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Experiences of Vulnerability & Precariousness during the COVID pandemic

A sociological case study of young people in Sweden.

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Abstract

This research critically examines the experiences of the pandemic for youths of the generation “i- Gen”. Concretely, the research focuses on the experiences revealed in qualitative interviews in comparison to existing research on precarity and youth studies, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the research is to analyze young people's stories through the theoretical lens of the concept of precarity. Firstly, I focus on the contextual background of the existence of precarity in leading to a notion of precariousness and stress for youth. Secondly, the research explores how the existing research can be related to the narratives from youth during the pandemic. The research is abductive; therefore, the consideration of other theories will be used to understand the background behind the interviewees’ narratives in an attempt to construct a theory. The results from the analysis of the interviews highlights three main conclusions: The importance of family resources and networks in feelings of stability, gendered stress of women worrying increasingly about the future, and the conflicting feelings of adulthood. Moreover, there seems to be a structure of youths cautiously choosing life paths in search of security. The participants with lower aspirations generally stood opposed to adulthood compared to other participants wanting to engage in the next phase of adulthood during the pandemic. Even though many of the participants shared life conditions, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds worried to a higher extent about the future. The research, therefore, concludes that social class and gender are the most important factor behind feelings of precariousness, stress over the future, and insecurity during the pandemic.

Keywords: Precariousness, i-Gen, COVID-19 Pandemic, Vulnerability, Sweden

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1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the young populations within generation i-Gen have been revealed increasingly impressionable and vulnerable to lockdowns. One can see a statistical trend of youths being more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, unreliable incomes, and stress, both before and during the pandemic. (Twenge, 2017; Robert, 2009) In current studies, particular emphasis has been given to the negative effects the pandemic has had on children's and youth's psychological wellbeing. Numerous surveys have highlighted that young people's mental health has been disproportionately affected relatively to older adults. Some studies even suggest an increase in suicidal thoughts and self-harm. (BMJ, 2020; BRIS, 2021) Hence, not only has the pandemic affected many young people's social life, but also their income and psychological health.

This study provides an insight into the expressed realities of eight young respondents, experiencing restricted opportunities of social gatherings, reduced job opportunities, and psychological vulnerability. The concept of 'precarity or precariousness' applies to the unfolding of the political, economic, and social impacts of COVID-19 on youths in Sweden. The concept of precarity draws attention to the predominantly insecure nets of livelihoods and investigates how these circumstances have had an impact on young people. Because of the abductive nature of this research, the literature review will operate as a tool to understand the interviews, meanwhile, empirical experiences and narratives construct generalized conclusions.

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to highlight young people's experience of the pandemic through the lens of precarity, with particular focus placed on the so-called i-Gen in Sweden. This allows investigating if the current crisis has affected young people's awareness and experience of vulnerability or if feelings of precariousness have intensified. The overarching research questions are therefore the following:

- How has the i-Gen in Sweden experienced the pandemic?

- How does precariousness relate to young peoples' experiences of the pandemic?

The research questions are constructed to connect the theoretical framework of precarity to different realities of the participants' life. This will be done through semi-structured interviews with respondents who belong to the I-Gen with an age range of 18-24. The author will not take control over the interview but allow the interview length and the sensitiveness of the data to depend on the participant. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques, to gather data from different social segments in society. Even though the research questions are broad, it serves the purpose of being open for unintended findings in the case study. Explanatory research aims to generate a theory from the gathered material and in this case, a fairly new field of the development processes from the pandemic. Therefore, the results can reveal new data and implications, opening up the demand for new studies to be conducted.

1.2 Disposition

In this first section of the paper an introduction of the purpose and contextual background of Covid-19 and the generation i-Gen. Then, the contextual background of youths' realities concerning current societal development will be introduced to firm up the purpose behind the research questions. This section emphasizes the existing research on the trend of rising anxieties, insecurities due to the pandemic, youth vulnerabilities of the current employment crises, and how this research could contribute. The next part presents the methodological approach, delimitations and case selection behind the research. Then elaborating on the theoretical definitions of precarity and class-relations following with the empirical data from the qualitative interviews. The last section discusses and concludes the findings, and presents a few statements answering the research questions.

2. Background

2.1 COVID-19

In the year 2020, the highly contagious virus COVID-19 spread globally, pushing the implementation of national lockdowns and closure of international borders to contain the spread. Sweden was not an exception and confirmed their first Covid-19 case on the 31st of January and since then, the spread has slowly increased until it became a fact that there was a pandemic in

March (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020). The Swedish government was until the 10th of January 2021 unable by law to induce a full lockdown and therefore no strict requirements could be implemented. Policy-makers intended to find alternative ways to keep the society running while minimizing the spread. Yet, the responsibility was placed on the public's judgment to contain the spread and stay home. (Claeson & Hanson 2020). However, the restriction has become harsher over time, due to the significantly high spread in Sweden compared to the size of the population (John Hopkins University of Medicine 2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted economic activity, resulting in millions of people around the world losing their jobs, or a large part of their income, at very short notice. Especially the pay-for-performance practices within the gig economy enable depression of wages and nonfinancial forms of compensation for employees. Sweden allowed companies to stay open despite the restrictions, leading to entrepreneurs or people employed within the gig economy having to make the individual judgment whether or not to work or be pushed into a further precarious situation. (Kavaliunas, 2020) Pandemic-related shutdowns hit younger generations significantly. In a survey conducted within Europe's borders, almost 30 percent of i-Gen and a quarter of younger millennials reported losing their jobs or being placed on temporary unpaid leave in April 2020. Moreover, only 38% of i-Gen reported their employment status unchanged by the pandemic. (Deloitte, 2020). Although the economic consequences of the pandemic have fallen heavily on younger generations, they still express characteristics of wanting to resolve world issues. This reveals new insights on a strong determination shared by young people. Before the pandemic young people rated the environment as their top concern, followed by unemployment and sexual harassment. During the pandemic, health care and disease prevention moved up as a concern in the second survey. Although, climate change and protecting the environment continued to be the top-rated issue. (Deloitte, 2021)

For the people employed in the gig economy, the pandemic has not only influenced their access to resources but due to lack of long-term contracts, further has implications on their access to non-financial resources, such as healthcare and housing. Given the insecure nature of their jobs and residences, some people are statistically less prone to afford to be sick or the practice of social distancing. (Sharkey, 2008) Despite the depressed wages associated with the gig economy,

even more, inequality is found in employees' right to health and life insurance, pension, and savings plan benefits (Kristal, Cohen, & Navot, 2020).

Since the pandemic started, people have more than doubled their intake on news, reports, and statistical data. This abundance of information results in the creation of an alternative reality based on the sense of "what if" and associated anxiety. The aftermath is an increasingly neurotic population with behavioral reactions according to their fragmented ideas of potential risks. (Paulsen, 2020)

Moreover, there seems to be a controversy regarding the benefits of social media during the pandemic. While some scholars are referring to the social benefits of social media during lockdowns, some studies highlight the overload of information as having a negative impact on stress levels, especially young people. Social media both increased youths' experience of FOMO (fear of missing out) although paradoxically enforcing a normative shame against socializing and a fear of spreading COVID-19. This resulted in social media giving contrasting influences in different directions, centralizing stress on the individual to make the right choice. (Bernes, 2021)

2.2 The i-Gen

i-Gen is defined as the generation born between 1995-2012, also known as the Gen-Z. However, the usage of i-Gen is chosen because it is theorized to highlight the important and characterizing fact that these youths have grown up with smartphones. With the help of four extensive data collections directed at youths, nine characteristics were identified for the i-Gen; slow maturing, internet connectivity, less social interaction, increased worries, reduced religious beliefs, reduced social activism, insecure income, indecisiveness, social inclusiveness. Many of these major behavioral changes are centered in two specific years 2011-2012 when access to smartphones had become the norm. (Twenge, 2017) According to Paulsen, (2020) 200 years of accelerating economic and social welfare seem to have reached a turning point for the younger generations. Never before have this many young people reported pessimism towards attaining the same economic stability as their parents. This pattern can be seen worldwide, in high-income as well as low-income countries, whereby young people are increasingly distressed over a declined future wellbeing. (Deloitte 2017; Cederström 2018) Recent studies confirm depression and suicidal risk have increased prominently in Europe, especially within younger ages.

