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Psychological Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Italian University Students: A Qualitative Study using Focus Group

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ABSTRACT

Background: COVID-19 pandemic has been spreading worldwide causing considerable psychological stress to all people. The general lockdown, one of the most drastic provision adopted by the Government for containing the spread of contagion, could represent a very stressful event for people, especially if prolonged over time. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experience and points of view related to COVID-19 pandemic of three groups of university students during the first lockdown and 1 year later, by using the focus group technique.

Methods: A qualitative study comprising two focus groups carried out online during the first lockdown period in Italy, in May 2020, and one focus group carried out in January 2021, at the end of the second lockdown. Online videoconferencing using Microsoft Teams platform. Sixteen Italian university students aged between 21 and 25 years.

Results: COVID-19 pandemic has created a sense of threat and stress that has surged globally at an alarming pace. Most governments have temporarily closed educational institutions to contain the spread of COVID-19, for this reason university students were confronted with new challenges.

Conclusions: This unprecedented experience of 'home quarantine' during the lockdown, with the uncertainty of academic and professional careers, has multifaceted impacts on the life of students.

Keywords: COVID-19; University Students; Psychological Well-Being; Focus Group

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Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been substantially influencing people across the world, especially after the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in the second week of March 2020. Hence, many countries implemented a series of anti-epidemic measures, such as restricting travel for foreign countries, closing down public spaces and shutting down the entire transit system to contain the transmission of the highly contagious infections from human-to-human.

In February 2020, Italy faced a state of emergency caused by the rapid spread of COVID-19 which, in short time, has turned into a pandemic with social, economic, political and health consequences. Italy, like many other countries, introduced lockdown measures from March 9th to May 4th, 2020, to ensure social distancing through home quarantine to curb the spread among its population. During this period (defined as Phase 1 of emergency), the movement of Italian population was restricted except for necessities, work, and health circumstances. After the total lockdown, European countries, including Italy, have been successful in limiting the incidence of infection. From May 18th, in Italy there was a gradual release of the restrictive measures allowing freedom for citizens. During Summer 2020 the number of cases dropped sharply, but a second epidemic wave has swept since the beginning of the Autumn 2020. Between November 2020 and January 2021, Italy faced a scenario of maximum severity and a high level of risk. Italian government introduced stricter measures: each region is classified into one of four coloured areas from red (maximum risk) to white (minimum risk). Each coloured area is linked to different epidemiological risk scenarios and levels setting out specific precautionary measures which regulate the freedom of movement within regions, and the opening of businesses, restaurants and cultural sites. A new but shorter lockdown was introduced in the Country, from December 21st 2020 to January 6th 2021.

COVID-19 has changed everyone's life, including university students: the whole educational system stopped from March 9th to mid-June 2020, and, therefore, students had to adapt to a new way of studying. University students are the protagonists of the present study whose main objective is to understand how they have experienced this situation of global crisis, how they have perceived the guidelines issued by the institutions, how they managed their time during the lockdowns, how and if their social relationships changed, how they adapted to this new situation and what their future expectations were.

University students are not usually considered among the most vulnerable groups that should be prioritized for early mental health interventions. There are limited data concerning students' mental health consequences of home confinement, although according to recent studies (Husky et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Meda et al., 2021), during COVID-19 pandemic, both academic and professional

uncertainty have worsened young students' mental health, increasing anxiety and depression (Sifat, 2020). Marelli et al. (2020) focused on perceived sleep quality and psycho-emotional well-being, they observed that the impact of lockdown was greater in students than in workers, and in females than in males. The delay in bed time and in wake up was more pronounced in students. Concerning the psycho-emotional aspects, about one-third of sample showed depressive or anxious symptoms. Thus, the new reality of the rapid global spread of COVID-19 has conducted the cohort of students with new challenges. The abrupt disruption of everyday life, the frequent loss of income, temporary unemployment, the need to return home to live with their families, the loss of social connections, and particularly, the concern about the health of their relatives, influenced students' lifestyle. In addition, the urgent need to adapt to distance learning has created the conditions for a potential source of stress, to which various factors contribute: the need to maintain high academic performance, the difficulties associated with a new way of interacting with teachers and university colleagues, any technical difficulties in connecting to the network (Rahiem, 2020). In facts, most students have encountered several kind of difficulties in dealing with the distance learning system (Raj & Fatima, 2020), and, as stated by Hasan and Bao (2020), due to inequality of resources, if all students can benefit from the lessons when they are delivered face to face, many of them fail to do so when lessons are online, due to technical and/or logistic difficulties. Distance learning is not the only factor that explains the general distress of university students, considering that the lack of healthy social relations can as well lead to severe physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and economic problems (Doyumgac et al., 2021).

A qualitative method is best suited to understand the feelings and emotional experiences in crisis contexts (Branquinho et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2012). Consequently, this study conducted an in-depth inductive investigation into the perception and emotional experience of Italian university students' during the lockdowns by using a qualitative research methodology. This study is based on the principle that young people can contribute with important knowledge related to their problems and needs, just listening to their voice and experience (Branquinho et al., 2020; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kim, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2014) which can be an important resource during and after COVID-19. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on university students can allow to identifies their coping strategies and lessons for future pandemics.

