

Correlation Between Lack of Psychological Distance & Adolescent Romanticization of COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumed inverse implications of exercising psychological distance, the existing body of knowledge concludes that not exercising psychological distance correlates with the romanticization of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to determine the extent of this correlation. Data was collected from January to February 2023 using an anonymous online survey that took a primarily quantitative approach but included qualitative questions. Respondents were asked questions relating to facts about the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to their personal experiences during that time. The survey yielded 174 responses from a variety of demographics. The results aligned with the hypotheses and the existing body of knowledge, showing a positive correlation between not exercising psychological distance and romanticizing the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the results showed that not exercising psychological distance can negatively affect adolescents. This study further revealed the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents, allowing these effects to be remedied and avoided in other mentally distressing situations. Future research should be conducted on the correlation of the research variables with other variables, the use of romanticization as a coping mechanism, and the application of this study's results to other demographics.

Literature Review

It's the end of your family's first week in a new town. You moved to escape a toxic school environment, yet you can't help feeling disappointed. Compared to your old town, you now live in a smaller house, have a longer school day, and struggle to adjust to the weather. You long for days when you had all those things and more, beginning to only remember the positive aspects of your old town and not the negative ones that urged you and your family to move. In this seemingly unharmed moment of longing, you are failing to exercise psychological distance. Psychological distance describes a person's ability to survey the environment and choose a course of action without being impacted by the immediate situation (Giesbrecht et al., 2010). By not exercising psychological distance, you begin to forget the negative aspects of a negative experience, leading to an unbalanced view of a situation. The hypothesis that this issue has been especially prevalent in adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic is explored in this study.

On January 10th, 2020, following hundreds of cases of pneumonia-like symptoms, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China. Three months later, after more than 118,000 cases in over 100 countries, the WHO further declared COVID-19 a pandemic (CDC, n.d.), leading to the imposition of social distancing measures through March and April of 2020 (Courtemanche et al., 2020). A study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, finds that the COVID-19 outbreak and aforementioned social distancing measures led to increased stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger, and fear within individuals (Torales et al., 2020). More specifically, the CDC finds that 37% of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic, with 44% of these individuals feeling persistently sad or hopeless (CDC, n.d.). These statistics show that, throughout the pandemic, adolescents struggled to maintain their social, emotional, and mental well-being. Such trauma experienced at a young age can lead to long-term consequences (CDC, n.d.), and

a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Personality and Individual Differences*, adds that trauma, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, puts individuals at risk for experiencing post traumatic stress disorder (Sadovy et al., 2021). In addition to overall stress related to the pandemic, these feelings have led adolescents to turn to social media as a coping mechanism, as a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, finds (Cauberghe et al., 2021). In fact, a study conducted by psychotherapist Pummy Sheoran concludes that over 70% of adolescent participants had an internet addiction (this includes social media) during the pandemic (Sheoran, 2021). This increased focus on the internet and specifically social media platforms has resulted in the fostering of various trends.

Among the whipped coffee, ghost photoshoots, and green-screen Zoom background social media trends of the pandemic years, emerged an interesting theme: romanticization. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term “romanticize” as “to talk about something in a way that makes it sound better than it really is, or to believe that something is better than it really is” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). While romanticization can apply to either past, current, or future events, it is most significant when recalling past experiences. A study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, states that people’s recollection of an event is usually more positive than their actual experience (Mitchell et al., 1997). A similar phenomenon seems to be occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic. A New York Times article published in May of 2022 notes that the hashtag “romanticize your life” has been viewed over 525 million times on TikTok and has been put in the captions of over 28,000 posts on Instagram (Caron, 2022). As of April of 2023, that hashtag has been viewed over one billion times on TikTok and posted over 85,000 times on Instagram, illustrating the magnitude of this trend. This romanticization seems to be fostering itself in the form of nostalgia. One TikTok video with over 130,000 likes displays the text, “let me take you back to the original quarantine” and is followed by images depicting popular elements of life from the spring of 2020, such as empty shelves in stores, photos from the popular TV shows, and drink trends (mkregardless, 2021). Almost all comments on the video are people longing for such times – claiming that life was “so much simpler” and asking, “Why do I miss it?” That is a great question: Why are adolescents longing for times when hundreds of people in America were dying per day or times when people had no choice but to put their lives at risk to supply for their families (Murphy, 2021)? One possible explanation for this romanticization of the pandemic is the lack of psychological distance exercised by adolescents.

