

Young Adults' Evolving Values, Attitudes, Behavior, and Processes of Unlearning in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract

Young adults' beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives on life were profoundly shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted their developmental transitions and reshaped their personal, social, and professional lives. This study aims to explore the specific changes in values, attitudes, and belief systems that emerged among young adults during the pandemic, examine their positive and negative effects in the post-pandemic context, and investigate young adults' willingness to unlearn behaviors and perceptions acquired during this period. This qualitative phenomenological study involved semi-structured interviews with ten young adults who either entered college or joined the workforce during the height of the pandemic, capturing their lived experiences of adaptation and change. Thematic analysis revealed several key insights: participants experienced a re-emphasis on core values such as family, health, and time; developed coping mechanisms that included financial prudence and digital reliance; and expressed varied levels of willingness to unlearn maladaptive behaviors such as social withdrawal and overuse of digital platforms. These findings suggest that adaptation among young adults is not merely behavioral but involves conscious reflection and restructuring of beliefs and routines. The study contributes to understanding how crises affect the developmental trajectories of emerging adults and emphasizes the role of unlearning in navigating post-pandemic transitions.

Keywords

Adaptation; pandemic-induced changes; post-pandemic realities; resilience; young adults

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic catalyzed a profound transformation in people's behaviors, especially as a result of combining pharmacological and preventive behavioral interventions that aimed to curb the spread of the disease (Perski et al., 2022). Such interventions included procedures corresponding to reduced physical contact, avoidance of crowded spaces, wearing of face masks, hand hygiene, vaccine protocols, and social distancing (Hotopf, Majorin, & White, 2024).

Additionally, changes were not limited to healthcare habits but also to attitudes toward the environment and behaviors that support environmental protection, like resource-saving and waste-sorting behaviors (Matiuk & Liobikienė, 2023). Other changes included domestic and international daily travel routines and mobility (Hamad, El Traboulsi, Shanableh, & Al-Ruzouq, 2024), mental health issues, as well as information behavior perceptions and information-seeking behaviors (Zimmermann, 2024), even going as far as to say that the pandemic disrupted

economic, social, and political facets without exception (Muhanga, Jesse, & Ngowi, 2024).

Prior to the pandemic, young adults—defined here as individuals aged 18 to 25—were navigating a critical developmental period marked by emerging independence, identity formation, social exploration, and career preparation (Arnett, 2000). These developmental milestones were often facilitated by on-campus education, internships, face-to-face mentorship, peer relationships, and gradual transitions into work or family life. However, the pandemic interrupted these transitions, forcing many to either delay or radically alter their life trajectories.

Individuals move through life with various issues and opportunities throughout their lifespan, and the COVID-19 pandemic further challenges this, as it introduced abrupt cultural and social determinants that forced people to comply and change their routines and behaviors. For instance, traditional workplace practices have undergone changes due to pandemic protocols wherein work-from-home (WFH) became the new norm for the majority of countries, both developing and developed (Zito et al., 2021) however, this change is without repercussions since employees must manage the boundaries between work and personal life, as well as how their daily routines are evolving (O'Leary, 2020). Moreover, Jamaludin et al. (2020) mentioned how the WFH new normal will persist even after the pandemic comes to an end, and because of this, it will impact individual and community-level energy sustainability as more people use electricity from permanent WFH (Madurai Elavarasan et al., 2020). This establishes that new normal practices in the post-pandemic era are not free from implications.

With myriad changes during the pandemic that echo throughout the post-pandemic landscape, it is important to recognize and distinguish the different challenges imposed on individuals at different life stages, particularly in the Philippine context. For emerging and young adults aged 18–25, this meant experiencing high school graduation and the first year of college in an online setting while also battling family and mental health issues at home, especially during lockdowns. According to a population-based longitudinal analysis in Australia by Li et al. (2023), mental health state and well-being significantly decreased as a result of prolonged lockdowns, and in the Philippines, its lockdown period was known as one of the world's longest and had the largest number of cases (Trinidad, 2021). Such a condition posits a lens for understanding and contextualizing the distinctive environment that people experienced during the pandemic.

During young adulthood, individuals typically develop their personalities while simultaneously establishing careers and families. This is also the time when there is more emphasis on socializing and building connections with other people. Moreover, their primary developmental task is to gain independence as they go through major life transitions such as moving out of the parental home, completing education, starting a job, living together with a partner, and becoming a parent (Winpenny et al., 2020). However, the pandemic's constraints on physical mobility, emotional connection, and institutional support disrupted these natural developmental stages, raising concerns about long-term behavioral, social, and psychological outcomes.