Method

This study has been conducted by using the focus group methodology, a qualitative data collection technique, involving participants from 4 to 12, who are asked to participate in a group discussion about a theme or a predetermined topic, in an informal environment, with the help of a moderator (and an observer) on a predetermined day (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1996; Morgan &

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Krueger, 1993; Patton, 1990; Zammuner, 2003). The term focus group comes from the idea that groups are “focused” on a collective activity (Kitzinger, 1994); indeed, the characteristic of this methodology is that the data used in the research are not derived from the analysis of the individual responses of the participants, but from the group discussion. This collective activity occurs within a social context. Although the social context in a focus group is not a natural one, the use of focus groups presents an opportunity to observe group interactions within this social context (Morgan, 1996), e.g. researchers can observe participants sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences, and even debating each other. This opportunity to observe interactive processes among participants is a clear advantage of focus groups over individual interviews (Morgan, 1996). The interactive processes, or group interactions, are a source of data that should be analysed and reported (Oprandi, 2001; Wilkinson, 1998).

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The focus group has become a popular method of data collection in health sciences research (Shamdasani & Stewart, 2014; Sims, 1998; Webb & Kevern, 2001), and nowadays it is considered an important qualitative research technique. This type of group interview method is based on the interaction between participants and on the idea that, by taking into account different people’s views of on the same topic, it is possible to collect additional elements to the results obtained through a quantitative method.

We have chosen to use this methodology because: (a) the focus group proved to be the most suitable and easy method to implement, considering the objectives of our study and the restrictions and limitations adopted by the Italian government to contain the spread of COVID-19; (b) the group discussion allows to study a specific topic in depth, obtaining information about the needs, attitudes, behaviours, motivations, ideas and beliefs of participants; (c) the group discussion allows the creation of an informal atmosphere in which participants do not feel judged, and therefore, they can provide genuine answers on the topic at issue.

Participants

Three online focus groups, with a total of 16 participants, were carried out between May 2020 and January 2021. Participants were students at the University of Palermo (Italy); they were 12 females and 4 males, aged between 21-25 years; nine of them were attending a bachelor's degree and 7 were attending a master's degree; 13 students lived in Palermo and 3 lived in other Sicilian towns.

The only inclusion criterion to take part to the focus group was to be a university student. Participants have been recruited by word-of-mouth. Thus, we have looked for volunteers among friends and colleagues of the present report’s authors. Since the aim of this study was to investigate the opinion of university students on certain topics (lockdown experience, time management,

difficulties in studying, interpersonal relationships, trust in the Italian institutions, risk perception, future expectations), a homogeneous group of participants was selected. In order to create a non-judgmental and cohesive climate, the group discussions were run by peer students who were doing the internship at the University of Palermo, who are also the authors of the present report.

Procedure

Focus groups were held online, two of them were run during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic in Italy (February-May 2020), on May 12th, and 13th, and one was run during the second phase (October 2020-May 2021), on January 13th. All focus-group sessions took place on Microsoft Teams online platform and were approximately one and a half hour long.

Immediately after each focus group, the moderator and the assistant moderator discussed about the group session, noting common themes, unexpected topics, and group dynamics. After the three focus groups, recordings from each group were transcribed and all the identifiers were removed to protect confidentiality. Transcripts were analysed and studied to identify common or different data between the three group discussions.

Questions were asked following a questioning route, we choose this strategy because the three focus groups conduction has been assigned to two different moderators. They used a semi directive approach showing flexibility in changing the questions order or to avoid asking specific questions if the topic was going to be discussed spontaneously. The questions are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

<i>General aspects of lockdown experience</i>	– Where did you spend the lockdown? Who did you spend the lockdown with?
<i>Time management</i>	– Was there anything you found harder to give up during lockdown? – How did you manage your time?
<i>Personal mood and social relations</i>	– What mood has characterized your days during lockdown? – Have you noticed any changes in the relationships with your loved ones (parents, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends,...)?
<i>Trust in institutions</i>	– What do you think of the dispositions adopted by Italian Government to contain the health emergency? – What are your ideas about the rules of social distancing? In your opinion, are these rules respected? – Has your level of trust changed towards the Italian health system?
<i>Future expectations</i>	– How did this situation compromise your expectations/plans for the future? – Could you say 3 words in relation to the future?
<i>Future expectations about COVID-19</i>	– In your opinion, who will be able to overcome this situation in a better way? – In your opinion, when will the emergency phase be over?

Table 1 - Questions asked in May 2020, 10 days after the end of the first lockdown in Italy

<i>Risk perception</i>	–	What do you think about the current situation compared to the one in March 2020?
<i>Study and time management</i>	–	How did you manage your studies?
	–	How did the health emergency affect your studies?
<i>Social relations and mood</i>	–	What do you think about distance learning?
	–	Have you noticed any changes in your relationships with your loved ones (parents, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends)?
	–	Use one word to describe your mood during phase 1 and one to describe your current mood.
<i>Trust in institutions</i>	–	What do you think about dispositions adopted by Italian Government to contain the health emergency due to COVID-19?
<i>Future expectations</i>	–	How did this situation compromise your future expectations?
<i>Future expectations about Covid-19</i>	–	How long do you think the pandemic will last for?