Through exercising psychological distance, an individual is able to play an impartial role in the situation – stepping back and making a decision without being directly influenced by the environment (Giesbrecht et al., 2010). As a result, not exercising psychological distance can result in a tarnished view of a situation, as is evident through the romanticization of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, before connecting a lack of psychological distance with other variables, it is first necessary to understand the impact of exercising psychological distance. A study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Journal of Consumer Research*, finds that psychological distance can lessen feelings of difficulty that stem from complex or anxiety-inducing tasks (Thomas & Tsai, 2011). Similarly, P.h.D. researcher Emma Bruehlman-Senecal finds that by viewing negative experiences from a future perspective – a specific type of psychological distance – an individual can better cope with negative events (Bruehlman-Senecal, 2015). This coping is achieved through the detachment of oneself from an emotional situation – another type of psychological distance – thus allowing for the regulation of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Webb et al., 2012). A common theme throughout these three studies is that psychological distance can be used as a coping mechanism. Many individuals (whether consciously or subconsciously) exercise psychological distance as a way of processing negative events or emotions, allowing them to better gauge a situation or experience. As a result, one can argue that by not exercising psychological distance, an individual cannot properly cope and, thus, is more likely to undergo a mentally taxing experience.

When applying psychological distance to pandemic-related romanticization, finding such scholarly information proved difficult. While scholarly journals supplied a plethora of information on the psychological concept itself, little information existed on the effects of not exercising psychological distance. Thus, in certain instances, it was necessary to draw conclusions about the inverse implications of exercising psychological distance. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that the information is completely accurate nor is it completely backed by data and can thus

undermine future research on this subject matter, leading to misinformation. As a result, the following study is one of the first to explore the effects of not exercising psychological distance and the implications of such actions when in contact with other variables.

Hypotheses

1. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to romanticize the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to have an inaccurate view of reality.
3. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to undergo mentally taxing experiences.
4. Adolescents who romanticize the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to develop an inaccurate view of reality.

Methods

A survey method approach was used to test the relationship between the lack of psychological distance and adolescents' romanticization of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey, containing various questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, was distributed to adolescents, and was not limited to specific geographical regions.

At the beginning of the research process, a meta-analysis research approach was considered due to the amount of information available on psychological distancing. However, after further delving into said research, it became evident that, although the research explained several aspects of the concept, it did not analyze the effects of not exercising psychological distance. In other words, arriving at conclusions necessary for this study solely on the basis of that research would be unattainable. Ultimately, a survey method approach was chosen for various reasons seen throughout the research and analysis process. By opting to use the online survey administrative software Google Forms, it was possible to design various questions ranging from multiple choice to Likert scale to open-ended. Both quantitative and qualitative questions could be properly asked, allowing for a thorough examination of the research variables. Additionally, the survey method made receiving numerical and opinionated responses feasible. The survey link was distributed via social media and word-of-mouth, allowing for a high volume of responses from demographics that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. In the analysis process, the online survey format allowed easy access to statistics and respondents' personal experiences.

Responses to the survey were collected from mid-January 2023 through the end of February 2023, totaling 174 responses. The survey was distributed through the researcher's personal Instagram account and was posted on several subreddits and Facebook groups dedicated to survey collection. The survey was further distributed to students at the researcher's high school in addition to the researcher's personal acquaintances. While this study focused on adolescents, people over eighteen were permitted to submit a response, but their responses were removed from the data set prior to the analysis to maintain the study's focus. Before taking the survey, the respondents were presented with a statement of confidentiality, informing them of the approximate length of the survey and that their responses would be kept anonymous.

