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The Blame Game: The Effects of Negative Communication Surrounding the Youth of Denmark During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Subject Module Project in Communication Studies

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Number of characters: 103,192

Roskilde, January 2021.

Abstract

This project deals with the enduringly relevant subject of COVID-19 or more specifically, how people perceive the media coverage about this topic. By focusing on a specific group of people, in this case young people in Copenhagen aged 18 to 24, the goal was to explore the individual emotions and opinions that are formed through consumption of information from the coverage of COVID-19. During the initial stages of discussion, the group noticed that young people were repeatedly being reported as the primary spreaders of the disease because of their social gatherings. The articles often seemed too generalized and accusatory in nature, which birthed the idea of exploring the impact these articles have on the people mentioned in them.

In order to set up the base of the project, it was necessary to carry out a literature review. Since COVID-19 is not the only large-scale pandemic in recent history, existing literature about the social, psychological and even media consequences were available. The selected articles deal with subjects like stigmatization during the H1N1 pandemic, localized blame based on a certain geographical location during the AIDS crisis in the United States and extremely proximal themes like an Australian study on media placing responsibility for COVID-19 infection rates.

The primary data was collected with a series of responsive, qualitative interviews. During the literature review phase, it became clear that most existing research around similar subjects was quantitative and focused on different numerical data, which provided the group with incentive to pursue other routes. Although some quantitative data was still used, its main purpose was to add credibility and a background for the interviews and not to produce the final results. The data collected from seven interviewees of diverse backgrounds and gender was transcribed in order for relevant information to be used in the analysis. The end goal was to answer the research question as well as the supporting questions that represent the focal points of interest. While analyzing gathered data using a theoretical lens, the group found that almost all of the participants noticed reoccurring reporting on young Danes spreading COVID-19 through their social gatherings. Interestingly enough, the degree of emotional response varied greatly depending on the individuals and how much they followed the news on the subject.

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Introduction

The year 2020, has without a doubt been one of the most tumultuous if not downright traumatic years in recent history. The infectious disease, COVID-19, or colloquially named Coronavirus, tore through continents, flooding hospitals and intensive care units, while mass graves became the final resting place for tens of thousands of people. Without a doubt the worst pandemic in more than a century - and unfortunately still ongoing as these words are written. While Denmark, in comparison to other countries, has made it seemingly unscathed through the pandemic, there is no denying that COVID-19 has affected the everyday life of everyone living in Denmark and the feeling of living in a state of emergency is very real. When societies experience crises, everyone looks to the media as the most important source of information. And while the media has for the most part lived up to their responsibility and covered the pandemic thoroughly as the story develops, the coverage has not been without its faults.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has highlighted several communities and groups in Denmark as the cause of high infection numbers, due to their inability to practice social distancing among other things. This has created a "blame-game" where certain groups, whether defined by ethnicity, age, etc., have been blamed for spikes in infection numbers in national media outlets. But why does the media focus on smaller specific groups, when thousands of people across a diverse demographic have been tested positive during the second wave of the pandemic? What would be the objective of such a news coverage?

One such group, which has been highlighted by the media, is the young people in Denmark. Time and time again, headlines focusing on the irresponsible behavior of young people have graced the covers of national media outlets. One of the goals of this project is to investigate their views and opinions, often ignored since their low susceptibility to the disease. Through a series of interviews, the expectation was to discover that young people (aged 18-24) perceive the media coverage in a negative way – that they feel blamed and unfairly judged. They might feel robbed of their youth since people older than them have already been able to enjoy their youth without being blamed for spreading a virus that can have deadly consequences. From a different point of view, the negative discourse could also be used to coerce young people into rethinking how they socialize - but is that the most constructive way to communicate a change in behavior? Socializing, often including alcohol, feels

incredibly important at that age, as many people find meaning through the interactions with their peers. For most young people, giving up your social life can feel detrimental, and maybe they feel that the risk of infection is worth the reward of socializing.

The research may even find that young people have become apathetic to the seriousness of COVID-19, due to the constant exposure - they simply don't care anymore. Since COVID-19 has been known to mainly affect older people and people with pre-existing conditions, young people may be inclined to think that they are "untouchable" by the virus. This is something that will have to be taken into consideration, when analyzing the empirical data.

Problem Area and Research Question

The goal of this project is to investigate the effects of the media coverage on the COVID-19 situation in Denmark. More specifically, the "trend" of news reporting on young people socializing in times of recommended and demanded social distancing. This project will be looking closer at the perceived stigmatization or "blame-game" within the media and the news coverage concerning COVID-19 and young people (age 18-24). The reason for focusing on young people is due to the extensive media coverage of this particular group, especially during the Summer of 2020. The actions and social practices of young people have been linked by the media to the increase in infection numbers. This project seeks to research whether or not young people in Denmark, more specifically Copenhagen, feel blamed by the media coverage of their partying and social gatherings. Since most of the project group members are young Danes living in Copenhagen, a discussion was formed quite naturally because of the obvious connection to the subject matter. To explore the above mentioned in greater detail, the following research question was formulated:

How do young people (age 18-24) perceive the media discourse regarding their social gatherings during COVID-19?