Table 2- *Questions asked in January 2021, 6 days after the end of the second lockdown in Italy*

Some of the questions posited in focus groups held during the first phase were revised for the focus group carried out during the second phase. The questions were intended to: (a) investigate how students have gone through the pandemic and what moods have characterized their days; (b) understand if and how the intimate relations have changed (family, friends, romantic partners, ...); (c) analyse the level of adaptation to the new "normality", both regarding their habits of life and the organization of study; (d) understand how they reacted to government restrictions; (e) analyse the risk perception related to Covid-19; and (f) know the future expectations of university students. Some themes emerged more clearly; we have shown them schematically in Figure 1.

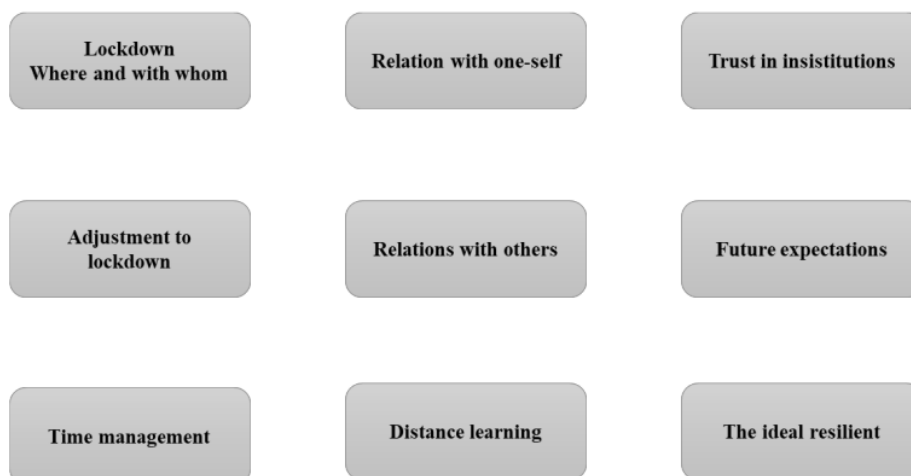


Figure 1 - *Themes emerged during focus groups*

The Institutional Review Board of the University of Palermo approved this study, which was conducted in conformity with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants received no compensation. Signed informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Results

The Experience of the First Lockdown: Where, How and with Whom

All students spent the first lockdown at home with their families. Those who were off-site, who used to live in the big city, had to return to their own town, as well as those who used to travel often for study purposes or for personal interests.

There were a number of advantages and disadvantages of having spent the period of the lockdown in a town or in a small village. On the one hand, those who lived in the small town or in the countryside have felt the advantage of having been able to move more easily in large spaces and in the open air, in contact with nature (Irene: "*Fortunately we have a house in the countryside, it's not like living in the city*"; Anna: "*Fortunately, in front of my house, I have an open space where I can go. In this way, I have not missed the relationship with nature. Contact with nature allowed me to rediscover my creativity... That one that sometimes the walls of the house block. I felt free.*"). As well as those who lived in the city centre have suffered from the limited urban spaces (Andrea: "*it is hard to live at home because I live in the city centre, so my freedom of movement is nil*"). On the other hand, there are limits to living in a small town because the opportunities offered by that place are very scarce (Federica: "*I had to leave Palermo to return to my town, a village lost in the mountains*"; Anna: "*the spaces in a small country are limited*").

For some of them, it was not possible to live with both parents as, work reasons, one of them was forced to stay out (Federica: "*My father is in Calabria for work and I have been always thinking to him*"; Sofia: "*My father stays out for the whole week*") or had to move away from the rest of the family to avoid health problems, which led to unexpected family reorganizations (Adele: "*I went to live at my mother's house with her partner. I have been living with my father for 6 years now, but he is a doctor, so to avoid problems I decided to go and live with my mother. It was strange*"). Someone had a chance to spend time with brothers or sisters they usually never were with.

Someone tells of the strangeness of finding oneself at home when you are used to travel or study outside (Carlotta: "*Generally, I've never been home for more than a week, I've always travelled for sporting events, I'm never at home*"; Andrea: "*I've been more at home in these 2 months than in the previous 8; I'm not used to stay at home or studying at home*"). All students share the same problem, which is the difficulty of constantly living with the loved ones, sometimes giving up their

moments of privacy, regardless of the size of the house they live in. That was true for both those who used to stay at home with their own family (Simone: *"I generally spend my time with my family, but when you are forced to, the pressure changes, it gets heavier. These family members! Damn, get away for a little! I often need to detach myself from the people around me"*; Irene: *"Although I live in the open air, being closed at home was heavy. Relationships with my family are strange, being 24/24 hours always with the same people. When I'm in a black mood I'd like to be alone, but it's not allowed"*; Laura: *"Well, there was no choice, the quarantine upset my normal day. Generally, I go to university, I live with 4 people in the same house and we are casinos by nature"*), and those who used to stay out for most of the time (Carlotta: *"At first I suffered a lot. Although we have a large house and everyone had their own spaces, conflicts in the family still exist, they never end. But you adapt, it's not impossible"*).

The Time Management during the Lockdown

Time was one of the most affected psychological dimensions during the lockdown. The perception of time has changed and with it the way to manage it. But it has also changed over the course of the lockdown.

Andrea: *"from a certain point of view it was frustrating because, when you were at home you thought you had more time, but in reality during the lockdown this time was missing, because time management was different"*.