Despite the benefits of the chosen method, limitations still existed. Firstly, due to the lack of existing studies about romanticization, self-devised questions were developed, which, although were crucial for analysis, may not have been the most accurate way of testing the extent to which an individual exercises romanticization. Another limitation was the inclusion of questions found unnecessary upon analysis of the data. Due to the lack of existing research on romanticization and psychological distance, a surplus of questions was included with the intention of testing the hypotheses as thoroughly as possible. However, through the analysis process, it became evident that only a select few of the questions included in the survey were necessary to thoroughly examine the research variables and hypotheses. Thus, it would have been better to limit the number of questions included in order to test research variables. This would have shortened the length of the survey, likely making it seem more appealing to potential respondents and thus generating a higher number of responses.

The first section of the survey pertained to demographics. Q1 was modified from a gender-related question by SurveyMonkey to include a “nonbinary/non-conforming” option. Q2 was modified from an age-related question by Formplus, a trusted question-developer website for reputable sources such as The Seattle Times and the University of Notre Dame, to include a different age range. Q3 was modified from an origin-related question from the Household Pulse Survey, a questionnaire conducted by the US Census Bureau, to include only yes/no answer options. Q4 was modified from a race-related question from the 2020 US Census to limit possible answer responses. Q5 was modified from an income-related question from the Household Pulse Survey to include larger monetary increments. Q6 was modified from a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center to focus on information sources during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and to include the answer options “family” and “friends.” Q7 was modified from information provided by the KFF Health Tracking Poll into a questionnaire-format. Q8 was modified from information provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures to format answer options as multiple choice responses.

The second section of the survey aimed to measure the extent to which the respondent exercised psychological distance. Q9 - Q16 were modified/replicated from a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Current Psychology*, which based its questions on the psychological pillars developed by researchers Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope. These questions asked respondents to rank the extent to which they agree/disagree with the given statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 5 = Agree). Within the questionnaire, Q9 - Q11 measured the gap between an individual’s physical location and an unmeasurable faraway place, and other people (spatial distance), Q12 - Q14 measured an individual’s perception of the present and the future (temporal distance), and Q15 - Q16 measured the gap between an individual and other people (social distance). Q17 and Q18 were modified from questions used in a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which examined the relationship between emotional intensity and psychological distance. Q17 asked respondents to rank how long ago the start of the COVID-19 pandemic feels on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Feels like yesterday, 5 = Feels very far away). Q18 asked respondents to rank the extent to which they can recall details from the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Very difficult, 5 = Very easy).

The third section of the survey aimed to measure the extent to which adolescents have an inaccurate view of reality by asking a series of true/false questions relating to different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the lack of existing studies and survey questions relating to true/false statements intending to measure an individual’s view of reality during the COVID-19 pandemic, all questions from this section were developed from information provided by reputable sources and formatted into true/false questions. Q19 was related to COVID-19 symptoms and was modified from information provided by the CDC. Q20 and Q21 were related to quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic and were modified from questions used in a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Mathematical Biosciences*. Q22 was related to face-coverings and was modified from information provided by Mayo Clinic. Q23 was related to mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and was modified from information provided by the World Health Organization. Q24 was related to the rate of COVID-19 infection and was modified from information provided by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Q25 was related to COVID-19 immunity and was modified from information provided by John Hopkins Medicine. Q26 was related to transmission of COVID-19 and was modified from information provided by the CDC. Q27 was related to availability of the COVID-19 vaccine and was modified from information provided by the US Food & Drug Administration.

The fourth section of the survey aimed to measure the extent to which individuals had a mentally taxing experience during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. All questions from this section were replicated/modified from a Mood and Feelings Questionnaire developed by researchers Adrian Angold and Elizabeth J. Costello in 1987. Respondents were asked to select an answer that most accurately represented the frequency of which they felt specific emotions/completed certain actions during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were able to select one of three answer choices: always true, sometimes true, and never true. For the purpose of this survey, the number of questions included was significantly shortened from the number of questions in the original questionnaire. Before starting the section, respondents were informed that certain questions touched upon sensitive/triggering topics. The

wording in Q35, Q37, Q38, Q39, Q40 was slightly modified from the wording in the original questions to better fit the survey.