Approximately 42% of people surveyed in the US December-report, had symptoms of anxiety or depression during the pandemic. An increase from 11% the previous year. (Zorthea, 2020).

“i-Gen” is the first generation growing up with smartphones and many studies indicate that this generation is significantly differentiated from other generations. (Twenge, 2017) According to some scholars, i-Gen has become more dependent on the social capital of the family, operating as a safety net to manage uncertainties in the future (Black, 2019) Therefore it is important to include the economic, cultural, and social background of their families when trying to understand young people’s different realities and construction of hopes for the future. (ibid). Extensive surveys within Europe and the US reveal striking changes in behavioral patterns, with a rapid drop in sexual activities, socializing, dating, drinking, driving, and having an increase in registered depression. Furthermore, compared to other generations, there has been a decline in aspirations for having an interesting lifestyle. There is also a decrease in valuing the social aspect of employment, having a fun working space or meaningful interaction with colleagues. Instead, many young people are in favor of a job characterized by stability and full-time employment. (Twenge, 2017)

Twenge (2017) concludes that precariousness as a normalized part of children's life. When comparing surveys from the year 1952-1992, she could see a prominent increase in worrying about the future. Specifically, around the year of 2010 one can see a statistical uprise in systematic precaution in American youths. Young people drink approximately 50% less than what young people did in the 70s. Furthermore, there are decreasing trends of violence and sexual intercourse in today's generation. In Twenges’s (2017) academic work “i-Gen”, a statistical graph concerned with religious beliefs was characterized by a long-term decline. Twenge (2017) argues that the differences between the generations have never before been as crucial to understand. I-Gen’s realities differ not only in their commitment to (un)social activities through social media, but also through their experiences of society and the threat of environmental crises.

i-Gen stands out as a generation, less persuaded to work in multinational companies, instead prioritizing companies' political and ecological impact as far more important. 40 percent reported

making a positive impact as their top job activity. This generation, therefore, tends to seek social inclusiveness in their working space and actively working against discrimination to a higher extent than before. (Excel, 2018) Hurrelmann (2021) refers to the i-Gen as “Generation Greta Thunberg”, implicating political involvement in youths. The i-Gen are significantly more critical towards society than other generations. Approximately one-third of European youths are involved in political movements. However, in the notion of underemployment and reduced middle-class standards, the economic divergence is fueling political polarization. Hurrelmann highlights a deeply rooted political polarization between young people, based on the individual’s access to different social platforms and access to resources. Young people engaged in environmental activism often come from affluent academic homes, meanwhile, working-class citizens to a higher extent are reporting feeling discriminated against. As concluding remarks, the research points towards the potential future of youth employment escalating, reducing time and opportunities for activism. Hurrelmann proposes that youths are under the threat of becoming characterized by current events and vulnerability, shifting the characterization from “Generation Greta Thunberg” into “Generation Covid-19”. (Hurrelmann, 2021)

3. Existing Research

3.1 Youth’s and Precariousness

“To be aware of risks is an insight, whereas precariousness is the insight of uncertainty”- Paulsen (2020).

The feeling of anxiety-based precariousness is explained through Kirkegaard (1965) as; the fear in itself is reprehensible to the insight that countering the risk is up to oneself. Another important aspect is that precariousness operates through “contradictory-thinking, conditioned by disinclination”, of what could be/have been in the future or past. Anxiety is the act of relating the present with regrets of the past or the fantasy of what is to come. Even though the mind can rationalize the risk as small, precarity becomes the liquid form of all kinds of uncertainty. The mass-produced choices have infiltrated every aspect of life in modern capitalist society, establishing the foundational ground for precarity. (Paulsen, 2020)

Paulsen (2020) argues for the state of people suffering from an intensified inability to live with uncertainties, affecting politics, law enforcement, and work. (ibid) Today WHO classifies different forms of anxiety disorders as the most prominent psychological problem worldwide. One-third of the European population suffers from different kinds of anxiety-related diagnoses. Over the spectrum of one decade, the amount of depressed people has increased by 20 percent worldwide, according to WHO (2017). Furthermore, the symptoms of depression have more than doubled in young women between the years of 2012 and 2015. When looking at statistical data from around the world, depression and suicidal risk have increased in specific countries, Sweden being one of them, and especially in the groups of women and young people. (Paulsen, 2020; The Washington Post, 2020) Despite the consensus that women, youths, and minority ethnic groups, are to a higher extent being disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, surveys are highlighting the pandemic as stress-releasing for certain populations. (Jordan et al., 2019) In a survey interviewing 27500 youths in Europe both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic one can see a clear difference in stress levels. The first survey revealed that more than half of the participants were stressed all or most of the time prior to the pandemic. In the second survey conducted after the pandemic, stress levels had fallen drastically, possibly indicating that the slowdown of life in lockdown may have reduced stress levels. (Deloitte, 2020)

Comprehensive research was conducted within Europe, emphasizing post-education trajectories of eroded opportunities for stability and realities under a “post-truth time” for youths. Findings from the qualitative interviews were broad and diverse but had one theme in common in all stages of life, uncertainty. Furthermore, this feeling of uncertainty was manifested in other related themes of caution, anxiety, fear, and hampered hopes for the future. The research concluded these tendencies as establishing a foundational structure for the citizens having to be the strategic but standby, constantly preparing for the future under short-time solutions. Three spheres were identified as shaping the mind of the youths and their future; The micro-future of circumstances in which the young person can influence, the mesosphere of life prospects dependent on external forces in society, and the macro-futures, global crises, and international forces beyond the individual’s control. (Black, 2019)

Since the year of 1985, a Swedish NGO called BRIS has gathered data on psychological distress in youths. The statistics of sleep deprivation, depression, and anxiety have more than doubled in Sweden since the 80s, whereby women represent the majority of cases. Women reported 10 percent higher on decreased sleep quality, increased stress, sadness, and depression. Furthermore, women had a doubled amount of anxiety compared to men and 15 percent higher reported increased loneliness, opposed to reports before the outbreak. Therefore, young women can be concluded as having an initial psychological vulnerability and are at the risk of being negatively affected by crises such as COVID-19. (Holmqvist, 2018; Kapetanovice et al, 2021).

BRIS report during the years 2020-2021, emphasizes that the pandemic has exposed underlying mental health problems. During the first year of the pandemic, phone calls received by BRIS regarding anxiety increased by 61 percent, while calls referring to depression increased by 55 percent (BRIS 2021, p. 12). The report revealed young peoples' difficulties in handling a decreased social engagement with other people. The report emphasizes the importance of social relationships, as an essential safety net for young people, giving youth a sense of community and a deeper understanding of their social role in society(*ibid*). Another factor could be highlighted in surveys comparing depression with the amount of screen time. These surveys emphasize a clear correlation between hourly engagement in social media and reported depression. Furthermore, feelings of loneliness and being left out have increased by around ten percent since 2007, the year the iPhone was released. Moreover, in 2015, 40 percent of 10th to 12th graders reported getting less than 7 hours of sleep, a rapid increase in sleep deprivation since 2010. (Twenge, 2017)

3.2 Youth and Underemployment

As the 21st century proceeds, never before have an abundance of people with an academic degree been positioned in insecure labor. (Black, 2019) These academic qualifications are understood as necessary work credentials to be able to compete and navigate within a complex global labor market. (*ibid*) Youth with educational degrees have become far more vulnerable in the labor market. With an over-supply of qualified applicants, precarity operates increasingly within people with an academic background. Yet, instead of qualification, the labor market is based on the employees' premises of flexibility and the performance-based access to shifts

(TUC, 2018). Recent studies conclude that young people are in a vulnerable position of having to realize how the labor market cannot guarantee sufficient amounts of jobs due to a global employment crisis. Young people of today are therefore faced with higher unemployment, lower job quality, higher detachments towards work, and intensified inequalities within the labor market. Hence, young people are forced to alter their aspirations for the future to meet the supply of the current labor market. (Elder & King, 2016)