Irene: *"during the first 2 weeks I was very well organized (study, work outs ...), I was very motivated and dynamic. Afterwards, my rhythms became too relaxed. Now, I no longer follow live lessons, but only video recordings. Out of laziness, I no longer train as I used to, but even the study has suffered a setback. I entered a spiral from which I am slowly trying to get out, in order to become more useful and dynamic"*.

There have been those who tried to find a new routine, also by including physical activity throughout the day:

Carlotta: *"I got up early in the morning, watch some television series, then study and at around 6.30 pm I did some physical activity (physical activity was sometimes kneading pizza, pasta or biscuits with my mother). I have organized my day to always be busy and never stand still, otherwise it would have been difficult, this thing destroys you"*.

Adele: *"Having no commitments outside the home, I structured the day starting earlier, with an alarm set at 5.30 (in normal life, you don't have contact with other people before 8 am), studying until 1 pm, resuming at 3pm in order to finish by 5-6pm, then I watched a movie, dinner and I was in bed by 10 pm. I took the first 2 weeks as a vacation, then it became a necessary routine to reach my goals (...) It is important to have the responsibility of a routine, guidelines to be productive, not to feel useless, to get tired it is essential to get to the end of the day destroyed, otherwise I had the feeling of having wasted time"*.

Sofia: *"I realized that in order to survive these days I had to create a plan, with schedules on what to do. I started writing a diary of things to do in quarantine and every day I wrote down what I did in detail. This thing helped me. I started training at 5 in the morning. Fixed and precise times with clear commitments during the day. So I managed to feel pretty good"*.

Federica: *"if I do not organize things, it's over for me! I have given myself a routine. It felt like a single day doing the same things over and over again, during the first month. I also trained from 5 pm to 6 pm, unthinkable to do on normal days"*.

But there have also been those who were not able to organize their days and had the feeling that they wasted time:

Simone: “I am not doing anything useful in life and I am falling into a spiral of destruction and depression (laughing), but it will be okay!”.

Rita: “I didn't find a way to stabilize my routine, I didn't do anything to put a check on it, I was overwhelmed by the situation. At first, I was very happy. I was having a very stressful time and this was the excuse to have a break, in my head I thought it wouldn't last long”.

It went better for the students who had the opportunity to work. In that case, having a very structured business was very helpful, (Rita: “there was a short period of 2 weeks during which I worked and this helped me. I had picked up a rhythm and I was no more tired because I had done things”).

Some students reported alterations in their circadian rhythms:

Simone: “I suffer from insomnia due to stress”;

Andrea: “I have seen so many television series, without sleeping at night, as my insomnia has amplified to biblical levels. The next step is to become a nocturnal animal”;

Sofia: “initially, I lost sleep. I could not sleep before 4am, maybe because I was not that tired for my brain to shut down”;

Rita: “at some point I started having sleep problems because I didn't feel tired at the end of the day. I used to do so many things. From there the rhythms got high and I went from times when I could not sleep to times when I got up early. Now it's very much as it comes”.

Some students felt like they were thrown back to the past, experiencing a sort of regression to adolescence. Many of them reported they spent most of their time in bed, pursuing their favourite hobbies, sticking to PC, mobile, or video games, rather than studying; (Laura: “I regressed to when I was a 17-year-old. I watched so many television series in a very short time”).

The Mood during the Lockdown

During the first lockdown, all students underlined the existence of a multiplicity of moods that characterized the days (Rita: “there were too many states of mind”). The most widely shared were frustration, given by the continuous brooding without ever being able to take the situation in hand (especially for the study), demotivation, sadness, nervousness, stress, fear of being trapped in a cage, not being able to come out, impotence to not be able to do anything to change the situation but for someone also the courage and strength not to abandon oneself.

Someone talked about an “emotional swing”:

Sofia: “it is not a precise state of mind; it is a continuous change. I had many mood swings, which oscillated between euphoria (because I had more time for myself) and the total absence of desire, of stimuli, I fell into idleness without understanding how to occupy my time in a productive way”.

There were those who experienced frustration, fear of failure and that nothing would ever be the same again:

Simone: *"everything has stopped! In these moments you feel stationary, stuck mulling over what you can't do and you can't do anything to take a step forward and you have to settle for what you've done so far"*;

Irene: *"the fear of failing and not being able to regain your rhythm, of getting stuck in this refrain, in this pit of yours. Sometimes it is paralyzing. I am one step away from graduation, but I always feel too far behind, I do not go 1 step forward (...) the problem is not being closed at home, but the frustration that nothing is the same as before"*.

Some students felt the need to re-establish control over their life:

Adele: *"not manic, but when we miss control, in order not to be carried away by events, we must create it ourselves"*.

Carlotta: *"I only cried once; this situation made me anguish because I thought it would hurt me. But I gained strength and courage, as I always do, and I faced the situation. My goal was to graduate in July. I studied like crazy. I'm doing it"*.

Some students experienced the boredom:

Francesco: *"in literature it is central, quarantine has made it live in an unprecedented way. The problem of boredom is related to our inability to wait. We don't know how-to live in waiting; they tell us we're in quarantine but they don't give us a limit but we know it's not certain. What has hit us the most is the waiting without a limit, the inability to wait"*.