After further research into the subject matter, the curiosity among the members increased revealing possible points of interest. If there is a media bias, then why and how was it created? Is the impression that is left with the receiver conditioned by their own actions and could these negative effects have been corrected? Added efforts gave way to more refined supporting questions:

- **What would be the purpose of the "blame-game"?**

- **How does the individual's own use of the media affect their perception of the COVID-19 coverage?**

- **Is there an untapped communications potential, when it comes to reporting on COVID-19?**

The researchers' assumption, and the problem that this project will be addressing, is that the media covers the COVID-19 pandemic in a way where they blame young people (age 18-24) for being a part of the reason there was an increase in infection numbers at the beginning of the Fall of 2020. Thus, this project will investigate whether a stigmatization is in fact experienced by the demographic in question.

The Media Coverage and COVID-19 in Numbers

Initially, this project looks at the numbers that emphasize the situation in Denmark regarding the topic of the project from September 2020 up until December 2020. This is in order to see if there is a valid foundation for blaming this particular group of people. Following is shown a search of how many times young people have been mentioned in written articles in connection with COVID-19. Furthermore, is an example of one selected article that gives a picture of how the young people are displayed, and lastly the infection numbers based on age, in the period that the focus shifted to young people as the main spreader of the COVID-19. In addition, since the presumption is that there is a pattern of placing blame for the spread of COVID-19 to the young, Danish population, providing some proof brings the desirable credibility for any research paper. This is why a decision was made to provide some quantitative data as presented below.

Based on a search on Infomedia, a platform that collects all articles from Danish papers and magazines, 21 articles regarding young people and COVID-19 were found:
- 15 articles were presenting young people as the main culprits for the rising number of confirmed COVID-19 cases
- Two articles were interviews with young people explaining how they would not stop partying despite the restrictions made by the government

- One article was an interview with an 18-year-old who explained how she and most of the young people she knows actually manages to live in accordance with the restrictions and recommendations and
- Three articles praise the efforts of young people actually trying to live in accordance with and follow the restrictions and recommendations

The search involved the papers Jyllands-Posten, B.T., Information, Kristeligt Dagblad, Politiken, Weekendavisen and Ekstra Bladet. Furthermore, the search criteria were based on the keywords "*Corona*" or "*COVID-19*" and "*Unge*" and/or "*Piratfester*" and was limited to the time between September 1st, 2020 to December 20th, 2020.

In addition, a single article was chosen for later use in order to collect data for the analysis. The article "*Nye coronarestriktioner rettet mod festende unge kan være på vej*" was written by Morten Zahle and published by Jyllands-Posten on September 13th, 2020 (Zahle, 2020). The article describes how young people in Copenhagen are still partying too much, gathering in groups of more than 10 people and overall does not seem to be able to follow the restrictions and recommendations. Due to this problem the government was considering implementing more restrictions aimed at young people aged 15 to 25 in Copenhagen. This article alone mentions young people 11 times, all in an accusatory matter (Zahle, 2020).

According to infection numbers from September 20th, 2020 published by DR (DR Nyheder, 2020) and official population numbers from the third quarter of 2020 from Danmarks Statistik, the distribution of infected people was as shown below (percentage of total numbers of infected):
- 10-19 y/o was 8,74%
- 20-29 y/o was 17,64%
- 30-39 y/o was 14,99%
- 40-49 y/o was 16,84%
- 50-59 y/o was 16,58%
- 60-69 y/o was 9,90%

(see appendix 1)

The statistics were done by the project group in order to fact check within the period of the Infomedia search of articles. Obviously, the numbers are a snapshot of this exact date,

September 20th, 2020, and cannot be replicated to other dates. However, this date was chosen, because it was three weeks after studies started at the universities and therefore, a time where the focus was especially on young people and their behavior during the first weeks of studying. The statistics were an indicator and confirmation of the sensationalization by the media and most importantly a specific feature to show the interviewees in order to discover if they were aware of how the infection numbers looked and were distributed between the age groups. These numbers were also shown during the interviews as an addition to one of the questions meant to investigate the interviewee's knowledge on the subject at hand. Specifically, the goal was to examine their awareness about the proximity of the numbers in different age groups.