Many young people experience an inability to afford the loans from a college education, placing them in a deadlock of career choices. (Twenge, 2017) The Swedish organization Saco reports on the wage correlation between academic studies versus people with only high school education. In Sweden, one can see an acceleration of wage centered at the age of 38, a breaking point between those with and without academic merits. However, the approximate return after paying back the loans for academic studies in Sweden is eight percent. Saco could also conclude that one-third of the academic education programs resulted in a decreased economic return. Hence, having an academic background in Sweden does not ensure economic stability, but could instead lead to economic degradation. (Saco, 2020)

In Sweden, short-time, on-call employment is the most common employment. (Alfonsson, 2018) On-call employees live under an alienating lifestyle, with an inability to control life, work, and personal relationships. To get a full-time contract then becomes a privilege, intensifying class differences in society. (ibid) Roberts (2009) refers to underemployment as the new status quo for youths in the 21st-century. Underemployment is not to be confused with unemployment, but refers to an economy of temporary employment, resulting in overqualified part-time employment. Gardiner (2014) points towards young people being far more vulnerable to the trends of underemployment. In a British survey, 32 percent reported low confidence in finding a job within the next couple of years. Furthermore, the confidence of gaining sufficient work experience is highly dependent on socio-economic background. More than half of the participants that reported limited access to job opportunities came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. (CMI, 2016) Twenge (2017) highlights the fact that young people are having far lower ambitions to get a fulfilling job than before. One out of four young males have never had a job but are spending their days with leisure activities. (Hurst, 2016)

According to the International Labor Organization (2015) around 60 percent of the world's workforce is in precarious work, the majority of them women. While all workers suffer due to depressed wages and benefits, the effect might severely affect the realities of people within the gig economy. Moreover, recent business closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified unemployment and disproportionately exacerbated the instability and uncertainty, characterizing precarity. (Austin, 2020) Alfonsson (2018) argues that precarity emerged due to an abundance of the labor force, shifting the power from a united labor force into the hands of managers. This in turn forces employees to self-exploit and be ready to push boundaries to adapt to the constantly changing working demands. A notion that significantly causes stress and uncertainty but increases a sense of alienation towards other employees competing for the same shifts. (Wood, 2017) Meaningless and low aspirations for the future can be derived from the concurrent need to rebuild identical markers, normality, and short-lived routines (Webster, 2016). This can then result in a growing population isolated from meaning, identity, and lasting relations from social cohesion (Friedman, 2014). In a similar study, the conclusion was drawn that the participants with a precarious job had a limited capacity to engage in long-term commitments, such as starting a family or investing resources in living arrangements due to limited agency within their own lives. The study highlights how the participants are ready to sacrifice their present lifestyle in the hope for a better future that never seems to arrive. These tendencies can therefore lower young people's expectations of adulthood and reduce the desire to become older. (Bone, 2019)

In comparative qualitative research, interviews of young students with different access to welfare and family networks compared findings from Sweden, England, and Italy. The research shows that precariousness only concerns the young people who are reliant on the labor market due to a lack of family sources or state support. The study reveals that for young people from families of wealth, the short-time contracts and flexible schedules were seen as a convenient extra income. Although, the most common was youth's feeling pressured to get a precarious job to support the family budget. (Antonuccio, 2018)

3.3 This Research's Contribution

Needless to say, many contemporary development processes are intertwined. The consequences of COVID-19 are unfolding in highly differentiated ways across the globe, at regional, international, and intra-national levels. Furthermore, the pandemic has fundamentally disrupted a multitude of development processes, hence opening up a multitude of academic gaps. (Grodach,2020). As the people living in extreme poverty are migrating to new socio-economic geographical areas, one can argue the importance of understanding the development field as a worldwide issue, not only centered in the “global south”.

Yet, the most prominent correlation between current developments and the planned research lies in the relevance for the current understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications on social welfare. The rapid job loss during the pandemic has formed major consequences in the development direction, intensifying deficiencies in many western societies. (Hall, 2020)

A fundamental principle behind pandemics, such as COVID-19, is the delayed societal consequences on public health and wellbeing. Hence highlighting the importance of conducting studies in an early stage to outline possible implications for social prospects to enable appropriate policies (Hall, 2020). In these uncertain and volatile times, one can argue for the necessity to investigate the realities of the young. Research in association with this theme could therefore contribute to an understanding of how inequalities are reproduced. According to current studies in Sweden, the virus is disproportionately centered in low-income neighborhoods. (Kalleberg, 2018) Hence, people who couldn't afford or have the availability to work from home. These tendencies can be viewed around the world, whereas being able to socially, financially, and psychologically afford to quarantine, has become a privilege. (Jacobsson; Grodach, 2020) One might argue for a possible relationship between the deeper inequalities followed by the pandemic and an intensified precariat situation. This research, therefore, touches upon many different development spheres, such as inequality, decent working conditions, psychological well-being, and relative poverty during the pandemic.

4. Methodology

A case study enables the opportunity to investigate a phenomenon in-depth in its natural surroundings. (Creswell et al. 2007: 247-248) A comparative analysis between existing research and narratives allows investigating interrelating factors, meanwhile emphasizing similarities and

contrasts of social entities such as experiences of Covid-19. (De Vaus, 2001) Open-ended questions allow the participant to direct the data gathering from their personal narrative on experiencing living through large-scale transformations in society. The chosen methodology, therefore, enables the researcher to gather a deep understanding of a social phenomenon, meanwhile increasing the representativeness through comparison to statistical data from the literature review. (Sheyvans, 2014; 67)

4.1 Interviews

Emphasizing gathering qualitative data is the most suitable methodology because of the research's aim of revealing participants' narratives on experiences of precarity or the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted for their suitability to gather a deeper understanding of the different realities of the teenagers. It allows the participant to freely argue their perspective on economic and social security, the future and experiences of the pandemic, and their generation. The interviews were guided through a basic set of questions regarding their experiences, meanwhile allowing the participants to control the directions of the interviews. In gathering the data. Moreover, the interviews were transcribed using open coding, clarifying which indicators are relevant to direct the study towards. (Scheyvans, 2014: 63)

One core element for valid results is to ensure the participants a safe environment to open up about their experiences during the interview. Therefore names and other important identity markers were altered for their privacy. An extra effort in building a relationship with the participants was committed. This decision was made because the author is the same age as the participants, and could therefore share personal experiences in order to create a mutually sharing atmosphere (Creswell et al. 2007: 247-248) A major disadvantage of using the case study method is the difficulties in generalization and representations in other contexts. For the results to have high validity, an equal degree of participants from different backgrounds should be considered.

The set of underlying questions was:

- How did the participant experience the pandemic?
- Does the participant experience certain characteristics of their experience?

- What are the participant's thoughts of themselves/their generation's aspirations for the future?

This set of questions was asked to create a broad ground for the participants to freely describe their experiences, meanwhile ensuring the participant will answer the main research question; How does precariousness relate to youths' experiences of the pandemic?

4.2 Sampling

The selection process was random but under certain conditions, therefore the sampling was based on a quota sampling. (Greenes, 2008) The participants were gathered from the convenience and their essential characteristics of being in the i-Gen generation and having slightly different life circumstances than the other participants. The sample design was judgmental, based on the researcher's judgment of the appropriateness of the participants. (ibid) The participants had different age ranges and came to a large extent from Lund, Malmö, or Stockholm. Even though participants chose by themselves to participate, in one case, legal guardians of minors were contacted to obtain verbal consent. However, the participants were aware and quite interested in the study before conducting it. Therefore many turned out to narrate and explain the logical or emotional processes, leading them down one path and not another. The participants were chosen under primarily the condition of 1. wanting to share their experiences out of interest for the project and 2. having a differentiated age range than the other participants, thereby being in a different life situation when the pandemic occurred.

