TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 28, 2022

A new decade for social changes

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798

TECHNIUM SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 28, 451-460, February, 2022
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

Emotional Distress, Attitudes and Beliefs of Youth in Pandemic Context. The Case of Constanta County

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented overall impact on the Romanian people. Just like the rest of the world, the Romanian people had to deal with the consequences of the dramatic changes that took place in their everyday life. A sample of 3503 young people, all residents of Constanta County, aged between 19 and 25 years old, was assessed with two questionnaires: The Emotional Distress Profile and Attitudes and Beliefs Survey. The purpose of the study is to identify significant differences between rural and urban residents, regarding these two psychological dimensions. Our results show that youth in the rural environment state their much more distressed and have much more irrational beliefs than those in urban environment. Results are discussed at the end of the paper in the context of the preparations people have to make in face of the COVID-19 fifth wave that is coming.

Keywords. Emotional distress, attitudes, beliefs, pandemic, youth.

1. A framework for the COVID-19 pandemic and its 5th wave

Facing the on-going COVID-19 5th wave, the pressure on the human psychic and the effects on mental health can be overwhelming. The international press states that in Romania, in the month of October 2021, more than 400.000 positive COVID tests were recorded, and also, the highest death rate in the world was registered (Cookman, 2021). Since then, Romania registered a drop of the infections with COVID-19. Thus, this winter, the Government eased some of the restrictions previously imposed, especially because of the holidays. Although Romanian officials expected for the new wave to hit our country in January and to last at least two months (Marica, 2021), no effective measures to counteract the emotional impact on the population have been taken. Furthermore, both the national and the international press state that Romania's daily infections doubled after the holidays (Reuters, 2022). With the unknown proportions of the fifth wave, Romanian authorities estimate a doubling of the number of cases comparative to the fourth wave, which in fact was a devastating epidemiological situation (Coroianu, 2022), that our country barely coped with.

Fear, anxiety, emotional distress or depression, are natural and disastrous consequences that affect the quality of life, the psychological wellbeing and the mental health of Romanian people. A list of influential factors of these feeling would include: the ease of the restrictions, the vaccine skepticism, a very poor vaccine education, the low vaccination pace (roughly 40% of the population is immunized with the full scheme), distrust in the healthcare system, lack of trust in authorities, misinformation from some politicians and even from some of the leaders of

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 28, 451-460, February, 2022
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

the Romanian Orthodox Church, conspiracy theories, intense campaigns against vaccination may explain the current framework in which coping to the emotional distress proves to be difficult for many people.

2. Emotional distress of youth and the COVID-19 pandemic

Studies about the emotional health of adolescents and youth show that distress, anxiety and depression symptoms are common among this population (Shaffique, Farooq, Anwer, Asif, Akram & Jung, 2020). We should emphasize at this point that stress is a consequence of the relationship of an individual with a threatening environment, while anxiety and depression are the responses of the person in relationship with a mood disturbance. Thus, what people experience as sadness, contempt, worry, anger, fear or regret is the result of the ways people think, feel and behave in a certain life-situation.

Studies conducted in different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic show a significant high level of stress (Li, Wang, Jiang, Valdimarsdóttir, Fall, Fang, Song, Lu & Zhang, 2020), fear, anxiety or depression among young people (Duan, Shao, Wang, Huang, Miao, Yang & Zhu, 2020), with participants stating that they are concerned about their carrier, health, mental health (Rajkumar, 2020), changes in sleep patterns (Livana, Mubin & Basthomi, 2020), use of social media, social disconnection and distancing (Peters, Wang, Ogunniran, Huang, Green, Chunga, Quainoo, Ren, Hollings, Mou, Khomera, Zhang, Zhou, Laimeche, Zheng, Xu, Jackson & Hayes, 2020), mistrust in other people, reduced physical activity and weight gain, less appropriate diets, prolonged screen times (Gilsbach, Herpertz-Dahlmann & Konrad, 2021). All of these reactions suggest a tough time adapting to the new climate imposed by the COVID-19 restrictions, on one hand, and the coping difficulties that young people show in this situation, even in the case of a low infection rate, on the other hand. Loneliness and the associated psychological distress are important factors of a lower quality of life and the fact is that nowadays mental issues have largely increased than before the pandemic.

Other studies about the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on psychological well-being, show that people with negative coping strategies (like drinking alcohol to reduce stress) experience greater psychological distress (Liang, Ren, Cao, Hu, Qin, Li & Mei, 2020), while problem-focused coping is inversely related to depression symptomatology (Duan et all, 2020).