Literature Review

Before the actual start of the exploration on the chosen subject matter, it is important to review the information that is already available through various academic sources. This way the reader can more easily understand the presented information and form critical opinions that are not solely dependent on the researchers' perspective. This will be achieved by examining different articles and the methodology that focus on the effects of being exposed to media coverage on the subject of disease-spreading, immigration, minority groups or stigmatization. Firstly, the article 'The H1N1 pandemic: media frames, stigmatization and coping' (McCauley et al., 2016) greatly correlates with the subjects this paper wants to explore. The main difference is the type of pandemic that is described in the media. The authors used focus groups to find out the racially diverse participants' perspective on the then occurring H1N1 pandemic. They concluded that all the participants went through similar effects of stress when dealing with news about the disease, but their responses and coping strategies differed significantly especially with the Hispanic participants. This can be attributed to the media reporting on the alleged origin of the outbreak coming from Mexican pig farms. From this example it is concludable that different social groups respond differently to news coverage, which is the main guiding assumption for this project.

As previously mentioned, including quantitative data can prove to be useful for supporting a claim, and can also be used to benefit the acquisition of primary data or in this case - qualitative data. An example of interesting findings through quantitative research is found in an article called 'How the Media Places Responsibility for the COVID-19 Pandemic—An Australian Media Analysis' (Thomas et al., 2020). The authors of the article focused on the

numerical data in order to find a noticeable practice in Australian reporting on COVID-19. While focusing on print media they learned that the blame/responsibility aspect of the pandemic differed depending on distinct periods in time. They divide them by the passing months into three phases. During the initial phase the responsibility fell mostly on tourists entering and leaving the country on vacation, with emphasis on Chinese tourists. Phase two began with the first deaths brought by the virus. During this time, the blame aspect was muted, and the media focused more on social responsibility and national unity. Finally, in the last phase of their analysis, the authors found minimal traces of blaming (except a few articles criticizing the Chinese government for not warning the rest of the world sooner) but rather identified moral evaluations of the general population like people panic buying massive amounts of products to stock up for possible prolonged periods of isolation. Although interesting and relevant, this research leaves room for improvement. By only analyzing print media there is a missed opportunity to get data from more 'emotionally charged' articles that can be found in the online renditions if going by the assumption that print media is viewed as more professional and controlled. To conclude, providing quantitatively measurable data brings more weight to the findings this project may come across and therefore should be included in the analysis.

Another important element when thinking about placing blame in a pandemic, whether justified or not, is geographical location. Authorities and the public will often try to officially, or at least by word of mouth, to confine the hotspots of infection in certain parts of the country. This is often a useful tool to fight the disease but can bring stigma towards the inhabitants of the certain area. An example of this can be seen all across the world and Denmark is not an exception. If one were to follow the presumption that more people equals more infection it is clear that Copenhagen will be the rank the highest. This was heavily reported in the media and the capital even had some restrictive measures tailored specifically to it. Raising stigma and blame around a certain geographical area is a trend far older than COVID-19. In his book, "AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame", Paul Farmer talks about the history of the AIDS pandemic in Haiti and certain Caribbean islands (Farmer, 2006). Some parts of his book deal directly with blame and stigma regarding the disease among the locals and 'neighboring' countries like the United States. Since the disease was new at the time, there was a lot of misinformation and even conspiracy theories among the locals with some even blaming alleged sorcerers in small villages. The part that is important for this project is the systematic blame in the American society focused towards

Haiti as the source of the pandemic in America. Since Haiti is relatively close to the United States, Farmer explains that a theory was developed that the virus was brought to America by immigrants and tourists coming from Haiti. This was achieved not only by the public's speculation but also by official gateways like the media and governmental releases. Farmer stated that: ''*In the United States, accusing fingers were pointed at poor or otherwise marginalized people: homosexual men, Haitian immigrants, intravenous drug users, and prostitutes. Ryan (1971:22) has argued convincingly that blaming the victim is 'central in the mainstream of contemporary American social thought, and its ideas pervade our most crucial assumptions so thoroughly that they are hardly noticed'. Its chief perpetuators, he suggests, are often social scientists or others with vaguely humanitarian ideals —especially those charged with elaborating social policies in the United States*''* (Farmer, 2006: 208).
By assuming that ideas from this quote can be applicable to any Western society, it is safe to conclude that stigmatization and haphazadring of a certain location are often a practice when dealing with things as frightening as a disease. Although a conclusion like this can be quite a stretch or generalization, many examples like Haiti occurred over time and can provide an insight into the human psyche in times of uncertainty. For the aforementioned reasons the geographical area referenced in this paper will be Copenhagen as it is one of the most stigmatized by the Danish media.