The final section of the survey aimed to understand the extent to which respondents were aware of recent discourse related to romanticization. Due to the lack of available research and surveys on romanticization, Q42 and Q43 were self-devised. Q42 asked respondents to select all answer options that applied to romanticization-related actions they have exhibited from March 2020 through winter 2023. Answer options included “other,” in which respondents could input their own answer. Q43 was an optional open-ended question in which respondents could choose to input examples in which they remembered the pandemic in an excessively fond light. The full text of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Results

I. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to romanticize the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data supported this hypothesis. The data shows that 39.7% of respondents selected answer Options 1 and 2 (*see Figure 1*), meaning these respondents did not exercise psychological distance. Of this percentage, 70.7% romanticized the COVID-19 pandemic (*see Figure 2*). This means that the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance exhibited higher rates of romanticizing the COVID-19 pandemic than those who exercised psychological distance.

How easy/hard is it for you to recall specific details regarding the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic?

174 responses

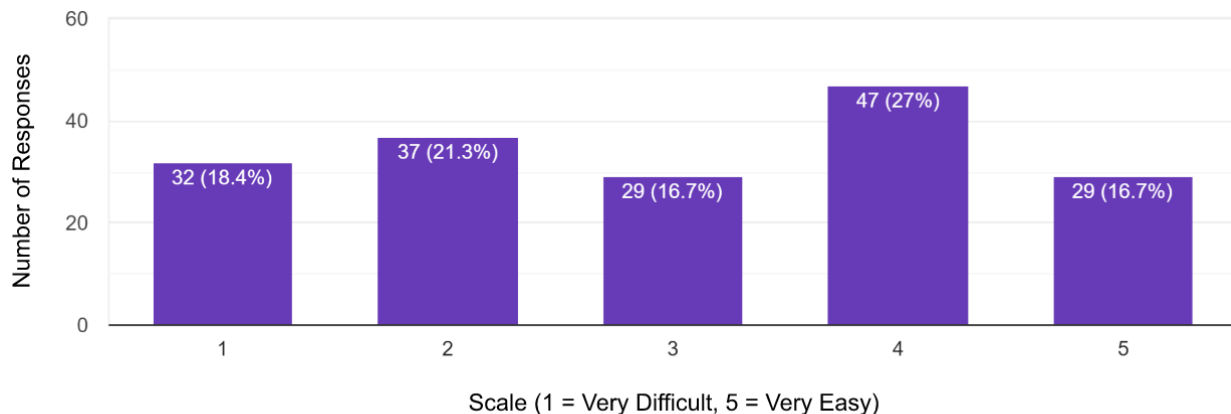


Figure 1

Romanticization Distribution Among Respondents Who Did Not Practice Psychological Distance During COVID-19 Pandemic

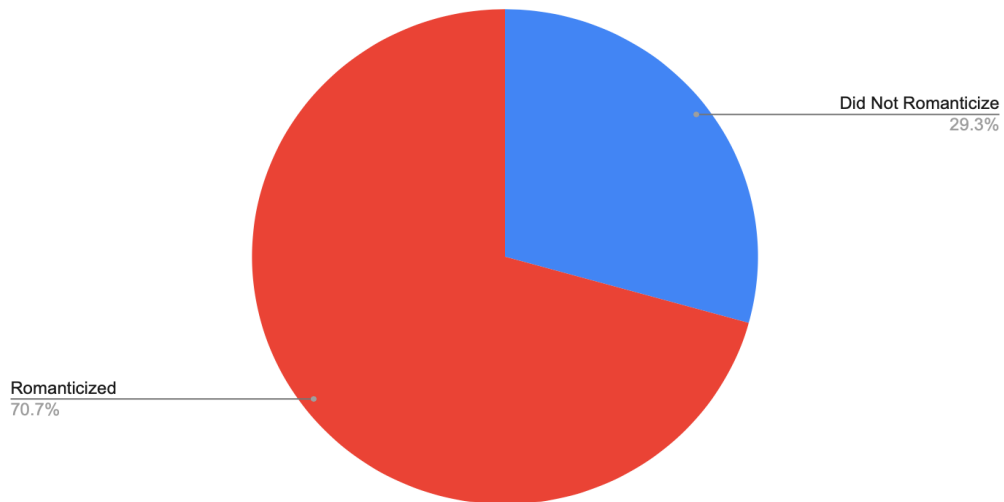


Figure 2

II. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to have an inaccurate view of reality.