Furthermore, a UNICEF report (2020) shows that 46% of youth report having less motivation to do activities they usually enjoyed and 73% have felt the need to ask for help concerning their physical and mental well-being. Previous studies document the fact that adolescents and youth worry about this crisis and are concerned about their schooling restrictions, peer relationships (Ellis, Dumas & Forbes, 2020), learning, friendships and family relations (Li, Beames, Newby, Maston, Christensen & Werner-Seidler, 2021). Thus, the spread of the virus, COVID-19 diagnosis or contacts with an infected person, low social support and negative coping have been related to high levels of emotional distress (Daniunaite, Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene, Thoresen, Zelviene & Kazlauskas, 2021).

Another important dimension for our study is the irrational attitudes and beliefs. In the framework of the pandemic there has been a spread of false and misleading information which had as a consequence the distrust in scientific communities, governments and institutions (Magarini, Pinelli, Sinisi, Ferrari, De Fazio & Galeazzi, 2021). This confidence crisis impacted mental health, as it was influenced by particularities of the social and environmental conditions (level of education or age), attitudes (low epistemic trust, avoidance of uncertainties, a conspiracy-prone mindset) and other contextual factors (like anxiety). Furthermore, studies show that different types of irrational thinking and beliefs predict maladaptive COVID-19

Technium Social Sciences Journal
Vol. 28, 451-460, February, 2022
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

related health practices (Stanković, Lazarević & Knežević, 2021). As a result, people are more vulnerable and susceptible, which ultimately leads to a strong relationship between irrational beliefs and health behaviors which proves to be detrimental for the psychological well-being of individuals (Teovanović, Lukić, Zupan, Lazić, Ninković & Žeželj, 2020).

3. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of our study is the identification of the differences regarding the emotional distress and irrational attitudes and beliefs of young people, based on the rural and urban environment, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The hypotheses are:

- It is assumed that there is a significant difference in emotional distress depending on the urban/rural environment.
- It is assumed that there is a significant difference in irrational attitudes and beliefs depending on the urban/rural environment.
-

4. Sample and instruments

Our sample was comprised of 3503 young people, aged between 19 and 25 years old. The sample was divided based urban/rural environment. The distribution consisted of 25.72% rural and 74.28% urban residents of Constanta County. We used a convenience sample and we collected the data in March 2021-September 2021. All subjects have given their consent to participate in this research.

Two surveys have been applied to verify our hypotheses:

- Emotional Distress Profile (Cognitrom Assessment System), which measures negative functional and dysfunctional emotions in the categories of fear and sadness/depression;
- ABS II - Attitude and belief scale (Cognitrom Assessment System), which refers to the cognitive processes related to irrational/catastrophic thinking, beliefs related to approval, achievement and comfort and the analysis of the formulation of items (irrational/rational) analyzed in terms of the overall scale score.

The data was collected a year and a half later than the installment of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Findings and results

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that there is a significant difference in emotional distress depending on the urban/rural environment.

To verify the hypothesis, we calculated the normality of the data using the Shapiro-Wilk normality coefficient for samples larger than 200 people. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Tests of normality.

	Provenience	**Shapiro-Wilk**		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Emotional Distress Profile	Urban	.860	2602	.000

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ISSN: 2668-7798
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	Rural	.904	901	.000

The analysis of the Shapiro-Wilk normality coefficient shows an abnormal distribution of the participants' answers to the research, which leads us to apply a non-parametric method of verifying the hypothesis. We used Mann-Whitney U Test, and the results are shown in the table below:

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U Test for emotional distress profile.

	Emotional distress profile
Mann Whitney U	1098487.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.005

From the analysis of the results presented in Table 2, our hypothesis is confirmed, at a significant threshold p=0.005, which means that young people from urban areas have a higher level of emotional distress (average = 57.02) than young people from rural areas (average = 54.54).

Hypothesis 2. It is assumed that there is a significant difference in irrational attitudes and beliefs depending on the urban/rural environment.

To verify the hypothesis, we calculated the normality of the data using the Shapiro-Wilk normality coefficient for samples larger than 200 people. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 3. Tests of normality.

	Provenience	**Shapiro-Wilk**		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Attitudes and beliefs	Urban	.961	2602	.000
	Rural	.976	901	.000

The analysis of the Shapiro-Wilk normality coefficient shows an abnormal distribution of the participants' answers to the research, which leads us to apply a non-parametric method of verifying the hypothesis. We used Mann-Whitney U Test, and the results are shown in the table below:

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Vol. 28, 451-460, February, 2022
ISSN: 2668-7798
www.techniumscience.com

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test for attitudes and beliefs.