Additionally, it is important to substantiate the choice to only use online articles with examples in order to explain and justify it. A good example of the power of the internet when it comes to spreading information about uncommon situations like pandemics is depicted in the article 'Blood Libel Rebooted: Traditional Scapegoats, Online Media, and the H1N1 Epidemic' (Duault et al., 2015). The article also deals with the H1N1 epidemic while focusing on the French population's response to it and vaccination attempts. The authors emphasize that H1N1 was the first epidemic happening during the Web 2.0 era. They focused on analyzing the online flow of information rather than the traditional media like television, newspapers or radio. What they found was that the information on social media and different forums greatly differed from the one being sent out by the government through their traditional counterparts. The communication was critical towards the government's plans and was reaching a big number of people including some that could be considered opinion makers in that situation like family doctors and private medical professionals. The authors concluded that the attempt of mass vaccination was a failure because the authorities failed to take online media into consideration. Over a decade has passed since these events and clearly the media

landscape has changed a great deal. With more and more people (even the older generations) using online media as their primary source of information and with the lesson learned from the French H1N1 case, it makes the most sense to focus the project's attention to online articles when researching the subject matter of this project. This is especially important when taking into account that the sample being interviewed predominantly uses the internet as their source of information - Danes aged 18 to 24 years old (Danmarks Statistik, 2017).

More on the subject of the actual response to information from the media can be found in works from authors like Richman and Leary (2009). In their article '*Reactions to Discrimination, Stigmatization, Ostracism, and Other Forms of Interpersonal Rejection: A Multimotive Model*' they give insight into a new model that should help explain people's reaction to negative social phenomena mentioned in the headline. The model is fairly complex and lengthy so describing all of its aspects could prove to be counterproductive since they are not all relevant to this project's topic. However, the key findings of it provide an interesting perspective on the outcomes of the social processes in the article's title that are placed in the category of rejection by the authors. They found that people's reaction to rejection can result in prosocial or antisocial behavior, depending on a number of different factors. This brings on the question of how will or how did young Danes react to media prosecution regarding the spread of COVID-19. If social behavior in this context is respecting distancing and other safety rules and antisocial behavior is rebelling and doing the opposite, perhaps this project can discover valuable information or predictions of which of the two is more common.

During our literature review, it was primarily quantitative studies that were found addressing similar themes. With this in mind, this project has found good reason to approach the problem from a primarily qualitative angle, to get a better understanding of young Danes' emotional motivation. This will also be covered in the methodology paragraph.

Conceptual Framework

Before describing the theories applied in the project, a description of the conceptual framework is made. Throughout the project, a series of important keywords and terms are used, since a proper understanding of these terms and keywords is essential for the overall understanding of the project and the outcome of the research. As the main focus of this project is the perception among young people of the media coverage of the COVID-19 situation, a description of the following terms is made:

COVID-19

According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) official website COVID-19 is defined as *"an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus"* (WHO, 2020). Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness (Ibid.). On February 11th, 2020, WHO announced an official name for the disease. It was named – coronavirus disease 2019 – abbreviated as COVID-19: CO stands for 'corona', VI stands for virus, and 'D' for disease (WHO, 2020).

A cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China was seen, eventually identified as a novel coronavirus in January 2020. On March 11th, 2020, the alarming levels of infection and the disease severity led WHO to characterize COVID-19 as a worldwide pandemic (Ibid.). Since the first known case of COVID-19 the world has been partially closed down at all times as countries have closed borders in order to control the spread of the virus. Different initiatives have been implemented to stop COVID-19, and WHO claims that the best way to prevent and slow transmission is to be "*well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. Protect yourself and others from infection by washing your hands or using an alcohol-based rub frequently and not touching your face*" (WHO, 2020). On January 3rd, 2021, there have been 82,579,768 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, including 1,818,849 deaths (Ibid.), with 165,930 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Denmark, including 1,322 deaths (WHO, 2020).

Young People

According to Lexico; Powered by Oxford, the definition of 'young' is *"being in the first or an early stage of life, growth, or development"* and *"Having lived or existed for only a short time"* with a connection to 'youth' with the definition *"the time of life when one is young"* (Lexico, 2020). The understanding of a young person differs a lot and depends on the circumstances and context of the situation. When using the term 'young people' in this project, it covers Danish people in the age 18 to 24 years old. The term covers all genders as well as employment statuses and levels of income unless other distinctions are made.

Blame-game

Blame-game is defined as *"...a situation in which one party blames others for something bad or unfortunate rather than attempting to seek a solution"* (Lexico, 2020). This project describes how there have been several cases of a blame-game seen in the Danish media in connection with COVID-19, with some articles referring to someone as 'sinners', leading to people blaming certain groups for the situation of increasing infection numbers.

Stigmatization

According to Oxford Languages, stigmatization is the action of *"... describing or regarding someone or something as worthy of disgrace or great disapproval"* and *"... the action or process of marking someone with stigmata"* (Oxford Languages, 2020). Based on these definitions, 'stigmatization' can be described as a majority disapproval of a person or group that differs from or has norms that differ from the majority. The stigmatized person(s) will be marked by the majority as more or less unwanted.