It then becomes essential to explore how young adults adapted to these unprecedented circumstances, especially in understanding their processes of thinking and their perspectives on unlearning. With this recognition, it becomes pertinent to assess the efficacy and desirability of people's altered behaviors post-pandemic, as it is imperative for understanding societal responses to crises. The emerging and young adults were forced to grow under the restrictions of the pandemic, and such necessitates an understanding of how it affected them going forward.

The concept of unlearning—defined here as the process of discarding outdated or maladaptive habits, values, or beliefs to make room for new and more contextually relevant ones—is especially critical in this post-crisis landscape. In fact, unlearning comes naturally as part of learning new information. According to van Mierlo, Halbe, Beers, Scholz, and Vinke-de (2020), viewing the learning process as concurrent with unlearning is beneficial, as it is significant during the transitional phase when individuals shift their daily practices and routines. Specifically, it helps the individual discard certain habits, methodologies, and cognitive frameworks and makes them ready to adopt and internalize new ones (van Oers, Feola, Runhaar, & Moors, 2023). Despite its relevance, the process of unlearning—particularly among young adults adapting after a global health crisis—remains underexplored. This research seeks to address that gap.

Recognizing the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on societal frameworks, economies, and public well-being is crucial for informing future preparedness efforts and policy decisions. We must clarify the intricate relationship between global emergencies and human behavior to improve crisis management and response strategies, particularly because there is no universally applicable solution.

Method

The study was conducted within regions accessible to the researcher. Specifically, primary locations include educational institutions and communities that can be reached locally and online by the researcher. These locations were chosen based on their accessibility and the presence of the target demographic. Moreover, the study carefully considered urban and suburban areas to ensure practical data collection while recognizing the potential limitations of geographic representation.

The target demographic of the study is young adults who have encountered the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to gather diverse experiences and perspectives from their experiences. Participants are 2020 college freshmen and 2021 graduates. This is because both groups experienced critical turning points in their life trajectories during a crisis, leading them to experience their first year of college and/or graduation remotely. These specific points of transition were chosen as inclusion criteria to ensure that participants had firsthand experience of disrupted developmental milestones during the pandemic.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who began college before 2020 or graduated before the pandemic, as their trajectories would not reflect the same transitional disruptions being studied. The study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the adaptations and unlearning processes among young adults in the post-pandemic era. A qualitative research design can provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions, as well as explain patterns of human behaviors (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). Specifically, a phenomenological approach is used to capture the participants' lived experiences. Such an approach can contextualize and understand the human social experience while also acknowledging its complexity, focusing on the structure of that experience itself (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). This is suitable for highlighting how the participants made sense of the changes and challenges they faced.

To gather the target demographic, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select ten (10) participants. Specifically, criterion sampling was utilized, wherein individuals are chosen

based on predetermined criteria, which enabled the researcher to target participants who have meaningful insights pertinent to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The interview questions were constructed with guidance from Carl Jung's Theory of Adulthood and Paul Baltes' Lifespan Approach to Human Development. These frameworks emphasize key developmental transitions in young adulthood, such as identity formation, independence, and social engagement. Drawing from these, questions were formulated to explore experiences related to shifts in values, attitudes, coping, and unlearning behaviors. For example, Jung's notion of individuation informed questions about participants' self-reflection and growth, while Baltes' contextual model guided questions on adaptive behavior in response to environmental stressors.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Profile of Participants

P	Age	Sex	Role during COVID-19 pandemic	Role during post-pandemic
1	27	F	Working	Working
2	22	F	Student	Student & working
3	22	F	Student	Working
4	22	M	Student & working	Student & working
5	27	M	Working	Working
6	27	F	Working	Working
7	23	F	Student & working	Student & working
8	23	F	Student	Student
9	22	M	Student	Student
10	28	M	Working	Working

Based on data saturation standards, a sample size of ten (10) participants is sufficient, wherein the information obtained is enough to adequately answer research objectives, and further data collection does not reveal any new themes or insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015). We made careful considerations and efforts to include participants from diverse backgrounds, aiming to capture a wide range of perspectives. The gathering and contacting of participants were conducted through personal outreach and social media platforms. Research has shown that social media platforms can provide an opportunity to reach diverse populations and can be a valuable source of both quantitative and qualitative data for researchers (Franz, Marsh, Chen, & Teo, 2019). The data collection process predominantly involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews to delve deeply into the experiences and perspectives of young adults in the post-pandemic era, complemented by a survey form through Google Forms to collect demographic details.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed and finalized, consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences, values, attitudes, and beliefs. Each question was aligned with theoretical constructs from the frameworks mentioned earlier, such as independence, self-definition, adaptation, and meaning-making—to maintain conceptual coherence. Open-ended questions were selected to allow flexibility and accommodate spontaneous discussions of emerging themes.