4.3 Data management

The research is based in Sweden, where all the participants were native Swedish speakers. The responses were translated from Swedish to English, analyzed, and coded by the author. This is because of the author's status as a native Swedish speaker, During the interviews, specific quotations were recorded for direct translations. First, all the data were read thoroughly to create an accurate overview of general ideas. Secondly, an overview of the data was constructed by stripping down the stories into codes and thematic labels. Open coding supported identifying which experiences, ideas, and underlying causes could be compared and in relevance for the study. This type of coding went into a coding protocol, which could ensure an easy tracking of significant statements and systematic structure over the themes. (Creswell & Creswell, (18)

4.4 Case selection

Even though the study is conducted within Sweden, the tendencies studied are interconnected to ongoing trends in the rest of the world due to widespread implantations of nationwide lockdowns. As stated before, young people are relevant for academic studies due to statistically being targeted as victims of undermined psychological well-being during the pandemic. (Zorthea, 2020) Furthermore, Sweden can be considered an interesting choice to be studied because of its distinct and controversial strategy of avoiding lockdowns. Sweden also holds interesting statistical data of highly reported feelings of the meaninglessness of employees and highly reported stress and anxiety levels in young people. (Paulson, 2020) Although the societal consequences of different COVID-19 policies can be hard to review at this point, one thing is certain, in Sweden young people calling for support against anxiety and depression have increased by 61 percent since the beginning of the pandemic. (BRIS, 2021)

4.5 Delimitations

There are some established threats to internal validity that should be considered. Because of the young age of the respondents, their ideas can change ideas over time. Furthermore, this study lacks sufficient representativeness and could potentially be biased through the small sample. Those who have the ability and interest in volunteering in a study generally were white and came from middle-class backgrounds with an academic background. Additionally, everyone but two of the respondents was a university student, which could influence the results. The response towards these limitations was to find participants who did not have extreme characteristics which could challenge the credibility of the research. However, it was still important with a differentiated sample of participants. Through the usage of existing research, the results can be compared to further tendencies seen across Europe. In investigating the mechanisms behind relative poverty in Sweden, this research could contribute in intersecting development processes both on a political and on an economic sphere. This study aims to operate on a macro scale, scratching on the surface of a subject. Therefore, more studies have to be conducted to validate and legitimize the results. Especially with a small sample, there is the possibility that some important opinions and perspectives are being missed.

Biases could furthermore be found in those who find this study of interest to participate, potentially already having feelings of precariousness and therefore are willing to share that experience in the study. That however can be neither confirmed nor denied. To minimize these tendencies, I considered every participant and their contribution in giving new perspectives. Therefore I made the choice in conducting smaller interviews but with more people than first intended.

Because of the qualitative interviews, I have to be concerned about my own bias possibly affecting the interpretation of data. The research both intend to collaborate with people of a young age, which therefore inquire cultivating a sensitivity towards the cultural context. (Sheyvans, 2014; 151) An overall ethical issue is the inherited power dimension between the researcher and the participants. This will be assessed with a mutually beneficial outcome of insights being handled in an empowering way. (Sheyvans, 2014; 180) With that being said, when researching a new field of development, all kinds of research can be arguably important for building comprehension.

Another point is that the pandemic was still ongoing when this research was conducted. Some people could therefore miss the comprehensive feeling of the pandemic as a whole. However, when committing this study my experience is that it reduced, refined and altered results. Instead, the participants in some cases cried out their frustration because they just wanted the pandemic to be over during the interview. Therefore, one can argue for the collection of raw data when conducting a study in the climax of the pandemic.

4.5.1 Reflexivity

As a researcher who is interpreting experiences, one must place further considerations in the transparency and objectivity in the study. Thus, the author will inevitably influence the research to some extent. (Trigg, 2001,p.36). I am, as the participants, in the same generation and situation as themselves. I am a white, female, currently studying at a university during the pandemic. As mentioned, I created a dialogical process during the interviews, where in some cases I would share my own experiences of the pandemic to create a mutual understanding. My similar experience could therefore help in understanding the other youths 'concerns and experiences.

However, as I can experience this pandemic myself, there is always the risk for it to influence my interpretation of what they are saying. Therefore, I continuously checked with the participants for validation of their answers after the interviews.

4.5.2 Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, one must consider the potential vulnerability of participants in the case study, therefore it's important for the researcher to respect and protect participants' narratives. Ethical considerations should be placed on securing the minor's rights of privacy and confidentiality. The issue of asking personal questions of feelings, experiences, and psychological distress could lead to compromised data or exposure of the participant. Therefore, considerations must be made through open questions and protecting the participants' real names.

Additionally, the participants have been informed with comprehensive knowledge about the research, usage of data, and rights when agreeing on participating. Another prioritized ethical consideration is to ensure that the participants' narratives are protected and respected.

Confidentiality is assessed by enabling the participants' access to the information and validating the data before publications, and storing data, and information correctly for the participants' privacy. (De Vaus 2001, p.146, Sheyvens, 2014; p.185) Methods used in this research require involvement with other people and therefore correctly and ethically conducted data is essential for the study to be valid. Participants have to be fully aware of the purpose of the research, how it is conducted, how the data is used, and any potential risks participants may face if participating (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018).

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Precarity

The current paradigm of precarity validates the precariat class as a consequence of globalization and an accelerating issue of the 21-century (Kalleberg, 2018; Standing 2020). This concept is grounded in the rising inequalities of rapid, fundamental changes due to globalization; offshoring, technological revolutions, intensified migration, the rise of new world powers, and residential shortage. On the losing side of globalization is the social class of the precariat, being victims of intensified sporadic and unreliable working conditions. This class is described as the growing

scale of the population that lacks the social, economic, and cultural capital to compete in the globalized arena and are therefore pushed into the margins. Additionally, this social class is often characterized by an unstable occupational identity, worrisome psychosocial welfare, and a tendency to turn towards right-extreme parties. (Standing, 2016) This social class is characterized by unstable employment, wage insecurity, low aspirations, and unrecognized work. Members of the precariat are not secured with the stability of welfare secured from a steady income and must therefore undertake an extensive amount of unpaid activities to be reassured with decent earnings. To have a precarious mind is explained by Standing (2020) as a state of being constantly faced with uncertainty, thereby undermining the capacity to be rational, in control, and plan. Furthermore, they bear the risk themselves, lacking the economical welfare benefits such as pensions and paid holidays. This leads to economic uncertainty to handle setbacks, whereby one mistake or bad decision can turn into a personal catastrophe. (Standing, 2020)

Precarity in itself is a theoretical concept explained by Judith Butler as a condition of being neglected from economic and social networks and therefore becoming increasingly exposed to insecurity and injuries. The concept of precarity is concerned with the politics of underemployment, which can be characterized as the institutional exploitation of fragmented labor conditions. Whereas precariousness is the psychological condition of vulnerability emerging as an expression of psychological exploitation. (Butler, 2009, p.25). Both concepts are intertwined with a political dimension of access to welfare and labor security, generally related to the exposure of precariousness. These mechanisms are operating not only in low-income countries but as a global phenomenon, cutting across economic classes and geographical areas. (Castelles, 1989) The analysis will look into the theoretical tools specified in Macdonald's (2019) research on characteristics of precariousness; modest aspiration, lack of control or choice, insecurity of work/income, debt, feelings of barely surviving any uncertainties, insecurities for the future, inability to plan, powerlessness, feelings of exploitation, worry and significant distress.