In this project, 'stigmatization' is used to describe the current state of blame-game seen in the Danish media, as many articles tend to point out young people as some of the biggest causes to the increasing infection numbers in Denmark. This is due to the fact that young people are seen partying and gathering in bigger groups despite the restrictions and recommendations stated by the Danish government, the Ministry of Health as well as with Statens Serum Institut, a Danish sector research institute specializing in disease prevention among other things (Statens Serum Institut, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The very nature of this project implies that the media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark has had an emotional impact on young people. With this in mind, it is relevant to look at classic theories regarding media coverage and journalism in general. These theories will among other things be used to analyze the empirical world as well as support some of the methodological choices.

Framing

The theory of frames and framing will be used as one of the key ideas to explore and support the topic of this project: the effect of current media practices regarding coverage of COVID-19 on young Danes in Copenhagen. The concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of communication, and suggests that any communication, such as storytelling, advertising, media coverage etc. can be shaped in different ways by selecting specific plot points in the story giving it the desired angle. In other words, framing is a common tool to create a desired reality alternative to what is true. According to Robert M. Entman (1993), framing is a means to select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more visible in a communicative situation. This is in order to promote a particular definition of a problem, the causes of the problem, the moral evaluations and solutions to the described phenomenon. In other words, framing is about which associations are connected with a particular phenomenon, and a distinction is made between two different parts of the framing process: frame-building and frame-setting (Entman, 1993: 52). Therefore, framing essentially involves salience and selection (Entman, 1993: 53). Frames highlight bits of information about a certain item that is the subject of communication, and thereby elevating them in salience. Salience in this case is defined by how it makes a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the recipients. An effective tool within framing is repetition, as people are more likely to be convinced if they are presented to the same reality and information several times (Ibid.). As well as selecting important plot points is an effective tool in a case of framing, choosing which plot points to omit is also a very important factor in order to obtain a successful outcome (Ibid.).

Entman suggests that frames have at least four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture (Entman, 1993: 52). *The communicator* makes conscious or unconscious framing judgments when deciding what to communicate,

guided by the frames that organize their belief systems. The *text (or message)* contains frames, that are manifested by the presence or absence of certain images, key words, sources of information and sentences that provide reinforcing clusters of facts (Ibid.). The frames that guide the thinking and conclusions by *the receiver,* might or might not reflect the frames in the communication and the intentions of framing of the communicator. Lastly, *the culture* is the collection of most commonly evoked frames. The culture might even be defined as the empirically conclusive set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thereby the thinking of most people in a social grouping (Entman, 1993: 53).

Framing is often seen in news media coverage, and an example is the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark for the past four to five months. In August the focus was especially on a group of Somali people in Aarhus, when several media outlets wrote articles blaming this particular group for the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Madsen & Elkjær, 2020). Approximately a month later in September a new group of people were the ones to be blamed. Young people in Copenhagen were now the group claimed to be responsible for the continued spread of the COVID-19 virus, according to several articles (Zahle, 2020).
A clear consequence of framing in this case is that with the constant alluding that a certain group is the cause of something, that group will get socially afflicted by such actions. As earlier mentioned, recipients are more likely to believe in the 'new reality' when they are exposed to repetition. When the recipients are exposed to the same story or stories alike several times, they begin to believe the stories, and then this becomes the new reality. A good metaphor is if you imagine the news reporting on COVID-19 during a single period in Denmark as a digital image. Every piece of news act as a pixel that will in the end constitute the image as a whole. If a lot of the pixels are similar in nature it will shape the perception of the whole frame. When a lot of people gain the same perspective, it creates a frame in society on how something is perceived. This will inevitably affect the society or even specific groups in it.

Hostile Media Effects

The theory of the "hostile media effects" is a perceptual theory within the field of mass communication research. Hostile media perception occurs when an individual perceives news coverage of a controversial issue as biased against its own side. Usually it can be seen in politics where opposite sides perceive an identical news coverage as biased against their side

and in favor of the opponent (Gunther et al., 2001: 296). The theory was first developed by Mark Lepper, Robert Vallone and Lee Ross in 1985, when they researched the perception of pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans and the media coverage about the conflict between these two opposing parties. Their research found that "...*partisans reported different perceptions and recollections about the program content itself; that is, each group reported more negative references to their side than positive ones, and each predicted that the coverage would sway nonpartisans in a hostile direction. Within both partisan groups, furthermore, greater knowledge of the crisis was associated with stronger perceptions of media bias*" (Vallone et al., 1985: 577). One of the goals of this project is to identify any perceptions of hostile media effects from the interviewees, young people from Copenhagen, in regard to the reporting on COVID-19. In this case the young people could perceive the coverage as though the media and other official sources have taken a generalized stance to blame this specific age demographic for spreading COVID-19. Whether this is the case or not, the theory of hostile media effects serves as a guide for the progression of the project in the subsequent analysis. The coverage could by the young perceiver also be seen as a sensationalization of the pandemic and their behavior by pointing them out as scapegoats in order to create a news story and thereby receive clicks. This sensationalization could feel almost volatile and unfair for the parties mentioned and be experienced as a stigmatization. This leads to the theory of news values which will be described in further detail in the following paragraph.