The process started with the identification of potential participants, wherein they were contacted and invited through personal and community networks, as well as social media platforms. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained to ensure that participants were fully aware of the study and their rights. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, tested for clarity and relevance through feedback. Following this, scheduling and arrangement

of interview dates took place, and a final venue was decided, whether in person or virtually. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. For analyzing the data gathered, the study primarily employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which allowed the researcher to identify, examine, and interpret patterns within the qualitative data.

The process began with transcription and familiarization, where the researcher reviewed the data multiple times to gain an intimate understanding. Initial codes were generated and then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. Finally, a detailed narrative of the results was written, integrating both thematic insights and theoretical interpretations.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results organized according to the study's research questions, followed by an integrative discussion grounded in relevant theories, particularly Carl Jung's Theory of Adulthood and Baltes' Lifespan Approach to Human Development. These theories highlight young adulthood as a critical period for identity formation, independence, and psychosocial development. As such, they guide our interpretation of how the participants adapted to the crisis and how they engaged in reflective processes of unlearning.

Specific Changes in Values, Attitudes, and Belief Systems among Young Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The findings revealed that the pandemic amplified pre-existing values rather than creating entirely new ones. While participants did not report completely abandoning their core values, they described placing greater importance on family, health, financial prudence, and gratitude. These shifts reflect the collectivist cultural context of the Philippines, where familial and communal ties remain central.

Before presenting the changes, it is important to note that the coding and analysis were guided by the theoretical constructs from Jung and Baltes, which emphasize the developmental significance of transitional periods and the self-reflective processes of young adulthood. The themes identified are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Changes in Values, Attitudes, and Belief Systems	
MAIN THEME	SUBTHEME
No changes in values, but rather an emphasis on specific, already existing values	Family first
	Health
	Prudence & frugality
	Gratitude
Developed positive attitudes	Commitment to increased financial responsibility
	Increased appreciation for family and relationships
	Self-reflection and reevaluation of life goals
Developed negative attitudes	Increased introversion
	Anxiety and uncertainty
	Decreased motivation for socially approved external success
Resulting belief systems	Value of time

Faith in God or spiritual beliefs

These findings suggest that participants were negotiating the psychological impacts of the pandemic while re-evaluating personal values and goals, a process that mirrors Jung's concept of individuation. The emphasis on time, family, and health as valuable constructs also aligns with Baltes' framework of selective optimization with compensation, in which individuals adapt their behavior to sustain functioning during adversity.

Shift in Priorities and Attitudes

The findings revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a lens through which young adults reprioritized their values, attitudes, and belief systems. While the pandemic did not necessarily transform their core principles, it amplified pre-existing values, shaped attitudes positively and negatively, and fostered shifts in belief systems that continue to influence their lives post-pandemic.

Contrary to expectations, young adults' values were not fundamentally altered but rather emphasized and reinforced. Family, in particular, emerged as the highest priority, with participants focusing on connection, support, and shared responsibilities. In the context of collectivist cultures (Saleh, Marissangan, Abdullah, Hamid, & Sulvinajayanti, 2024), such as those in South Asia or the Philippines, this heightened focus on family is unsurprising, given the culturally ingrained emphasis on interdependence and support. This reflects how crises can amplify intrinsic values, motivating individuals to prioritize what truly matters.

The heightened awareness of health and hygiene and financial prudence demonstrates how values were operationalized in practical ways (Amuakwa-Mensah, Klege, Adom, & Köhlin, 2021) to adapt to the pandemic's challenges. This shift not only indicates a greater focus on physical well-being but also demonstrates a proactive effort to prevent future vulnerabilities. In line with Jung's Theory of Adulthood, these shifts represent the individuation process, where young adults begin to make deliberate and inward-focused decisions that reflect their emerging identities and redefined goals. Likewise, Baltes' lifespan approach supports the notion that these value amplifications are adaptive responses shaped by age-graded and history-graded influences.