One of the students reported the feeling of being free, because she realized that before the pandemic she was trapped in habits that made her days very chaotic without giving her the chance to take some time for herself:

Rita: *"paradoxically, freedom, despite being a period in which we are not free, I felt very free with respect to the daily obligations. I discharged them anyway, but I had the opportunity to manage them myself, in my own time"*.

Some students pointed out how they were able to support others, while they were not able to do the same thing for themselves:

Laura: *"I said to everyone" it will be fine "just not to stop and say that it was a shit situation". What I have done in recent months has been to ask others: How are you? "*

Irene: *"I was supporting others but I was drowning, even trying to face old demons"*.

During the second confinement period, emotional states deeply changed comparing to the first one. The adjectives used by participants to describe their current state of mind are related to uncertainty, discouragement, acceptance and adaptation. They appear more negative than the beginning of the epidemiological crisis reflecting a significant resignation to the pandemic. They almost gave up normality showing acceptance to coexist with the pandemic:

Alessandra: *"confused both in March and now"*

Clara: *"fright in March, now discouragement"*

Vincenzo: *"sowing in March, acceptance now. You take care of your garden, but as much as you work, there are external factors that blow everything up. Murphy's famous law! "*

Giovanna: *"in March uncertainty, now discouragement and hope"*

Federica: *"in March curiosity, now I don't know... some days I'm positive, some days I'm very pessimistic."*

The Relations with Others during the Lockdown

Overall, relationships with parents seem to have changed the most, even more than those with friends, and in some circumstances relationships with brothers and sisters have also changed.

People who did not spend much time at home rediscovered a family atmosphere of harmony and complicity; although sometimes there was the need for solitude and privacy.

With regards to parents, some participants reported that their relationship improved:

Giovanna: *"I had only my mother at home and our relationship has positively changed"*.

Andrea: *"I am building a new balance with my parents, our communication improved, and we are all involved in the care of the house"*.

Sofia: *"I think that this situation imposed the quiet living to safeguard family relationships, committing not to create unnecessary disagreements", "before my mother used to get angry with me, even for trivial things. Now, we realized that it is better to avoid certain discussions"*. Clara: *"Spending all this time with my parents allowed me to understand their point of view, I'm not the only one who can have a bad day. Now, I feel more empathetic towards them."*

Rita: *"I started to live better with my parents. Before the quarantine, there was some tension. We understood it was important to put aside tensions and adapt to live together. We reached a new balance. Now we are more organized and coordinated in the management of the house. At the end of the meal we spend time to chat"*.

For someone else they got worse:

Federica: *"Before the pandemic, I lived in my apartment in Palermo and I met my mother 3-4 times a month, while with my father, who works in another Region, we talked on the phone. Now I'm back to my village and the forced cohabitation with my mother causes me a lot of anxiety"*.

Francesco: *"The discomfort and discontent, resulting from my mother's nursing job, emerge in interactions with my family. As Sartre stated: Hell is other people"*.

Some students reported their need to distance from their own family:

Simone: *"I decided to get as far away from my family as possible."*

Federica: *"I haven't lived at home since 3 years, I used to go back to my home city only for short periods. I was not used to live with my mother anymore. When I went to visit her I was happy to spend time together at home, there was a peaceful atmosphere. Coming back, and being forced to live with her wasn't easy. It's been stressful for both of us."*

Most of students reported they were requested to re-negotiate relations that were advanced to a new stage, in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Andrea: *"have to comply with the house rules again was not easy. I had to adapt to go back to living with my parents"*

Many students reported improvements in the relationship with their siblings, experiences as an unexpected discovery:

Irene: *"I rediscovered the relationship with my relatives. I used to study abroad and I did not have the opportunity to spend much time with them. I gave more value to a table game or to simply watch a movie with my family. We are four sons and we never managed to be all together before. Now I am aware that they are there for me."*

Anna: *"The relationship with my brother has changed, we do more stuff together and I like it."*

Sofia: *"I never spent more than one hour alone with my brother. We started training together"*

Participants pointed out the importance of friendship during this lockdown period. Thanks to the social media (Whatsapp, Instagram, Face Time, video calling) they kept in touch with their friends.

This period allowed them to understand who are the real friends in their life:

Clara: *“I have understood who are the really important people in my life and who, instead, were only friends of circumstance”*. Simone: *“I usually stay by myself, but recently I started changing my behaviour because it is good to be surrounded by friends or simply catch up with someone. I started calling people that I used to talk to in the past, being curious about how they were feeling. Thanks to lockdown I discovered my emotional side and I noticed that there are many people that I would like to hang out with.”*

The Relation with One-Self during the Lockdown

Most of the students were able to grasp the opportunities for personal growth even in a period of great emergency for all. The loneliness to which everyone was forced was re-valued:

Adele: *“I usually like to take a break from people at least for a week since I was sixteen as I worked in a pub, dealing with so many persons that I started hating them. But this time I took it differently, in a more mature way. I started expressing my feelings (I do not usually do such a thing especially with my parents), I had a good response and I feel happy about it. I decided to do those things that I tend to postpone. I felt brilliant by myself, being surrounded by people is not my priority at the moment”*.