News Values

News values can be explained as a set of criteria that journalists use to decide what events are considered news and worth reporting on to the public and how they are formed into information presented in various forms of media. From an idealistic point of view, these values have been established and carried out by the media continually since the very beginnings of the journalistic field that you know today. But as with most things, the normative idea of operating is often contorted by circumstances and revision in practices. Authors like Harcup & O'Neill talk about how these values can be described or listed, and how they change through time in their highly quoted articles from 2001 and 2016. Through their research, they concluded that stories must satisfy certain requirements if they are to become news. The 10 categories of what constitutes the news are listed by Harcup & O'Neill as follows:

1. *The power elite*: Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions.

2. *Celebrity*: Stories concerning people who are already famous.

3. *Entertainment*: Stories concerning sex, showbusiness, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.

4. *Surprise*: Stories that have an element of surprise and/or contrast.

5. *Bad news*: Stories with particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy.

6. *Good news*: Stories with particularly positive overtones, such as rescues and cures.

7. *Magnitude*: Stories that are perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact.

8. *Relevance*: Stories about issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.

9. *Follow-up*: Stories about subjects already in the news.

10. *Newspaper agenda*: Stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda
 (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016: 1471).

Furthermore, the authors refer to other researchers like Shultz (2007) and state that: ''*...six news values in journalism dominate: timeliness, relevance, identification, conflict, sensation and exclusivity*'' (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016: 1472). Additionally, the development of digital media must be taken into consideration since it is the main source of information for the group that this paper is focusing on researching. On this subject, Harcup and O'Neill add that ''*The rise of digital and online media also demonstrate the role that technology and audiences play in decisions about what makes the news, with user-generated content becoming more important in news production*'' (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016:1474). In this context it does not mean that the readers create these articles themselves, but their interest in them may influence the considerable production of youth-related news about COVID-19. Ultimately, because of the many differing views on *news values* and their constantly changing nature, they will be used as a framework to consider when researching and reading through related literature instead of as an actual theory for writing.

Methodology

As previously stated, this project seeks to uncover the emotional perception of young people during the media coverage of COVID-19. This means that a qualitative approach is needed for the simple reason that emotions cannot be quantified. One of the project's "raison d'être" is that most similar studies have focused on quantitative data, whereas this project will be centered around qualitative data in order to get a better idea of the feelings of young people. Although qualitative data is mainly used, the project also looked at how the different age groups are represented in new infection numbers, in order to actually conclude whether or not the media coverage and "blame" on young people is actually valid. However, this approach is primarily for background research, whereas the qualitative methodologies applied in this project will be described in further detail in the following paragraphs.

Phenomenology

With the emotional effects of the COVID-19 coverage being the focal point of this project, it is relevant to look at the perspective of phenomenology. Although an abstract concept with many different interpretations, modern day phenomenology can generally be attributed to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl with further expansion on the elements of the perspective done by fellow German philosopher Martin Heidegger among others (Egholm, 2014: 105). The core idea of phenomenology is that a phenomenon has to be understood through human experience (Ibid.). Expanding on this notion, it could be said that phenomenology is at its core about epistemology or in other words - how we understand the world (Egholm, 2014: 110). The reason for choosing the phenomenological perspective has to do with the very nature of the research question and the wish to look at the young people's individual perception of how they have been treated in the media coverage.

In addition to the above-mentioned understanding of phenomenology, one of the concepts most often associated with the perspective is the *lifeworld*. The lifeworld can be described as *"... people's everyday life and practices, their mutual interrelationships and experiences, which create the background for their intentions (directedness) and the conditions for which phenomena manifest"* (Egholm, 2014: 109). In other words, the lifeworld is the context from which an individual's knowledge and understanding emerge from.

From a phenomenological perspective, something can only be described if one starts with how it is perceived and experienced by the very individuals involved. This requires the researchers to investigate the empirical world from a first-person perspective (Egholm, 2014: 109). The view from the first-person perspective is also one of the cornerstones of this project and the main reason why the choice has been made to collect qualitative data through a series of interviews with individuals from the target demographic – young people, aged 18-24. The experiences of the different interviewees will affect any meaning creation, which means that the phenomena (the media coverage) cannot be separated from the subject (the interviewees) (Egholm, 2014: 110).

By having a phenomenological approach, as mentioned the project will be researching the individual emotions experienced by the interviewees. This also means that the empirical world must be treated ideographically, i.e. it is not possible to generalize on the basis of the final analysis (Egholm, 2014: 108). When working from a phenomenological point of view it is also important to remember the purpose of such an approach. First of all, the purpose of a phenomenological analysis is never to create new knowledge of how the world works, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the basic conditions of our world, which may be obvious and taken for granted (Egholm, 2014: 111). In addition to phenomenology being ideographic it is also an inductive and not deductive process. Meaning that any theories formulated has to emerge from any empirical data rather than proving/disproving a theory already formulated (Egholm, 2014: 106).

