

Asian-Canadian Youths' Pandemic Experiences Through Visual Arts

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the associated disruptions such as school closures, isolation, cancelled events, and missed milestones had an emotional toll on Canadian youth, making them highly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic (Ferguson et al., 2021).

The pandemic intensified existing health and socioeconomic disparities that immigrants face in diverse settings (Khanlou et al., 2020), differentially and disproportionality impacting racialized communities (Gopal & Adesara, 2020). In the earlier stages those identifying as Asian-Canadian were especially affected (Cheng et al, 2021; Choi et al., 2021). Identity is a distinguishing character of an individual. A recent study found university students in Canada and in Spain were increasingly reporting higher rates of mental health problems relating to identity concerns (Gfellner et al., 2024). The 2023 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth found a decline in mental health and optimism about school from the pre-pandemic period amounts all young persons (Statistics Canada, 2024). Our ongoing study explores the impacts of the pandemic on the identities, sense of belonging, and agency of Asian-Canadian youth. In this Information Sheet we report on some of the educational and mental health challenges that youth experienced as a result of the pandemic.

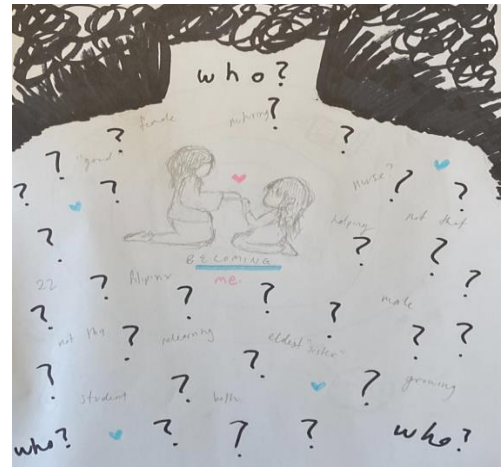


Figure 1 Self-portrait drawn by a female research participant during the study interview

Our study

The goal of our ongoing project is to explore the impact of the pandemic on the identities of Asian-Canadian youth, their sense of belonging and agency. Its specific objectives are to examine:

1. Asian-Canadian youths' (aged 16-24) identities using arts-based methods through individual interviews (visual arts: Self-Portrait, Relational Map) and group interviews (drama: Readers Theatre);
2. Engage youth in participatory and digital knowledge transfer activities; and
3. Inform youth-centred practice, policy, and scholarship through an equity-informed lens addressing exclusionary discourses and discriminatory practices during the pandemic's response and recovery phases.

In this Information Sheet we share several of the emerging research findings from our individual interviews based on visual arts methods (i.e. Self-Portrait, Relational Map).

What did we do?

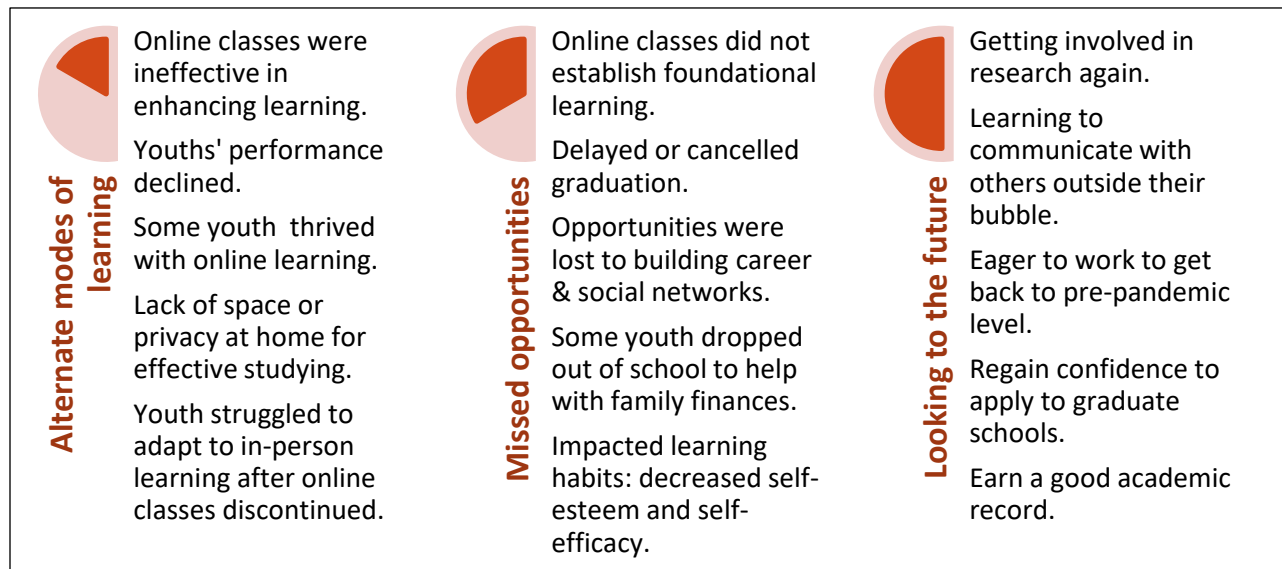
- ✚ We interviewed 58 Canadian immigrant youth aged 16 and 24 from China, India, and the Philippines, the top three source countries of recent immigration to Canada (i.e. 2016-2021) (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- ✚ The youth participated online or in-person individual in-depth qualitative interviews that were integrated with two visual arts methods, Self-Portrait and Relational Map.
- ✚ Youth were asked questions on identity, sense of belonging, and agency, challenges and resilience during the pandemic, and to reflect upon the drawings they made.

What did we find?