Federica: *“I revalued solitude, I understood that I am an independent person. It does not mean that I want to be alone forever but I can manage to be by myself.”*

Someone was also able to capture the link between melancholy due to loneliness and creative capacity:

Sofia: *“I have always been hyperactive and being alone at home was very hard. I started wondering how am I going to deal with this? I discovered that I am not that bad. I kept on writing as this condition take out your own creativity. When you do not open up you feel melancholic and indeed you start being more creative. I could write without feeling bad. I had a good potential and now i feel more confident about myself”*.

The Experience of Distance Learning

All participants reported that distance learning affected their academic adjustment, both in its cognitive and social dimensions. Some students declared they did not have any problems to attend the online lessons (Vincenzo: *“I have never studied so much!”*) and referred to some advantages of distance learning, such as having the availability of video-recorded lessons, or feeling more comfortable when they were at home:

Giovanna: *“a positive effect of distance learning is the increase of interactions between teachers and students, even though the screen. Maybe, since the students are at home and feel more comfortable, they can pose questions during the lessons more easily”*.

Nevertheless, other students reported serious difficulties:

Clara: *“not being physically present at the lesson is very difficult for me. I find myself better to see the professor moving around the classroom while he/she teaches, to make a speech during the lesson. Being in front of a screen for many hours gives me a headache”*.

Federica: *“distance learning slows me down. I have decided to transcribe all the lessons, but it is very demanding and this is slowing me down in the study”*.

Irene: *“the approach to the study suffered a strong setback that generated a frustration and fear mechanism that has been difficult to get rid of”*.

One of the students remarked the importance to re-think distance learning (Vincenzo: *“distance learning needs to be adapted to individual cases. You cannot change a person”*). But many of them

complain about the lack of relationships with colleagues, which, in addition to being an emotional resource, are also a source of motivation for studying:

Clara: *“studying with colleagues motivates me. I have missed this”*.

Federica: *“I miss more the social aspect, the relationships with colleagues who are also my friends. I felt more motivated to follow the lessons with colleagues. It's not the same now”*.

Some students also focused their attention on some technical problems, such as not having a space at home where they could study or having a stable internet connection: (Vincenzo: *“the network is a basic service, like water, electricity, gas”*).

The Role of Institutions and Citizens

In general, the students judged the provisions issued by the national government to deal with the health crisis positively, during both the first and the second phase of the pandemic.

Laura: *“There were people thinking that everything should have been opened in march but thankfully we have this government. Measures were as restrictive as accurate”*.

Federica: *“Comparing different countries' system is normal. The Italian one has been underestimated especially in the USA”*.

According to them, the problem was represented by the respect of the rules by the citizens and the control of the territory, especially in a context such as Sicily, where compliance with the rules is more lacking than elsewhere:

Laura: *“With the end of the lockdown and the opening, Italians are proving once again that you give them a hand and take the whole arm”*,

Francesco: *“now the citizen is expected to play his or her role”*.

Simone: *“In Palermo, everyone does what he wants, and the police say they cannot do anything because they do not have the authorization to use force on a gathering, otherwise it is fascism, or the government is weak. But here in Palermo we needed greater strength. You cannot be ignored as a cop and the citizen is free to spit on you. The provisions did not take into account the differences between the regions. There are regions where there is too much freedom and others where there is none”*.

Carlotta: *“We cannot be free as Heidi coming down from the mountains. Many guys came here from Milan visiting their relatives in the house-cares. It's your fault if your grandfather is dead!”*

Laura: *“At the beginning of the pandemic journalists used to interview young people and they usually replied: it's a dangerous disease just for elderlies”, “Don't you have any relatives?”*

Most of participant assumed that the measures adopted by the government have been affective to contain the epidemiological emergency, but they added that the economic aid from the state was insufficient due to the government's past problems on the matter.

Adele: *“the government should be more careful about the economic and social country's difficulties. They did act in a correct way but there is an endless list of future measures that government should act in order to help citizens”*.

Conflicting views have emerged between students living in the city and those living in small towns. The first ones assumed that restrictive provisions adopted by the government were appropriate to the situation but the interventions at the local level were completely ineffective (Carlotta: *“I live in downtown Palermo and here people feel like they are on vacation. If what happened in Lombardy*

had happened here, we would all have died"). On the contrary, those who live in a small town pointed out that the situation was handled exactly as required by the current provisions, implementing all the measures and any penalty provider for.

From the focus group conducted during the second phase of the pandemic, instead, much more conflicting but apparently confident views emerged: someone thinks that the measures that have been really effective were those implemented by the government during the first lockdown: Federica: *"The measures that were implemented in march have been effective. Now I don't know... The government seems confused"*. Others students are in favour of the current measures (Clara: *I have trust in the strategy that the government has implemented, it is right that the measures change according to the risks in a specific area of the country*) and finally, there are other ones who argue that today's measures are the same as the previous ones but it is our perception of them that has changed.

Future Expectations

In general, university students expressed mixed feelings in relation to future expectations: on the one hand, they reported suffering, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, crisis, heaviness, confusion, and uncertainty; on the other hand, they reported hope, fortitude, need for rebirth, recovery, courage, freedom, depth of ties and determination.

Many students said they felt angry because of the loss of many opportunities for their life, like Federica who planned to carry on with her studies outside her hometown, but because of the pandemic, she changed her mind: *"the pandemic has already ruined my expectations for the future. I can't make plans for the future. I feel my wings clipped"*.