With a phenomenological approach, this project will therefore attempt to understand the very subjective emotions of the interviewees in the most "objective" way possible. That being said, objectivity is not the end goal nor remotely possible in this project, since the group members' own assumptions in one way or another are bound to affect the empirical world and subsequent analysis. Therefore, bias and subjectivity are inevitable – however, the researchers should always question their own assumptions and how these may have affected or potentially will affect the outcome of the project (Egholm, 2014: 103).

The Interviews

As mentioned several times in this project, the importance of qualitative approach cannot be downplayed. Keeping in mind that phenomenology and its core elements play a main role in

this project, conducting qualitative interviews was a natural progression to gain a deeper understanding of the problem at hand. Before collecting the data, there were already a few assumptions as to what the outcome of the interviews would be, mainly that most young people would have perceived the coverage as being biased against them and their generation. At the same time, there is also an awareness that the complete opposite conclusion could be reached when collecting the data. These interviews could show that young people have not perceived the media coverage in a negative way – maybe they have not even noticed the stigmatization and the original assumption of blame at all.

Interview Type – responsive, qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews were selected as an interview method since it is difficult to unfold feelings and emotions in for example a survey where quantity is in focus. The advantages of the qualitative interviews compared with for example surveys is that it allows elaboration of the answers and thereby nuances that are not detectable from a yes or no answer. In a way, the qualitative interview can lead to longer and more detailed and descriptive answers which goes hand in hand with the perspective of phenomenology (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 95-96).

Another consideration involved the numerical structure of the interviews and whether they should be single person interviews or focus group interviews. It was quickly decided to do single person interviews for several reasons. One of the disadvantages with focus group interviews is that it can be affected by social control meaning that strong personalities might impact the dynamic and inevitably the outcome of the interview (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 94). With the age group of this project in mind this disadvantage might have a negative influence on the outcome. Besides that, the current COVID-19 situation calls to a greater extent for single person interviews instead of collecting a bigger group in the same place. Even though this was the reflexive starting point concerning interview methodology, the ever-changing conditions of the Danish COVID-19 situation made it more difficult to conduct interviews in person. This is also the reason why four out of seven interviews ended up being conducted virtually.

In terms of interview style, Uwe Flick refers to the term 'responsive interviews' made by Rubin & Rubin (Flick, 2014: 265). The responsive interview is a style within qualitative

methodology where the focus is on the relationship established during the conduction of the interview between the interviewer and the interviewee. The goal of the responsive interviews, as is the case for most qualitative interviews, is to create a fuller picture of the interview person's point of view. It is important for both the questions and the responses as well as initially the outcome of the interview, that a comfortable atmosphere for the interviewee is created. Therefore, the questions require a friendly and non-confronting tone (Flick, 2014: 265). Responsive interviews allow the adaptation of the information given by the interviewees, while at the same time focusing on the topic and questions at hand. The given structure from the interview guide is followed while at the same time there is room for additional questions. This enables the interviewer to ask more in-depth questions which is beneficial as this project seeks to unfold feelings (Flick, 2014: 265).

In order for the responsive qualitative interview to unfold properly in the conduction phase, an interview guide was designed. For the interview guide Rubin & Rubin mentions three types of questions: main questions, follow-up questions and probes. Unlike main questions and follow-up questions, probes do not have to involve the actual theme of the interview specifically since they are meant to spur reaction or emotions. As an interviewer you are supposed to shift between those three questions in order to get a dynamic interview and the wanted responses (Flick, 2014: 266). Just as Flick who refers to Rubin & Rubin, Kvale argues that there are different question types that are meant to stimulate different outcomes and responses. Kvale describes nine types of questions, all of which have something different to offer to the atmosphere around the very interview: preliminary questions, follow up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct questions, indirect questions, structuring questions, interpretive questions and silence (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 99). In the interview guide developed for this project it has been pursued to incorporate as many of these mentioned types of questions, which were deemed suitable for the interviews.

Sampling

As earlier mentioned, the aim of this project is to research and examine young people's perception of the media coverage of COVID-19. As the project focuses on young people in Copenhagen, an important criterion for an interview person was that he/she lives in Copenhagen – whether they studied and/or worked in Copenhagen, however, was irrelevant to this project. As it can be seen in the section 'Conceptual Framework' earlier in this project,

the term "young people" was defined as being between 18 to 24 years old. Even though the Danish media mentions even younger people as a part of the increase in infection numbers, this age span was decided on for several reasons (Hagemann-Nielsen, 2020). The main one being that by setting the age limit to 18 years old, no parental permissions would be needed to conduct the interviews.