5.2 Bourdieu's class-theory

Bourdieu formalized a theory of how class is interrelated with identity, which therefore serves as a driving force of which life choices we make. According to Bourdieu, habitus is a social

construction and system, dividing the individual into differently valued lifestyles based on classes. Society is classified on the basis of capital, the sum of the social, economic, symbolic and cultural capital. Bourdieu refers to the socialization of class, inherited from our upbringing of symbolic, cultural values and access to economic and social networks. He coined the terms of cultural capital, the reference frame of cultural taste, habits, and academic opinions which are accepted within different social classes. Academic capital refers to knowledge within scientific discourses subsumed under cultural capital, the knowledge of how to behave correctly in certain social groups (Bourdieu, 2010). Social capital is the collective resources of networks featuring trust, norms and social engagement facilitating a mutual benefit (Putnam,1993). Symbolic capital is the ability to subsist with cultural markers, an expression of prestige and recognition. These forms of capital are both inherited from birth and developed through experiences and education. Social mobility is therefore dependent on which behavioral symbols are accepted in the cultural context and each individual's capacity to gain these different forms of capital for social mobility. (Bourdieu, 2010)

5.3 Coping Theory

The coping theory, which can be described as coping strategies, is relevant since it discusses how humans cope with feelings of distress and anxiety which may occur during a crisis. Two of the pioneers of the coping theory are Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, who discuss that stress occurs in all parts of society, institutions, and individuals. Lazarus coined the systematic structure with either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping mechanisms. The basis of the theory is that the environment creates stimuli perceived by the individual. These stressors are interpreted in the primary appraisal as either neutral or possibly threatening situations, making the individual reflect on their capacity to overcome these challenges. This stage is called the secondary appraisal, the contemplation and perception of having either sufficient or insufficient resources. With insufficient resources, stress and anxiety occur. The overcoming of stress is through the coping mechanisms, either trying to change the stressful elements of the situation called problem-focused coping, or change themselves in relation to the situation, called emotion-focused coping. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

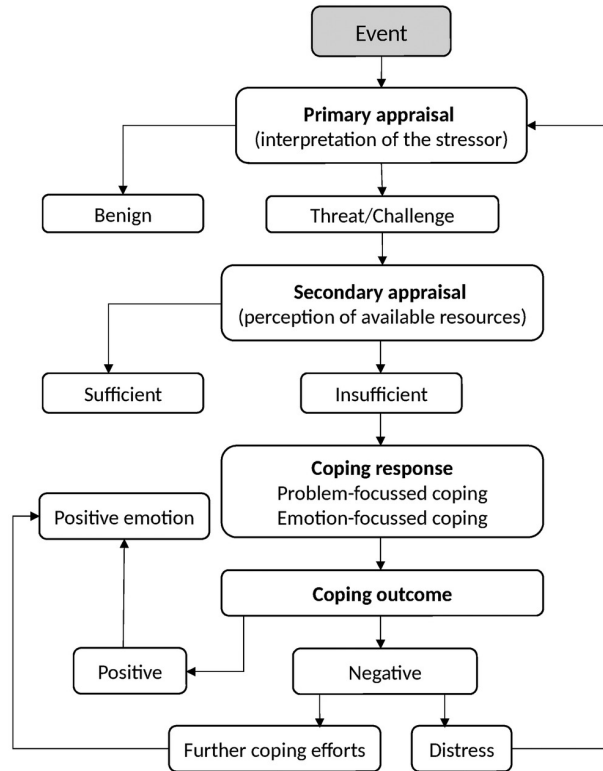


Figure 1: Stress and Coping Assessment, (Cambridge University Press, 2019)

5.4 Justification of Theoretical Framework

This research is a bachelor thesis in Development Studies, majoring in sociology. Therefore the theoretical framework is based on sociological discourses to understand current development processes. The analysis is conducted primarily through the framework of two established class theories and blueprints of how class is formed in modern capitalist society.

Bourdieu's class theory conceptualizes opportunities based on the networks of social class. This is relevant to understand how the participants' support net and access to different forms of capital could influence their experience of threat during the pandemic. The theory could therefore highlight how different realities of precariousness can be based on different access to economic, cultural, and social capital in favor of secured living, long-term contracts, and residency. However, the theory of precarity is the focal theory against which the interviews are analyzed.

Precarity and precariousness can be used to understand how the pandemic can intensify underlying structures of inequalities. Precarity highlights how the gig-economy and insufficient

welfare produces inequalities, divergence, and political polarization. Meanwhile, precariousness emphasizes the emotional expressions of insecurities, such as stress, fear, and psychological liabilities for the youth. However, all participants live under the same welfare system in Sweden, therefore access to other forms of security nets are important indicators for the amount of precariousness experienced by the participants. Therefore, Bourdieu's class theory is a strong backbone to understand to what extent the unreliable labor market influences people's experiences of stress and precautions.

Combining class theories with the concept of coping mechanisms, one can relate the stage of "perception of available resources", with Bourdieu's "access to capital-based safety nets". The coping theory can therefore contribute towards an understanding of how stress and anxiety are triggered, and accelerated, through insufficient access to resources. People in a precarious situation are faced with constant challenges but with limited opportunities to change their circumstances, as stated before. Therefore, as can be seen in the chart, their last option is to operate with emotion-focused coping, changing their relationship to the situation through alienating themselves or altering their aspirations to avoid more stress. These concepts can therefore complement each other in explaining how different underlying processes and pre-conditions can be related to expressed vulnerabilities of the participants.

6. Stories of i-Gen: Growing up During Covid-19

In essence, this section covers the participants' stories, told through direct quotes translated from Swedish to English. A brief description of their life circumstances will be presented with some changed identical markers, to protect them from being recognized. Because one participant came from a quite small city, the choice was made to avoid specifying that city. The interviews are displayed in separate interviews and are structured on the overall themes presented by the participants.

6.1 Low aspirations

Isak, soon to be 18 years old, will soon start the last year of a gymnasium, a Swedish high school. Isak lives in a lower-middle-class socio-economic area in Stockholm with his parents. Isak describes his existence with low stress but high unpredictability. He feels that he stands

ignorant for the fact that everything can go wrong and try to enjoy each day as it comes. He describes that he is fully aware of the implications the pandemic has on some people, but he does not care.

”It is an experience that should be horrible, but it's not, because you are numb. You roll with the punches, you just hope that in some years you will have forgotten about this period.”

He explains that many of his friends have become more depressed by having to stay home, some have even gotten special permission to go to school despite restrictions because their mental health could not handle staying home by themselves. His recurrent theme was descriptions of experiences of increased nihilism and numb feelings in contrast with strong nostalgia and sensitivity.

“I experience my generation as within an era of mass-nihilism. I don't know why that is, maybe we are suppressing feelings meanwhile getting more channels to express them. To see someone die on social media, doesn't affect you, everything horrible seems like meh, because you've seen worse. Our generation has become numb.“

He furthermore describes low aspirations in his life and many in his surroundings. He believes his generation has become lazier. To get enough money for food and occasional leisure is enough for him. He describes this as part of the nihilism he refers to. When asking about visions for the future, he talks vaguely about the dream of middle-class standards and stability. He elaborates that he experiences that many are just desperate for a big sum of money, therefore resorting to selling drugs. “They just want to become rich”. According to Isak, economic issues have not crossed his mind as much as environmental issues. He describes himself as personally invested in that activism. He then elaborates on his frustration of people not being able to stay home, although the constraints of the pandemic.

“You thought that the environment would become better from the pandemic, everyone will stay in quarantine. But everyone is seeking escape from everyday life, with travel as

their number one priority. Now they are escaping quarantine through road trips or cheap flights. We had a chance to do something for the environment, but we did not take it. It feels unintelligent.”

During the interview, he explained the complexities of growing up fast, then desperately wanting to go back into easier times.

“To be a grown-up is horrible and scary. You have this urge to gain back the childhood you lost when you tried to grow up.”

He explains many encounters with children in the years of 11-12, on the streets of Stockholm, taking drugs and drinking alcohol every day because it makes them feel more like an adult. He argues that this will take a turn when they become older, realizing that becoming an adult is far from desirable.

“It reaches you when you get older. The setback. Not that you do something extraordinary, you just wish you were a child. Able to relive your childhood again.”

Filip is 20 years old and is currently living in a lower-middle-class socio-economic area in a small city and lives at home with his mother. For a long time, he has been reliant on short-time contracts for work and has not gotten an opportunity to move out since he became an adult. He spends most of his time on the computer and has short-time employment to contribute to his mother’s budget. Although the pandemic limited such opportunities for extra work.

“I, Myself, has not been as affected by the pandemic as some others, except for losing my income and having an even harder time finding a job.”

He explains that except for becoming more reliant on his mother, much in his life has stayed the same. Before the pandemic, he also spent most of his time on the computer. He does not have any hopes and aspirations for the future, he explains that he has already given up. He tried to join

the navy but was denied because of his depression. He furthermore describes the pandemic experience as “surreal, never-ending winter”, constraining the ability for him to leave home.

6.2 The Pandemic as a Stress-relief for Over-achievers

Kim, 21, moved cities, into an apartment in a low socio-economic area in Malmö, and began studying to become a teacher. Overall, she can appreciate the pandemic on what it has meant for her stress levels.