	Attitudes and beliefs
Mann Whitney U	1014348.500
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 4, there is a statistically significant difference (p=0.000) in terms of irrational thoughts in young people from urban areas compared to those living in rural areas. Dysfunctional attitudes are more present in the answers of students from rural areas (average = 116.79) than those from urban areas (average = 106.86).

All three research hypotheses were confirmed.

6. Discussion

The first significant difference regards the emotional distress, which is more severe in the case of the participants in rural areas. We analysed the general score of the test and found a series of explanations. All young people had to conduct their educational activities in the different available online platforms that they had to adjust to, with the support of the Government and educational institutions (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). This situation raised the problems of understanding the online lectures and materials delivered through these virtual platforms.

Furthermore, the difficulties in the supervision of students, the difficulty of getting Internet signal in rural remote areas, the great amount of homework and the passing of educational responsibility from teacher to student are challenges in online learning (Mylsidayu, 2021). In general, youth in Romanian rural areas have to face different problems, especially because of the poor infrastructure, high modernization deficit, deficiencies in the educational sector and in the skills of the population at large (Zaman & Stanculescu, 2006). With few telephone lines, unreliable cell phone service, few computers, little or no Internet access at all and, in some cases, no village library, education is progressing with difficulty.

Youth in rural areas also may have some disadvantage in using computers due their lack of digital literacy and foreign language skills, which is another challenge they have to face. Studies show that the virtual teaching environments can be successful in higher education but in the case of appropriate technical environment and support (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

Another area of influence resides in the participants' emotional context itself. Emotional symptoms like depression, irritability, anxiety, mood swings, worries, panic, impulsivity, sadness or fear impair the cognitive skills and disrupt the abilities to focus on the learning environment (Tangkudung & Mylsidayu, 2017). Combined with low freedom, heavy responsibility and stressful work, emotional distress makes young people vulnerable to mental issues (Man, Toma, Motoc, Necrelescu, Bondor, Chis, Lesan, Pop, Todea, Dantes, Puiu & Rajnoveanu, 2020). Other studies emphasize a series of risk factors for the deterioration of the mental state. Among these factors we can list the existance of suicidal thoughts during forced isolation, the use of non-adaptive coping strategies, such as denial of the existence of problems, emotional discharge, use of psychoactive substances and alcohol, discontinuation of action, and blaming oneself for a certain situation (Talarowska, Chodkiewicz, Nawrocka, Miniszewska & Bilinski, 2020).

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ISSN: 2668-7798
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Another consequence and possible explanation targets the context of scarce employment opportunities, in which youth must often leave to find jobs or educational opportunities (Klimaszewski & Nyce, 2009) in other parts of the country, more often in a bigger city near their residence.

Also, studies show that people with low socio-economic status, migration background and limited living space are more affected by the frame the pandemic has created (Ravens-Sieberer, Kaman, Erhart, Devine, Schlack & Otto, 2021). We can acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has put resilience to the test, and as a result many people around the world have become more vulnerable facing the specific emotional burden due to the pandemic, such as social isolation, grief and loss (Hsieh, Powell, Tan & Chen, 2021).

One other important aspect is the fact that not all young people had to conduct their education in a virtual environment. Some universities around the country organized face-to-face classes, trying to make students feel comfortable on campus, which lead to inequalities and even marginalization for students involved in online education, with a negative impact especially on students in rural areas. Our results are also relevant because in many cases digital divide in villages is reflective of the greater economic and social divides and inequalities within a population (Hawkins, 2005; Ono & Zavodny, 2007).

The beginning of the academic year in October 2021 put to the test the capacity to adjust to new challenges like finding accommodation, living together in university dormitories with compliance to imposed sanitary measures, worries about how and where to access food (Blake, Knight, Jia, Corner, Morling, Denning, Ball, Bolton, Figueredo, Morris, Tighe, Villalon, Ayling & Vedhara, 2021), limited opportunities for social contact, concerns about the risk of infection and passing on the virus to their loved ones. Students in rural areas are thus predisposed to a higher emotional distress. Furthermore, students may face the challenges appearing from communication with a large number of people in this frequently changed framework of national and international circumstances (Blake et all, 2021).