The data supported this hypothesis. Out of the respondents who did not exercise psychological distance, only 2.9% had an accurate view of reality (see Figure 3), while 97.1% had an inaccurate view of reality (see Figure 3). This means that the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance exhibited higher rates of inaccurate views of reality than those who exercised psychological distance.

View of Reality Distribution Among Respondents Who Did Not Practice Psychological Distance

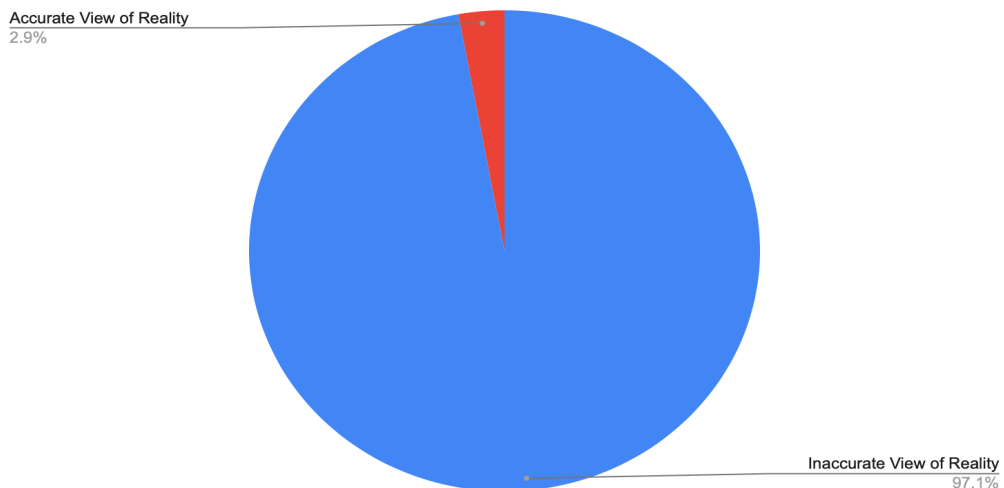


Figure 3

III. Adolescents who do not exercise psychological distance are likely to undergo mentally taxing experiences.

The data supported this hypothesis. Out of the respondents who did not exercise psychological distance, 69.7% underwent a mentally taxing experience (see Figure 4), while only 30.4% did not (see Figure 4). This means that the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance exhibited higher rates of undergoing mentally taxing experiences than those who exercised psychological distance.

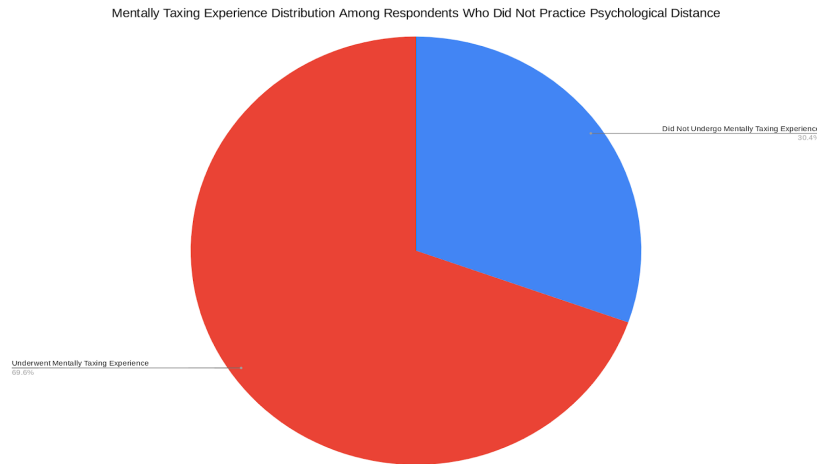


Figure 4

IV. Adolescents who romanticize the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to develop an inaccurate view of reality.