Dual Impact of the Pandemic

The pandemic also spurred notable shifts in attitudes. Positive attitudes included a deeper appreciation for family and relationships, financial responsibility, and a more proactive, goal-oriented outlook on life. These attitudes reflect the resilience of young adults, who were able to reframe adversity into opportunities for growth and reflection (Mohd Azril Shukri, 2024; Bell et al., 2023).

On the other hand, negative attitudes such as increased introversion, heightened anxiety, and diminished motivation for external achievements reveal the emotional and social costs of prolonged isolation and uncertainty (Nguyen et al., 2024). Interestingly, the situation puts into perspective the critical role that milestones play in young adult development, as they serve as markers of growth, achievement, and social integration.

It is important to emphasize, however, that participants did not view their reduced motivation for external achievements as entirely negative. Instead, it became an opportunity for them to reassess their priorities and see other aspects of life more clearly. Rather than losing ambition, they adopted a more cautious perspective, having entered adulthood with specific timelines and long-term goals that were disrupted by the pandemic. This cautious optimism reveals how

young adults began to apply selective optimization—intensifying their investment in fewer but more meaningful goals—consistent with Baltes’ model of adaptive development. These competing responses also reflect Jung’s idea of the “shadow self,” where personal growth arises through engagement with discomfort, inner conflict, and reflection. Their ability to draw strength from uncertainty demonstrates how meaning-making became essential in shaping a renewed sense of purpose.

These shifts in values and attitudes led to significant changes in belief systems. Many participants reported a heightened awareness of time’s fleeting nature, prompting them to reevaluate life priorities. Spiritual or existential exploration also became a common coping mechanism, with some turning to (Sweetman & O’Farrell, 2024) and others finding meaning through human connection.

This turn to reflection and spiritual reorientation reflects Jung’s assertion that emerging adults must integrate the personal and the transcendent as part of achieving wholeness. Baltes’ framework supports this interpretation by emphasizing how sociocultural and normative pressures shape development during critical periods such as global crises.

This duality highlights the pandemic’s role as a crucible for both self-discovery and emotional strain. Participants’ redefined belief systems—centered on time, relationships, purpose, and transcendence—underscore how crises can catalyze profound internal realignments even when external circumstances remain unstable.

Positive and Negative Effects of Pandemic-Induced Changes

Table 3. Impacts of Pandemic-Induced Changes in the Post-Pandemic Landscape

MAIN THEME	SUBTHEME
Positive Changes	Family orientation and closer relationships
	Time management and productivity
	Continued self-improvement and personal growth
Negative Changes	Socialization difficulties
	Increased screen time leading to short attention span
	Loss and missed opportunities

Positive Post-Pandemic Realities

As participants reflected on the shifts in their values, attitudes, and belief systems during the pandemic, it is now essential to explore the lasting impact of these changes beyond the pandemic. The result raises essential questions about how these transformations have influenced their daily lives and decision-making processes, which make up their post-pandemic realities.

Since strengthened family relationships were a dominant theme, participants integrated family into their long-term plans and decisions. However, the heightened reliance on family structures also led to perceived delays in achieving independence, such as moving out or pursuing individual goals. This tension highlights the paradox of strengthened familial ties—while providing support and security, they can also create a sense of constraint. On a positive note, structured routines and improved time management, cultivated during remote work and online learning, became lasting habits (Kombanda, Margerison, Booth, & Worsley, 2022). The pandemic also acted as a catalyst for self-reflection, prompting participants to reevaluate their priorities and redefine success on their terms. This shows how, in the right circumstances and

tools, crisis-induced disruptions can lead to meaningful growth. This aligns with Baltes' concept of selective optimization with compensation, where individuals strategically focus on meaningful goals while adapting to contextual constraints. Jung's concept of individuation is also evident as young adults engage in deeper internal reflection, leading to personal integration and growth.

In general, these findings affirm that when given space and structure, crisis-induced disruptions can serve as developmental accelerators that foster identity refinement and personal resilience.