Pandemic amplified and created educational challenges

Through their drawings and words, youth shared their experiences of remote learning during the pandemic and missed opportunities, and described how these impacted their future goals (see figure 2 below). With the closure of schools and the move to remote learning, some youth reflected upon it as an unproductive academic year and viewed their future aspirations and goals as “just very confused and uncertain.” One youth felt “really stagnant right now, like I sort of plateaued in life.” With school campus and libraries closed, some youth struggled to find a quiet, non-distracting space to attend class. Sharing his frustration one youth said: “have a big family, there’s not a lot of room to have the privacy or privilege to study even if you have your own room.” Not everyone was displeased with learning remotely. Some youth found comfort and ease in online classes, as one said, “it was better for me because I was more self-paced, I guess it helped me focus better.”

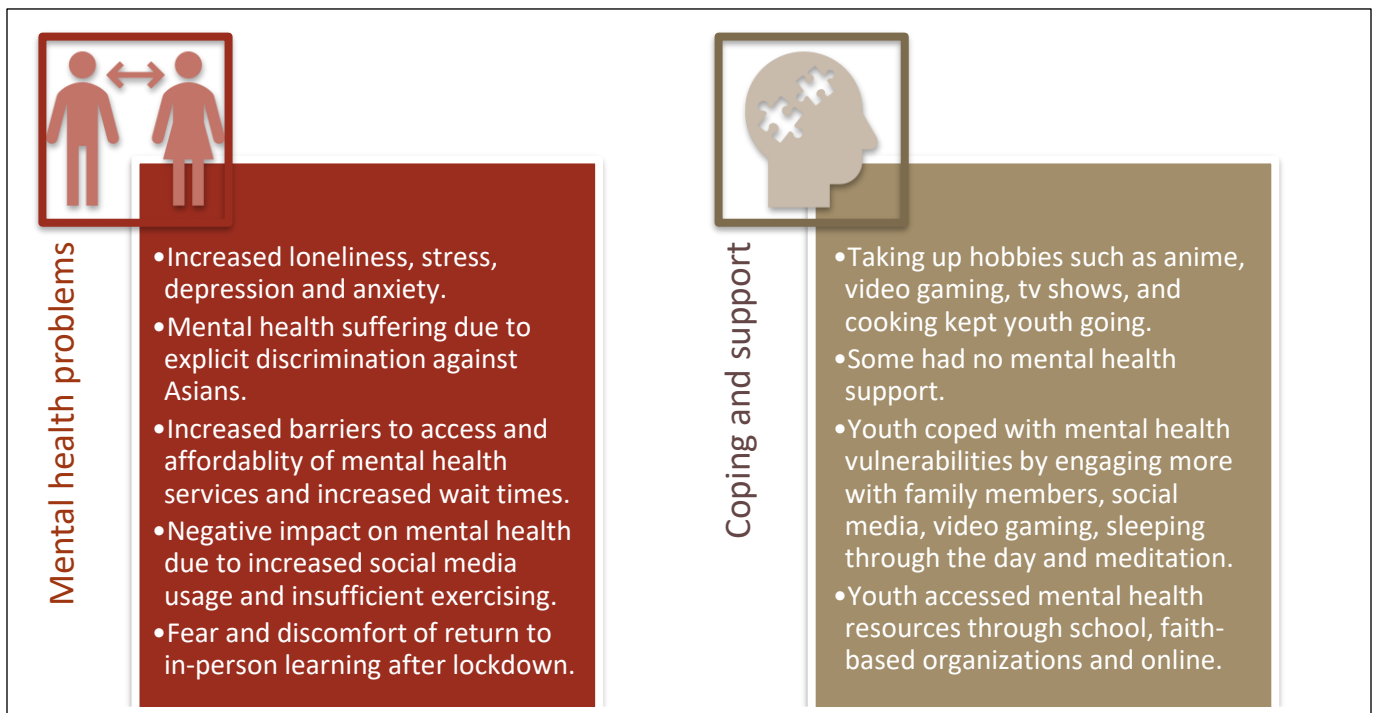
Figure 2 Educational Challenges; Future Strategies



Pandemic amplified and created mental health challenges

The anxiety of returning to in-person learning after pandemic-related school closures and remote learning was shared by a university freshman as follows: “like a lot of social anxiety. I had to go to therapy and stuff. But I got scared of therapy, that’s during the pandemic, I realized I need to start taking care of my mental health more.” The limitations of cancelled events and being unable to meet friends and socialize contributed to changes to youths' personalities, with some feeling more introverted than ever. One youth expressed as follows “being in isolation took a toll on my mental health. I am someone that likes to spend a lot of alone time, but being confined in my house, not interacting with anyone and only seeing people on a screen, just messes with you in some sort of way.” Another youth shared how pandemic lockdowns impacted his emotional health, when a friend in their group had serious mental health issues, and none of them could be physically there with him.

Figure 3 Mental Health Challenges; Coping Strategies



Asian Canadian youths’ recommendations on mental health support

1. Prior to the pandemic, Asian communities weren’t aware of the importance of mental health support. “Now it is the responsibility of the Asian-Canadian youth to bring that topic forward and educate their community about it.”
2. There is need for more mental health resources that would be particularly beneficial for Asian-Canadian youth, so that youth do not struggle in silence with mental health problems.

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ABOUT THE INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet is part of a series of information sheets produced at our Office and in relation to the Youth Identities, Resilience, and Arts-Based Approaches Research Program. It summarizes key ideas from our study titled: **Asian-Canadian Youth Identities in a Pandemic Era: Arts-Based Research**.

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