Some students were afraid to leave their comfort zone during the pandemic, like Giovanna: *"Even if my university allows me to join the Erasmus project, I would be afraid to travel because the health emergency is not over yet"*, or Federica: *"I would not feel comfortable in moving to an unknown city without being able to socialize with my future colleagues"*.

But at the same time, some of them showed a positive attitude in dealing with this unexpected reality, preferring to focus on the present rather than the future:

Francesca: *"I want to face the future step by step, setting small goals. Thinking about my future takes positive energy away from what I have to do now. I focus on the present rather than the future. Thinking about the future makes me unhappy and anxious"*.

The Ideal Resilient Person

Several resources were identified as relevant to successfully face the crisis due to the pandemic. Some students outlined the role of economic well-being:

Carlotta: *“Those who do not have serious economic problems. If you do not have money, the inability to feed your sons will drive you mad”*.

Francesco: *“It is not true that lockdown is the same for everyone. Those people who could not work are worse than the rest”*.

Simone: *“we get used to this new life, but not our wallet. It will be difficult especially for young people looking for jobs”*.

Other students underlined that even though economic resources are important, they are not enough; people who can rely on social support may deal more easily with the adversities caused by the pandemic:

Laura: *“The economic factor is important as well as the psychological side. Those who were supported are feeling better. If you managed to keep in touch you feel more motivated to go ahead.”*

Nevertheless, most of them outlined the importance of psychological resources such as the strength of character, the capability to be alone, the sense of personal security, the self-acceptance (Irene: *“strength is not related to psychological support”*).

The Risk Perception

Participants declared that the state of the pandemic during the second phase was much more serious than during the first phase. Some of them said that, on a psychological level, they were worse off, and other ones who said they have adapted to a "new normality". Students appeared concerned about the importance that the individual plays in containing the spread of the virus (Vincenzo: *“it all depends on how each of us behaves in our small way, it is important to respect the rules”*). Everything had an undertone of anger towards those people who have never respected any of the measures imposed by the law and the fear dictated by the fact that, whoever does not respect the rules, not only puts him or herself in danger, but puts at stake also the health of those people who have always respected the restrictive provisions.

Regarding the perception of the risk, participants shared similar opinions: *“The spread of the virus depends on the civic engagement”*, *“Covid-19 pandemic is worse compared to March”*. Although the number of cases has increased, some students think that the current situation is under control *“in March we did not know how to contain the spread of the virus, nowadays we have more information and I feel less worried”*.

In the three focus groups, all participants remarked the importance of civic engagement in containing the spread of the virus. They appeared both angry and worried (Clara: *“It is impossible to control the behaviour of others”*, *“Those who do not respect the rules might affect other’s health”*).

According to Francesca, the current situation *“is more serious psychologically”* because *“No one ever expected that the Covid-19 pandemic would have lasted for more than one year”*. Giovanna disagreed with Francesca because, from a psychological point of view, she felt worse between

March and April 2020, and she stated: *“Right now I feel better, I got used to the virus.... I cannot imagine a life without masks and sanitizer”*. As Giovanna, other students (interviewed during January) have adjusted to this reality, Vincenzo: *“I found a new routine in this new normality”*.

Differences between the First and the Second Phase

Conflicting feelings were found between the first and the second lockdown. More negative responses were recorded in the latter one than in the previous groups. The main differences, which were found in the mood of people from the first lockdown to January 2021, concern the search for new habits and routines to live with the virus. In fact, the adjectives used by participants to describe their state of mind were less negative than at the beginning of the epidemiological crisis, but they reflected a certain resignation to the pandemic. Among these, there were *“discouragement”*, *“acceptance”* and *“adaptation”*. About the common characteristics between the three focus groups, in each of them the participants reported words such as *“confusion”* and *“fear”* in March/April, May and January. Sofia spoke of *“conflicting emotions”*, like *“euphoria”* and *“bore”*, that made her feel like in a *“swing”*.

Future Expectations Related to Covid-19

With regards to future expectations concerning the pandemic evolution, we observed different reactions at different times. During the first lockdown, students seemed more optimistic. When we asked them when they thought the emergency phase would be over, they placed a high level of trust and hope in vaccines, and they figured that in one year the crisis would be solved.

During the second lockdown, students were close to give up to the *“old reality”* being willing to accept this new *“normality”* despite the vaccines campaign had already started in December 2020. Some of them believed that the pandemic would be over in one or two years, while others thought that it will likely never end (Vincenzo: *“This situation will not end. We will not return to normality. What if this is the normality 2.0? It will be necessary to find a new way of teaching, of talking, of health care. Our enemy is not the virus!”*).

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic came out as the most devastating and challenging crisis for public health in the contemporary world. This condition had multiple impacts on the mental health of the university students, some of whom suffered from anxiety and depression. In the focus groups we carried out, we explored the psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Italian university students in phase 1 (first lockdown period) and in phase 2 (second lockdown period).

This study suggest³ that the pandemic had both a positive and negative impact on university students' life. The topics raised during the group discussion were: time management, social relationship, relation with one-self, distance learning, risk perception, future expectation, trust in institution, and adjustment to the pandemic.