The data supported this hypothesis. Out of respondents who romanticized the COVID-19 pandemic, only 9.2% had an accurate view of reality (see Figure 5), while 90.8% had an inaccurate view of reality (see Figure 5). This means that the majority of respondents who romanticized the COVID-19 pandemic exhibited higher rates of inaccurate views of reality.

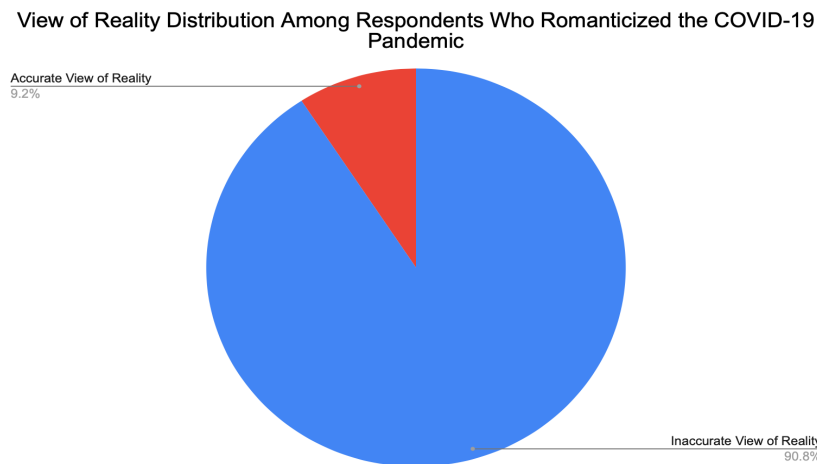


Figure 5

Discussion

Although scholarly information exists on the general topic of psychological distance, few resources are available on the effects of not exercising psychological distance. Before this study, in order to understand the concept, assumptions about the inverse effects of psychological distance had to be made based on pre-existing research. The data yielded by this study provides all future researchers with a foundational understanding of some of the many effects of not exercising psychological distance in addition to information on other research variables.

The data suggested that adolescents who did not exercise psychological distance (ie: those who did not have an objective view of reality) were significantly more likely to romanticize the pandemic than adolescents who did exercise psychological distance. To determine whether individuals exercised psychological distance, respondents were asked to rank, on a scale of one-to-five, how well they remembered specific details from the start of the pandemic. Respondents who selected answer options 1 and 2 indicated that they had a difficult time remembering such details, meaning they did not exercise psychological distance, as they did not have a holistic view of the situation. To test romanticization, respondents were asked to select all romanticization-related answer options that represented decisions/actions they took during the pandemic. Adolescents who selected “does not apply” were assumed to have not romanticized the pandemic.

Additionally, the data suggested that adolescents who did not exercise psychological distance were more likely to have an inaccurate view of reality than adolescents who exercised psychological distance. To examine the extent to which psychological distance correlated with accurate/inaccurate views of reality, respondents were presented with a series of true or false statements regarding certain aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. If respondents answered at least 65% of the question correctly, it was assumed that they had an accurate view of reality. If respondents answered less than 65% of the questions correctly, it was assumed that they had an inaccurate view of reality. Since the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance also had inaccurate views of reality, it is evident that there is a positive correlation between the two variables.

The data also revealed that adolescents who did not exercise psychological distance were more likely to undergo mentally taxing experiences than adolescents who did exercise psychological distance. To understand whether participants underwent mentally taxing experiences, respondents were asked a series of questions taken from the Mood and Feelings Questionnaire produced by Duke University. Respondents were asked to select an answer that most accurately represented the frequency of which they felt specific negative emotions/completed certain negative actions during the first year of the pandemic. Respondents were able to select one of three answer choices: always true, sometimes true, and never true. If respondents answered at least half of the questions with the responses of sometimes or always true, it was assumed that they underwent mentally taxing experiences. The majority of respondents who exercised psychological distance also underwent mentally taxing experiences during the pandemic, showing a correlation between the two variables. Lastly, the data suggested that romanticization of an event correlates with inaccurate views of reality. The majority of adolescents who romanticized the pandemic had inaccurate views of reality, leading to the conclusion that there is a strong relationship between these two variables.