This long-lasting pandemic situation and all the restrictions that have been imposed by the Romanian Government are strongly related to the risk of mental illness, with students having concerns about their mental health, associated with high rates of stress, anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang & Sasangohar, 2020).

The second confirmed hypothesis showed that young people in rural areas score higher in irrational thoughts and attitudes than those in urban areas. Studies show that higher scores of irrational attitudes are related to depression, anxiety and emotional distress, with previous mental disorders, with loneliness, with the usage of psychiatric support before the pandemic and with poor economic situation (Juchnowicz, Baj, Forma, Karakula, Sitarz, Bogucki & Karakula-Juchnowicz, 2021). The poor economic situation is particularly important because people in rural environment experienced a large amount of difficulties and challenges when they had to move from Communism to a free-market economy. Although Communism imposed a harsh everyday life, it seems that members of the community born and raised in that historic period often have difficulty adjusting to today's economy, partially because the villagers lacked capital.

Apart from the economic factor, irrational thoughts about the pandemic have been supported by the conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. Many people believe that the virus was intentionally developed and an important part is played by their political beliefs (Duplaga, 2020) on one hand and their psychological traits on the other hand. Catastrophic beliefs, a low tolerance to frustration, depreciation and low global self-assessment are key characteristics of

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Vol. 28, 451-460, February, 2022
ISSN: 2668-7798
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these irrational patterns of thinking. Low socio-economic status supports negative and maladaptive emotions, strongly related to stress, depression, anxiety, aggression or guilt.

Misinformation of COVID-19 can be seen in Romania in the general attitude towards vaccination. It has been found that inconsistent communication from public health experts, officials and authorities regarding health risks leads to vaccine hesitancy (Etzioni-Friedman, & Etzioni, 2021).

Young people in rural environment are predisposed to misinformation also because of their lack of skills of critical thinking, documenting, and informational access to reliable sources. Beliefs are thus shaped based on communication between family members and friends, which ultimately can be regarded as trustworthy sources of information. Furthermore, young people are bound to discuss their problems in peer groups, and thus, in this limitative context, beliefs are shaped in a direction that promotes vulnerability. Studies show that age is a predisposing factor to irrational beliefs and attitudes, in the sense that young people seem to be more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories than older people (Shaeffer, 2020).

Another influencing factor of the irrational beliefs is the reliability and the quantity of scientific data, which in an informational society, with such a large quantity of information at one's disposal has the consequence of unclear and confused information (Magarini et all, 2021). Furthermore, misinformation may also facilitate stigma, group labeling, responsibility and perceived peril of the disease (Li, Twersky, Ignace, Zhao, Purandare, Bennett-Jones & Weaver, 2020).

7. Conclusions

The main objective of our study was the identification of the differences in emotional distress and irrational attitudes and beliefs based on the rural and urban environment, during the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We accomplished our purpose and confirmed the 2 hypotheses obtaining results that prove that young people in rural areas show greater emotional distress and irrational beliefs than those in urban areas.

In the context of the fifth COVID-19 wave it is imperative to effectively address the negative impacts caused by the pandemic. Thus, we feel that officials and authorities, decision and policy-makers, educational leaders and professors, and the staff of academic centers jointly with the youth, need to work together to ensure that young people have the support and resources they need to address their mental, emotional, and behavioral health needs in the wake of the pandemic. Tolerance and empathy are a crucial support factor. In the large context in which people had to face unprecedented challenges (and these challenges are far from being over), using technology to maintain connections and the willingness to lead healthy lifestyles are crucial to developing innovative coping mechanisms.

Universities should act in the direction of generating opportunities for social support and networking, through academic departments, sports, wellbeing facilities, clubs for students and societies.

In the context of so many young people in universities it becomes crucial to provide appropriate COVID-19 information in a clear way. Informational campaigns should be delivered by trusted sources that should promote positive behaviors. Students can be used to create messages for their peers, since it is well-established that young people are often more influenced by their peers than by adults. A student voice in delivering messages can be helpful to reach higher education students in younger age groups.

Also, authorities should take into consideration the opportunity to improve resilience against uncertainty by enhancing a mindful personal attitude, social support on digital

platforms, physical activity and spiritual health. Resilience can be strengthened and taught and in this process every part of our society is important. Professionals should invest more in research of psychological education as a possible solution to promote trust and interpersonal collaboration. By participating in group supervisions, by staying up to date with new and trustworthy guidelines, professionals could change the COVID-19 pandemic impact and enforce a humanistic self and an empathic civilization.

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