“The world had a chance to breathe, it’s not the usual greediness and social status...instead everyone was home.”

With no opportunity to be able to get a job or participate in social gatherings, she experienced that at the beginning of the pandemic, she had more time to read books and live within her own rules. Paradoxically she is aware that she has become isolated from other people, and it has started affecting her. She talks with her boyfriend over the phone, and that is about all the interactions she gets on a day.

“To be honest, I have loved not being able to socialize and I have loved distance-learning, finally I can relax and fully recharge my energy.”

She explains that she is extroverted but has a tendency to work until she breaks. That is why the pandemic happened at good timing. She then elaborates that she is a quite hypochondriac person, therefore she usually worries about other people’s hygiene. This has worsened during the pandemic. She never leaves her home unless fully geared and covered, in fear of getting the virus. However, she feels that she now has a legitimate excuse to avoid social gatherings.

She describes her stress with her constant worries about the political climate. She explains that she is scared of both the environmental changes and the political polarization potentially leading towards “ history repeating itself”

“That's what I'm most scared of, I'm not going to lie. It's my family, friends that are in danger from right-wing extremist parties. “

She feels that the development is going in the right direction through more and more knowledge. But as a practicing teacher, she feels a strong divergence between the educated and ignorant.

“I can feel that some of us are more politically involved. Even kids are more open to political issues. At the same time, a lot of people are frighteningly ignorant, people in my generation are so curled by their parents... Some people are almost grown-ups, but has no clue about Swedish politics, genocides, and other important historical issues.”

Katarina, 23, lives in a middle-class socio-economic area in Malmö. Katarina was working within the media industry when the pandemic occurred and therefore lost a big part of her income. Although of the initial higher stress of having to find new income, she still feels gratitude for the pandemic forcing her to slow down “ I still feel like I won, stress-wise.”

When asked about personal reflections on her generation, Katarina can feel that she had noticed some differences towards people born some years before her. She explained the concept of flirting in bars feels completely unnatural for people her age. She expressed not knowing how to approach flirting in real life, without the support of digital apps for dating. Katarina refers to her desire to get a university degree more than before. Even though she is studying philosophy, she plans to get an economics degree in the future.

When asked about her experience of the pandemic, she first stated “boring!” but she quickly added that it has affected her psychological well-being positively. She feels that society is going in a slower patch and she suspects that she was critically run down by stress before.

“ I experience a form of duality with both feeling more alone, meanwhile getting far more closely with those I live with. We have never been as close and functioning before, simultaneously, I am single and haven't had a chance to change that.”

She also explained that she believes the anxiety has become less abstract and more based on real threats. How the social anxiety of being overbooked has changed into real threats.

She has started to reflect more on existential questions, about the future, career, and family life than before. With fewer fun distractions she had to tackle mental health issues and seize the chance for internal reflection regarding who she is and how she wants to live.

She then reflects on the implication this pandemic has had on the majority of people.

“I think that if you act depressed you become depressed. This pandemic induced the whole nation in a state of being half-depressed.”

She elaborates on her thoughts of feeling less and less willing to do things, sleep more, and work out less with a lack of social validation.

“ You soon realize that you don't have to take a shower when it's just you. You don't have to work out because you can't really date anyone. You can't buy new clothes because who would see them?”

She explains that with this realization she was forced to enforce more discipline, work out more, eat healthier, and drink less alcohol to ensure to not become depressed.

6.3 Unpredictability for the Future

Julia, 22, lives in a lower-middle-class socio-economic area in Malmö, but studies at Lund University to become a computer engineer. She explains that she chose this program because of the prospect of economic stability in the future. Julia experienced an overall dream of a secured living and to afford her own housing. She explains that she wants to earn money to be able to live, not live for an interesting and fun job. She can feel jealous of people studying something for fun or based on their passion, but she explained that her nerves would never be able to handle this type of uncertainty.

She explained that to be able to change the dynamics of the male-dominated technology industry would feel great, but her number one priority is stability. Julia expressed that the pandemic has undermined personal and important identity markers. Many of her interests have been constrained by the pandemic and now she experiences anxiety in coming back to ordinary life. However, she can see that her feelings of “FOMO” (fear of missing out) have been forced to be altered. Suddenly every potential choice to socialize or do something has been canceled. Instead, she found new things to do with her time, but she dislikes the person she has become. She was the girl that went to three concerts each week and now, nothing.

“I’m afraid that this feeling inside will never change, that it has become the new me, this unwillingness to do things, partying until 5 in the morning doesn't even feel desirable anymore. I’m afraid to have become an old lady, at the age of 22.”

She explains that everything she loves to do has disappeared, all cozy leisures have become part of everyday life. First, she went in with the attitude that she would read books and learn how to cook during this period. But she doesn't enjoy these things anymore because she feels like it operates as medicine rather than desirable leisures. She then expressed her frustration agitated: “IT IS HORRIBLE, I HATE IT!”

Billie is 24 years old, a part-time musician, and studying a double major. She has recently moved to a middle-class socio-economic area Malmö, from Stockholm. When asked about her experience of the pandemic, she thought for a while and then expressed the pandemics’ power of unfolding and revealing the foundation of one's life.

“When every layer disappears, you are forced to look at the core of your life and ask yourself do you like it? What can I say that I have accomplished during my life?”

She feels like she is done with being young and wants to move forward to her next chapter in life. At the beginning of the pandemic, Billie wanted to escape the city, move out to the countryside and become self-sufficient. However, as the pandemic unfolded the awareness of isolation became intensified which affected her visions for the future;

“ I just never want to be alone with my thoughts again! I don't think it's good for humans to only socialize through the computer. I want to move into a huge collective-house!”

Billie expressed intense stress and uncertainty in her life and her work is the only way to escape the pressure from school and the lack of direction in her life. She then makes a joke of currently having “Harmonie dreams” (a reference to Harry Potter) of being so stressed, that she has nightmares of failing her academic work. She just wants to be able to get a steady income, she explained.

“ All I want to do is play music, write songs and write my book, that is what I love to do, but I hate the political climate of today's industry, so I had to give that up.”

With high loans from her past studies, she feels that she has to choose a career path and start a master’s degree, even though she is sick of studying. She explained that she's lived in Berlin and Stockholm for many years and has finally moved back to her hometown. But with her boyfriend studying in Amsterdam, she has become even more conflicted about her future.

“I'm so sick of moving around! I just want to stay at the same place! I've been a super-supportive girlfriend, but know I'm just lost”

6.4 Committing to Adulthood

Kalle, 24, lives in a middle-class socio-economic area in Lund but is moving to Stockholm. Kalle explained that the pandemic has established and reinforced fundamental routines in his life. With no opportunity to meet new people or try new things this period was consumed by waiting on the pandemic to end. He studies the last year of his program at university but does not experience any significant stress or unpredictability. He has a full-time contract at a company and a newly bought apartment ready after graduation.

“I get up, look at a lecture on zoom, study, work out and then sleep, on repeat. I guess that you have been set in your ways with no opportunity to break the cycle.”

He explained that there have been more small-scale dinners than before and less alcohol consumption. It is easier than to establish a grown-up lifestyle. He went into a stable relationship during the pandemic. He explains:

“I guess if the pandemic had continued one more year, we would have started having babies!”

Cherie, 24, is an engineer who graduated from Lund University, has secured employment, and has recently bought an apartment in a middle-class socio-economic area in Stockholm. Cherie explained that he has it all set so he does not experience so much personal stress. He then explains that during the pandemic he has experienced himself and people around him, forgetting how to socialize with new people. Furthermore, he explained that he has noticed that the people around him have changed life patterns and re-evaluated what matters for them during the pandemic. He expressed an intensified insecurity within world issues, explaining that one can no longer keep their eyes shut from what is going on around the world.

“Will we be able to solve the climate crisis? It can really, all just go to hell.”

To some extent, he experiences that many in his surroundings choose a more economically stable and safe direction than might have first been planned. Some talked about traveling or getting a self-fulfilling job before the pandemic occurred. He then opens up about a friend of his, who had dreamt of one job for a very long time, but during the pandemic chose a safer path towards economic security.