Participants were interested in the topic and the informal/non-judgmental atmosphere allowed them to come up with spontaneous opinions, giving birth to different points of views. We found that the insecurity of the health emergency caused moods such as “confusion”, “uncertainty”, “fear” that got worse during Phase 2. These results are similar to those reported by Aristovnik et al. (2020), who investigated how students perceive the impacts of the first wave of COVID-19. Authors found that the main emotions felt by students were boredom, anxiety, hopeful and frustration¹². In the present study, students seemed preoccupied regarding the pandemic evolution: the majority was angry at those who do not respect the rules stepping over the law, while others remarked the absence of law enforcement³⁵.

In terms of trust in the institutions, clear messages arose from the three groups: in the ones conducted in May, students expressed a high level of trust in the Italian institutions giving positive feedback to the national measures implemented in order to fight the virus, meanwhile others complained about the lack of efficient controls (more effective in big cities rather than in small villages). From the answers received in January, they considered the Italian government more reliable throughout March, April and May but after almost one year of pandemic, their opinions have changed. Some of them lost their trust because of the lack of control during Summer; moreover, the government's strategy implemented during Phase 2 to share the Nation into areas of risks caused a feeling of extreme confusion and uncertainty in some students.

Other students were disappointed of the economic aspects. They considered that many people did not receive an adequate help in order to save their activities during this period of crisis.

Another important topic is how students reacted to the distance learning: some of them encountered serious difficulties on how to manage time and settle into a new routine, while others kept the same rhythms. Most of them showed negative feelings clearly defining the concepts of stress, frustration, demotivation caused by the inability to manage the study, meet their colleagues or simply going to the library. Raj & Fatima (2020) found that due to the lockdown more than 50% of students were stressed and worried for their studies and not comfortable with the online classes. A minor group felt more positive: they felt comfortable with themselves in taking more exams as well as interacting with professors more easily.

In the present study, most of the participants improved their familiar relationships, especially with their siblings. Similar results were obtained by Cao et al., (2020) who found that living with parents⁸

and having a stable family income are protective factors for students against the anxiety experienced during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Students also understood who were the people they could truly call “real friends” throughout the whole period. The inability to move out of the house and socialize with their friends, relatives and colleagues, has caused a significant amount of distress. Students have tried to cope with this distress by connecting virtually with their loved ones.

In May, university students were more positive than in January, indeed, when we asked them to think about words in relation to the future, they answered: “success”, “obstacles”, “courage”, “recovery”, “uncertainty”, “change”, “freedom”, and “determination”. These words of hope emerged at a time when the situation was still unclear, and it was not thought that it would last so long. According to what emerged in January 2021, participants expressed a sense of resignation and uncertainty because it was no longer possible to see the end of that period. Students complained about the lack of opportunities for their future.

As regards the future expectations related to COVID-19, in May, students believed that the pandemic would have ended with the discovery of the vaccine. However, in January, no one mentioned the vaccine, although the vaccination campaign had already started. Probably this can be explained as a resignation concerning this new reality.

It is important to remark the voluntary involvement of those students who felt free to express their opinion without fear of being judged. Voluntary participation was a key factor in the success of the group discussion. In fact, although the focus groups lasted longer than the expected time for an online group (60 minutes), the interest in the topics was such that the authenticity of the responses was not compromised. In addition, the report of the participants about common stories and experiences encouraged mirroring, that allowed the construction of a cohesive group, despite the loss of the group’s circularity in online mode. An informal climate was created within the groups and the variables of the study were designed to generate the minimal distortion in the answers given by each participant. On average, one participant in each focus group was not able to answer questions related to the interpersonal relationships, probably due to sensitivity of these subjects, despite the informal atmosphere. This type of resistance is predictable considering that the matters tackled during the discussions could be very sensitive ones to somebody.

Therefore, it would be useful to carry on with this “experiment,” which could implement efficient results by letting people feel free and confident to have an opinion regardless of the intimacy of the topics. This would make possible to enrich the results, increasing the sample to be examined, and to improve the study's internal validity. In addition, it could give the possibility to design ongoing new variables that have not been considered so far. This study highlights that the expectations of

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university students have changed negatively from the first to the second phase of the epidemic. It is suggested that the mental health of college students should be monitored during COVID-19 pandemic.

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The findings of our study provide some insights about the psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on university students by listening to their voice and experience (Branquinho et al., 2020; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kim, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2014) which can be an important resource during and after COVID-19.

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Most of the students did not manage to adapt easily to the new distance learning. They lost motivation due to the amount of time spent in front of the laptop without being able to interact with both teachers and colleagues. Some of the participants claimed that the approach to the study suffered a strong setback that generated frustration and fear of failure. Moreover, a few of them complained about repetitive technical issues like lack of strong internet connection and space at home. Despite this they highlighted some advantages of distance learning, such as having the availability of video-recorded lessons, or feeling more comfortable when they were at home. These findings may have practical implication for university administrators because they suggest that they should take proactive steps to support the mental health and educational success of their students at all times. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on university students can allow to identify their coping strategies and lessons for future pandemics.

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Authors' contribution

Alessia Maria Rita Milia assisted with concept, study design, data analysis, manuscript preparation and manuscript editing; Salvo Diliberto assisted with the generation of the initial draft of the whole manuscript, manuscript editing and data interpretation; Arianna Di Piazza assisted with manuscript editing and study concept; Sonia Ingoglia assisted with manuscript editing, data analysis, data interpretation, and study supervision. All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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