Negative Post-Pandemic Realities

Significant difficulties also persisted in the post-pandemic landscape. Socialization challenges were particularly notable, with many participants struggling to reintegrate into face-to-face interactions. Increased introversion and social anxiety limited broader social or professional engagement, while others lamented the loss of their previously extroverted tendencies. During the pandemic, heavy reliance on digital platforms led to challenges with attention and focus (Andayani & Akbar, 2024). This shift impacted work productivity and academic performance, presenting long-term obstacles. The study goes on to show that extended screen time affects not only children's developmental trajectories but also adults.

Additionally, missed milestones, such as graduations and key life events, led to feelings of loss and paused growth, reflecting the emotional toll of disrupted developmental milestones on young adults' sense of progress and fulfillment. The absence of these experiences might have disrupted their sense of continuity and accomplishment (Benner & Mistry, 2020), leaving a lingering impact on their self-perception and future aspirations. These findings underscore Jung's assertion that key transitions are psychological thresholds; without them, one's developmental journey may feel incomplete. In accordance with Baltes' theory, the lack of normative age-graded experiences may have impeded adaptive development, as young adults struggled to find new reference points for success and maturity.

The post-pandemic realities of young adults reveal a duality of positive growth and lingering challenges. While many participants successfully adapted and developed resilience, others continue to grapple with the emotional and social consequences of the pandemic.

Young Adults' Willingness to Unlearn

Table 4. Willingness to Unlearn Pandemic-Induced Behaviors or Perceptions

MAIN THEME	SUBTHEME
Positive Attitude to Unlearning	Desire for self-improvement Adjusting to new realities
Reaffirming Positive Changes	Adjusting to new realities Maintenance of positive behaviors

Unlearning and Adaptation

Young adults expressed a nuanced approach to unlearning pandemic-formed behaviors and adapting to post-pandemic realities. While there was a general awareness of the need to unlearn negative habits, such as social anxiety and over-reliance on digital distractions, the process often remained in the reflection stage due to busy schedules. This hesitation to act reveals the challenges of balancing immediate responsibilities with the longer-term goal of personal improvement. Simultaneously, they displayed a strong commitment to reaffirming the positive changes they cultivated during the pandemic. Practices like improved time management,

resilience, and self-discipline were highly valued, with participants making a conscious effort to sustain these habits as part of their personal growth journey.

This reflects the early stages of what van Mierlo et al. (2020) describe as behavioral unlearning—an intentional process of discarding maladaptive responses to make way for more context-appropriate patterns. The participants' selective retention of beneficial behaviors suggests that unlearning is more than forgetting—it is an evaluative and identity-driven adaptation process.

In retrospect, participants appeared more focused on reinforcing the positive changes they experienced during the pandemic than addressing the negative behaviors they developed post-pandemic. This inclination may stem from the tangible benefits they observed firsthand, making it easier to act on habits that had already proven their value. Interestingly, such an inclination also suggests how experiencing the positive outcomes of behavioral adjustments can serve as a powerful motivator for change. From a theoretical perspective, this supports Baltes' emphasis on optimization, where individuals enhance high-priority areas of functioning while allowing others to diminish. It also aligns with Jung's model of purposeful transformation during adulthood, where awareness leads to reintegration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered widespread changes in behaviors, values, and attitudes as individuals adapted to public health interventions and new social norms. Beyond health-related practices, these changes reshaped work environments, education, social interactions, and mental health, significantly influencing young adults during a critical developmental period. The findings of this study show that while core values remained intact, they became more pronounced, especially those related to financial stability, health, and family-centeredness. Young adults responded to disruptions in normative life transitions with both resilience and introspection, reframing adversity into opportunities for growth while grappling with heightened introversion, anxiety, and motivation loss.

These dual realities reflect the adaptive strategies highlighted in Baltes' Lifespan Approach and the meaning-making processes central to Jung's Theory of Adulthood. Participants showed a strong inclination to reinforce positive habits formed during the pandemic, such as time management and self-discipline, while struggling to unlearn detrimental behaviors due to limited time, resources, or systemic barriers. This hesitancy points to a deeper tension between personal insight and structural support, suggesting that recovery is not merely about individual willpower but also access to enabling environments.

In light of these findings, the study recommends that post-pandemic recovery efforts—whether institutional, psychological, or policy-based—prioritize sustained mental health support, digital wellness initiatives, and opportunities for social reintegration tailored to young adults' needs. Recovery should not be reduced to a return to pre-pandemic norms but envisioned as a transformative process that addresses lingering emotional, cognitive, and social vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to move beyond reactive crisis management and toward intentional systems that support long-term well-being, equity, and developmental continuity.

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