7. Analysis

When looking at the interviews, there are some shared themes and experiences between the participants. A majority mentioned feelings of boredom, monotony, and being stuck. Another repeated theme was feelings of having to grow up and mature during the pandemic. Overall, many participants felt insecurities for the future, both within their own lives and for future global movements. Many people worry about future residency, different life paths, and how their social

status has changed after the pandemic. There is also a trend of people feeling more stressed over political polarization and environmental changes than before.

7.1 Psychological Vulnerability

The social consequences of lockdowns have led to further unreliable income for people lacking a full-time contract or possibilities to work from home. This suggests a downward spiral of the effects from lower pay and evidently, constrained foundational access to health care benefits, social networks, and secured residency in the context of the pandemic. Young people, however, seem to have contradictory experiences of these changes. The younger generation stands out during global lockdowns with both strongly decreasing stress levels, although with increasing anxiety and depression levels. One can therefore reflect over Katarina's statement of "becoming depressed by acting depressed". The pandemic has forced the citizens to act in a similar way, with stay-home orders and reduced opportunities to work or meet people. The participants do not seem shaken by the pandemic, some already spend an extensive number of hours at home with different kinds of technology. But as confirmed in the literature review, there is a clear correlation between hourly screen-time, lower self-esteem, and reported depression in youth. Hence, revealing how lockdowns put young people in a psychological threat of having to stay home, with solely the company of something known to induce depression in youth.

A theme often repeated was the feelings of duality during the pandemic. Both having more time to relax, meanwhile opening up for more possibilities to reflect over the future. The same can be said about anxiety and feelings of loneliness. To some extent, the participants were far more isolated than before. In some cases, that have meant building more meaningful relationships with an inner circle of friends/family. The duality can be found by comparing two interviewees experiences: one of the participants referred to the pandemic as a time to "re-value what you want to spend your time on" in contradiction to another participant, experiencing the pandemic in losing his only source of income and becoming dependent on family members for survival. Approximately half of the participants explained this period as surreal and with contradicting feelings, meanwhile, the other half expressed strong feelings of hating the circumstances. These different realities put light on the extent of access to economic and social resources that

determines their experience of the pandemic, especially for men. For some people, the pandemic meant more intimate gatherings, but for others, this period has induced feelings of total isolation.

7.2 Gendered Experiences

In the BRIS (2021) report, the responsibility for someone else's death and pressure of the consequences of every action has led to many young people reflecting over death and other existential questions during the pandemic. As can be concluded by BRIS statistical data, young women seem to be far more vulnerable to stress, both before and during the pandemic. In the interviews, one can sense a difference in worrying about the future, depending on gender. The women were increasingly prone to be worried about failing or not being able to survive, despite having the exact same academic background as some of the male participants. Furthermore, the interviews reveal that the pandemic reduced external distractions for youth, and therefore opened up for more existential thoughts and anxiety. The male participants of lower socio-economic backgrounds, lacking employment and academic merits, did not express stress but unpredictability for the future. These males had accepted their position, to be in some cases living with their parents and aspiring for a sufficient amount of money to survive. The women, however, experienced this pandemic in a more dramatic way than the male participants, expressing higher stress over a constrained social life, insecure income, and residency. Furthermore, with the oral expressions from women one can see a structure of determination to secure their status as middle class and sacrifice their personal passions for educational merits.

Some women expressed frustration at losing meaning and important identical markers during the pandemic. One woman referred to the lack of symbolic meaning of being active without the element of socializing. To consume, shower, exercise was directly connected to the company of others. Another woman described a similar frustration of losing her social position and identity as being the one keeping up with new concerts. The men on the other hand, were not as stressed regarding identical markers. They mentioned changed forms of socializing and a more routine-based life but were not as concerned with what that meant for their social status. Another important finding is that female participants experienced reduced stress and precariousness during the pandemic, due to life slowing down. These participants expressed that they were grateful for the lockdowns' ability to reduce opportunities for socializing and working. These

tendencies could be seen in the Deloitte (2020) surveys: “Even though 60 percent of the youth in the surveys lost income during the pandemic, the survey still concluded a drastic drop in stress after induced lockdowns. “

From the perspective of coping strategies, gender once again divides the participants. The male participants in a precarious situation tend to alienate themselves from the precarious situation and accept the circumstances. Women however are less prone to give up or use coping mechanisms to avoid stressors. Instead, women are to a higher extent willing to change their life situation to reduce the elements of stress, even though the pressure could affect their psychological health. In the interviews, the majority of women of different socio-economic backgrounds had either been worn out of stress before the pandemic or were currently in a stressful situation. Furthermore, socio-economic status did not affect the female experience of precariousness, instead, gendered precarity moved across socio-economic areas.

As can be seen from the interviews, precariousness and stress emerge for almost all women, but for the male participants, the difference is further based on socio-economic status. This can be related to Standing's description of precarity as the losers of globalization. One can therefore question whether males of lower-middle-class socio-economic status are descending into a population left behind, stuck within precarity. Women of both higher- and lower-middle-class status seem to balance in a middle sphere, becoming more vulnerable for the psychological exploitation of precariousness in trying to adapt towards the new labor markets.

7.3 Social classes and Adulthood

For the participants expressing insecurity and constant stress, many of them already felt a lack of a safety net. With no ability to purchase their own apartments, unless one can guarantee economic assurance from the family and a long-term employment contract, one lacks independence. Therefore, one can see a clear pattern of anxiety between the participants who can rely on economic and social networks to ensure stable dwelling, compared to the other stuck in unpredictability and stress over the future. As mentioned before, families have become more important for the youth's prospects than academic merits, due to an abundance of an educated workforce. As can be seen from the secondary sources; when educational qualifications no

longer guarantee jobs, one's job opportunities become more dependent on family networks. For young people coming from resourceful homes, the precariat labor market can be fitting as an extra income when needed. But for those who are dependent on these sources of income, the inability to secure sufficient income affects attitudes towards long-term commitments. This could possibly be a factor behind the expressed nihilism and low aspiration brought to attention by Isak. During the pandemic, i- Gen seems to have accumulated stress, forcing them to become more responsible. Many have experienced a constrained ability to be childish and have instead focused their time on preparing to move into the next phase of their life, to become an adult. For one participant, Kalle, having secured employment and housing during the pandemic raised thoughts about starting a family. But for other young people, adulthood has become something horrifying and insecure, as for Isak.

As stated in the literature review on the i-Gen, the participants are within a generation characterized for their precaution and political engagement. Both these themes could be found within the interviews, in all attributed gender and socio-economic backgrounds. None of the participants planned to engage in a creative or self-fulfilling career, even though wanting to. In some cases, the participants' political conviction stood in the way of engaging in certain types of industries and careers, as for Katarina. However, to be cautious and afraid, or engaged in political activism are characteristics arguably contradicting each other. Therefore, one can argue that current events and developments are giving substance to this generation's fundamental characteristics. Raising the question if i-Gen will become framed as a generation characterized by independence and political activism, or become known as an vulnerable, precarious, and depressed generation.

8. Conclusions

Precariousness can be viewed in many of the participants' stories. It is found in low ambitions, higher stress levels, expressed insecurity, and powerlessness. Although there seems to be a growing divergence in the characteristics of the i-Gens. As the young people from resourceful homes are becoming more engaged in activism and international politics, other youths are becoming more vulnerable, cautious, and driven by passivity. For some participants the stress seems to be the driving force, pushing them forward to secure a status as middle class. Although in some cases, precariousness increases a form of powerlessness and low aspirations, resulting in a further nihilistic perspective on life and the future. The female participants experienced the pandemic in a far more stressful way, with the pandemic challenging identity makers, social life, and increasing the individual's responsibility of containing the spread. The male participants with higher socio-economic backgrounds had a quite different, stable, and more clear direction in life than the rest of the participants. These male participants felt ready to commit to the next phase of their life as grown-ups, compared to the other male participants who were giving up on having a secure living. Despite the shared middle-class upbringing of the participants, this thesis highlights the importance of family as safety nets when understanding youths' levels of precariousness during the pandemic. This implies that precarity is on one hand based on the foundation of access to capital and social classes. On the other hand, associated themes of precariousness; experienced stress to secure a stable living, versus the passivity of low ambitions, are divided through across gender.