The results of this study are generally in agreement with what others have shown in the fields of the research variables. By assuming the inverse effects of Emma Bruehlman-Senecal’s findings, it can be concluded that not exercising psychological distancing results in an individual being more likely to undergo a mentally taxing experience (Bruehlman-Senecal, 2015). This is evident through the data, as the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance also underwent mentally taxing experiences during the pandemic. In terms of romanticization, Mitchell et al. concluded that people remember an event more positively than what their actual experience was like (Mitchell et al., 1997). This conclusion is supported by the results, as, out of the respondents who underwent mentally taxing experiences during the pandemic, the majority romanticized the pandemic. Additionally, using statistics provided by the New York Times as the basis of the assumption (Caron, 2022), the results confirm that romanticization trends continue to play a significant role on social media. As of April of 2023, the hashtag “romanticize your life” has

been viewed over one billion times on TikTok, nearly a 53% increase in the number of views it had received in May of 2022. The illustrated the extent to which this trend, and its inevitable impacts, will continue.

The similarity between the results of the study and pre-existing research leads to two major new understandings. With 70.7% of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance romanticizing the pandemic, it is evident that there is a positive correlation between the two variables. This establishes that the two concepts, which are rooted in similar ideas, are directly linked to each other. Additionally, the data shows that not exercising psychological distance correlates with an individual being more likely to experience negative effects. Of the respondents who did not exercise psychological distance, 97.1% had inaccurate views of reality and 69.6% underwent mentally taxing experiences. This means that the majority of respondents who did not exercise psychological distance experienced at least one of these negative situations, illustrating the generally negative effects of not exercising psychological distance.

Although results of the study supported the hypotheses and were in line with existing research, there were some factors that negatively impacted certain outcomes. One example are the demographics of the responses. An overwhelming majority of respondents were female, meaning that the conclusions drawn may not be completely accurate for all demographics. However, the responses were sufficiently diverse in other aspects, meaning that overall conclusions are accurate but will vary slightly between gender demographics. Another limitation was receiving conflicting responses to certain questions. For example, for the question that asked respondents to select all romanticization-related actions they participated in, there was a “not-applicable” answer option, meaning respondents who selected that answer did not participate in the listed actions. However, the analysis revealed that some respondents selected romanticization-related actions in addition to the “not-applicable” answer option. These respondents were grouped with those who did romanticize the pandemic, but it is important to recognize that this may have slightly affected the results.

Using these newfound results, we are better able to understand the impact of the pandemic on the mental wellbeing of adolescents. Although not all impacted, a significant number of adolescents did not exercise psychological distance, ultimately correlating with romanticization, inaccurate views of reality, and increased likelihood of undergoing mentally taxing experiences. By understanding the causes of the negative impacts of the pandemic on adolescents, it will be easier to remedy these effects and avoid them in other mentally distressing situations. Additionally, the results reinforce the importance of exercising psychological distance. Since not exercising psychological distance correlates with significant negative effects, it can be assumed that exercising psychological distance generally correlates with positive effects (this is also reinforced by the existing body of knowledge). Thus, this stronger understanding of the importance of exercising psychological distance means that this strategy can be recommended to adolescents in an effort to avoid inaccurate views of reality and decrease likelihood of undergoing mentally taxing experiences.

Using the foundation established by this study, future researchers can take a variety of directions. Firstly, research should be conducted on the direct correlation between the lack of psychological distance and how well an individual is able to cope with mentally taxing experiences. This study focuses less on this relationship and more on the relationship between psychological and other variables. Similarly, it would be interesting to see the extent to which romanticization is/was used as a coping mechanism, whether in terms of the pandemic or other instances. Additionally, due to unbalanced gender demographics for responses, future research should be conducted on the prevalence of psychological distance and romanticization in individual gender groups. Overall, due to the lack of existing research on the variables, the results of this study should be used as a foundation for future research endeavors regarding psychological distance and romanticization.

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