In essence, this study has underlined important structures and tendencies seen in different spheres of society, highlighting the importance of social safety nets and economic safety when coping with crises. Using qualitative research and especially under an ongoing pandemic, unfolds plenty of raw data. How these findings relate to intersectionality and especially, why psychological distress is gendered, is an essential contribution to elaborate in future studies. A distinct crucial finding is young people's negative perceptions of the future, expressing being scared of growing up. However, to be able to validate and increase the reciprocity of these findings, a larger sample is essential.

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Appendix A. First Coding of All Data

	Quotations	Codes	Categories	Titles
Participant 1, Male	<p>“I have thought about this, I guess that you have re-valued what you want to spend your time on and what really matters during the pandemic ”</p> <p>“ Will we be able to solve the climate crisis? It can really, all just go to hell”</p>	<p>Environmental stress</p> <p>Adulthood</p> <p>Existential thoughts</p>	<p>High socio-economic background</p> <p>Politically engaged</p> <p>Academic degree</p>	Growing up
Participant 2, Male	<p>“I guess if the pandemic had continued one more year, we would have started having babies!”</p> <p>“I go up, look at a lecture on zoom, study, work out and then sleep, on repeat. I guess that you have been set in your ways with no opportunity to break the circle”</p>	<p>Adulthood</p> <p>Scheduled-life</p>	<p>High socio-economic background</p> <p>Academic degree</p>	Growing up
Participant 3, Male	<p>“To be a grown-up is horrible and scary. You have this urge to gain back the childhood you lost when you tried to grow up”</p> <p>“You thought that the environment would become better from the pandemic, everyone will stay in quarantine. But everyone is seeking escape from everyday life, with travel as their number one priority. Now they are escaping quarantine through road trips or cheap flights. We had a chance to do something for the environment, but we did not take it. It feels unintelligent”</p> <p>“ I experience my generation as within an era of mass-nihilism. I don't know why that is, maybe we are suppressing feelings meanwhile getting more channels to express them. To see someone die on social media, doesn't affect you, everything horrible seems like meh, because you've seen worse. Our generation has become numb.“</p> <p>” It is an experience that should be horrible, but it's not, because you are numb. You roll with the punches, you just hope that in some years you will have forgotten about this period”.</p>	<p>Adulthood</p> <p>Environmental stress</p> <p>Existential thoughts</p> <p>Technological skepticism</p> <p>Low aspirations</p>	<p>Low socio-economic background</p> <p>Exploitation</p> <p>Politically engaged</p>	Low Aspirations

	<p>“ To get enough money for food and occasional leisure is enough for me”</p>			
<p>Participant 4, Male</p>	<p>“I, myself, has not been as affected by the pandemic as some others, except for losing my income and having an even harder time finding a job” “surreal, never ending winter”, “ I dont have any hopes and aspirations for the future,”</p>	<p>Income loss Isolation Low aspirations</p>	<p>Low socio-economic background Exploitation</p>	<p>Low aspirations</p>
<p>Participant 5, Female</p>	<p>“To be honest, I have loved not being able to socialize and I have loved distance-learning, finally I can relax and fully recharge my energy” “that’s what I’m most scared of, I’m not going to lie, It’s my family, friends that is in danger of right winged extremist parties. “ “I can feel that some of us is more politically involved. Even kids are more open for political issues. At the same time that a lot of people are frightening ignorant, people in my generation are so curled by their parents... Some people are soon grown up, but has no clue about swedish politics, genocides and other important historical issues”</p>	<p>Stress-relief Stress Political polarization</p>	<p>Low socio-economic background Exploitation Politically engaged Academic background</p>	<p>Precarious Stress-relief</p>
<p>Participant 6, Female</p>	<p>“ I still feel like I won, stress-wise” I want to get a university degree more than before “ I experience a form of duality with both feeling more alone, meanwhile getting far more closely with those I live with. We have never been as close and functioning before, simultaneously, I am single and haven't had a chance to change that” “I have started to reflect more on existential questions, about the future, career, and family life than before.” “I think that if you act depressed you become depressed. This pandemic induced the whole nation in a state of being half-depressed” “ You soon realize that you don't have to take a shower when it's just you. You don't have to work out because you can't really date anyone. You can't buy new</p>	<p>Stress-relief Precariousness Connectivity Existential thoughts Depression Lack of Meaning</p>	<p>Middle class Exploitation Academic degree</p>	<p>Precarious Stress-relief</p>

	<p>clothes because who would see them?"</p> <p>"I was forced to enforce more discipline, work out more, eat healthier, and drink less alcohol to ensure not to become depressed"</p>	Scheduled life	Loss of identical markers	
Participant 7, Female	<p>"I'm afraid that this feeling inside will never change, that it has become the new me, this unwillingness to do things, partying until 5 in the morning doesn't even feel desirable anymore.</p> <p>I'm afraid to have become an old lady, at the age of 22"</p> <p>"I dont want to do any of these things anymore because she feels like it operates as medicine rather than desirable leisures. " IT IS HORRIBLE, I HATE IT!"</p> <p>"FOMO" (fear of missing out) have been forced to be altered</p> <p>"I want to earn money to be able to live, not live for an interesting and fun job. I can feel jealous of people studying something for fun or within their passion, but my nerves would never be able to handle this type of uncertainty"</p>	<p>Adulthood</p> <p>FOMO</p> <p>Stress</p> <p>Altered aspirations</p> <p>Unpredictability</p>	<p>Loss of identical markers</p> <p>Exploitation</p> <p>Academic degree</p> <p>Low socio-economic Background</p>	Insecurities For the Future
Participant 8, Female	<p>"I feel like i'm done with being young and want to move forward to her next chapter in life"</p> <p>"When every layer disappears, you are forced to look at the core of your life and ask yourself do you like it? What can I say that I have accomplished during my life?"</p> <p>" I just never want to be alone with my thoughts again! I don't think it's good for humans to only socialize through the computer. I want to move into a huge collective-house!"</p> <p>" All I want to do is play music, write songs and write my book, that is what I love to do, but I hate the political climate of today's industry, so I have to give that up"</p> <p>"I'm so sick of moving around! I just want to stay at the same place! I've been a super-supportive girlfriend, but know I'm just lost"</p>	<p>Adulthood</p> <p>Existential thoughts</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Altered aspiration</p> <p>Unpredictability</p>	<p>High socio-economic background</p> <p>Exploitation</p> <p>Academic degree</p>	Insecurities For the Future

Appendix B. Second Coding of Themes

	Anxiety and Depression	Stress and Insecurity	Growing Up	Low Aspirations	Exploitation
Class	“I just never want to be alone with my thoughts again! I don't think it's good for humans to only socialize through the computer. I want to move into a huge collective!”	“Will we be able to solve the climate crisis? It can really, all just go to hell”	“I guess if the pandemic had continued one more year, we would have started having babies!”	“To get enough money for food and an occasional beer is enough for me”	“I guess that you have re-valued what you want to spend your time on during the pandemic ”
Precarity	“I feel jealous of people studying something for fun or within their passion, but my nerves would never be able to handle this type of uncertainty.”	“I'm so sick of moving around! I just want to stay at the same place! I've been a super-supportive girlfriend, but know I'm just lost”	“It reaches you when you get older. The setback. Not that you do something extraordinary, you just wish you were a child. Able to relive your childhood again”	“All I want to do is play music, write songs and write my book, that is what I love to do, but I hate the political climate of today's industry, so I have to give that up”	“Having an even harder time finding a job.. the pandemic has been as a never ending winter”
Gender	“You roll with the punches, you just hope that in some years you will have forgotten about this period”	“When every layer disappears you are forced to look at the core of your life and ask yourself do you like it? What can I say that I have accomplished during my life?”	“I'm afraid that this feeling inside will never change, that it has become the new me. Partying until 5 in the morning doesn't even feel desirable anymore. I'm afraid to have become an old lady at the age of 22”	“You soon realize that you don't have to take a shower when it's just you. You don't have to work out because you can't really date anyone. You can't buy new clothes because who would see them?”	“For me, to work is the only way to escape the pressures from school and the indecisiveness of direction in my life”