The sampling of interviewees was challenged due to the very topic of this project, COVID-19. Out of respect and in following with the governmental restrictions, the interviewees were found within the broader network of the project group. However, it was made sure that the interviewees did not have a direct personal connection to a member of the project group. Furthermore, it was desired for the project to get a minimum of six interview persons with an equal balance in gender as well as a spread in age to create the most representative result for this type of project. Nonetheless, it must be noted that a representative image is not possible to obtain with seven interview persons as this project ended up with, nor is it the goal of this project to create a representative story of young people's perception of the COVID-19 coverage.

Designing of the Interview Guide

With all the above mentioned in mind, the interview guide was designed with the purpose of creating structure and a dynamic conversation (see appendix 10).

Usually interview persons are divided into types according to their background and in what way they are used in the specific interview i.e. regular people or experts (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 90). In this project, the interviewees are ordinary people which means that they are usually not used to the media or trained in systematically answering questions during interviews. At the same time, they might be a bit uncomfortable and need more help from the interviewer when they respond (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 94). With this in mind, an active choice of starting out with easy questions to loosen up and create a pleasant and friendly atmosphere was made. Practically, this can be seen as factual questions about the interview person, their name, age and occupation in the very beginning, followed by some overall questions about the COVID-19 situation. In connection to this, a focus was also on the information given before the interviews since this is a crucial part as well in order for the

interviewee to feel comfortable with the setting of the interview (Rimestad & Gravengaard, 2014: 99).

Since the COVID-19 situation unexpectedly changed from the beginning of the project until the conduction of the interviews, a decision about showing an actual article during the interview was made. This article had to be somewhat representative of the COVID-19 coverage on young people. Besides that, it is too demanding, to require for the interviewees, to reflect back on events several months ago on the spot.

Another consideration involved how to ask the questions properly in order to receive the most extensive answers. The project group agreed on the fact that feelings usually can be overwhelming to talk about, so a change in the formulation of the questions helped to remove focus from the emotional aspect, while still allowing the interviewees to describe emotions indirectly. In the first draft of the interview guide, a question was formulated as follows: *Hvad er din mening om mediernes dækning af unges adfærd under COVID-19?* This was then changed to: *Hvad synes du om måden, medierne har dækket unge menneskers adfærd under corona?*. Notice that these questions are referred to in Danish in this methodology part, since wording is not directly translatable and exactly the wording was in focus in the method work when constructing the questions. In conclusion, two things were changed from the first draft. *Hvad er din mening om* was changed to *Hvad synes du om* because the last formulation was considered by the project group to be more informal and less clearly opinionated.

Furthermore, the term COVID-19 was replaced with corona, since this is more suitable to everyday language and again less formal. In the same way, the draft question: *Hvad føler du ift. at unge er blevet fremhævet som en del af årsagen til stigningen i smittetallene i løbet af sommeren og starten af efteråret?* was in the final version of the interview guide changed to: *Hvordan har du det med, at unge er blevet fremhævet som en del af årsagen til stigningen i smittetallene i løbet af sommeren og starten af efteråret?*. This change in wording as with the previous example was in order to remove the direct focus of talking about emotions and at the same time asking the exact same but in a different and less emotionally, opinionatedly overwhelming way.

Choosing the Article

Since the goal of the research is to gain a perspective into the feelings of the young Danish population in Copenhagen a certain allusion to the wanted subject is necessary at the beginning of the interviews. The most efficient way to find out if the interviewees are affected by a sense of blame from society is to exemplify a piece of information being sent out to a large number of people – in this case exemplified by an online article. Not only is online media the most consumed type of news among the age group being interviewed, but it is also easily gatherable due to its availability on the internet. When choosing the article to show to the interviewees certain criteria had to be met. Firstly, the article should not be too emotionally charged. This could manipulate the interviewee to feel a certain way about the topic of discussion and bring biased results. Secondly, it was important that the article was published around the time of the 'second wave' of the pandemic i.e. towards the end of summer or September. Choosing news from this period brings more credibility to the idea of continuous reporting on social gatherings of young people. Also, if a piece of news from the beginning of the pandemic was chosen, it would be less representative because of the initial frenzy among the public. Finally, the geographical location mentioned in the article must reflect the place of residence of the interviewees i.e. the city of Copenhagen.

If one were to assume that any published news can be placed within at least one of the previously mentioned *news values* categories, then they should provide an explanation and an opportunity to evaluate the choice of the article that will be shown to the participants in the interviews. Following these values in combination with reviews of online editions of popular Danish media an article was chosen.

The Jyllands-Posten piece named "*Nye coronarestriktioner rettet mod festende unge kan være på vej*" or "*New corona restrictions aimed at partying young people may be on the way*" met the aforementioned requirements. It singles out young people in Copenhagen numerous times throughout the article while still not appealing to the emotions of the reader in an obvious way. The article can also be connected to the different news values described earlier in the project. Firstly, it fits into at least a few of Harcup & O'Neill's (2001) categories about what makes news. It has *magnitude* because it is seen as significant by a large number of people, *relevance* in the sense that it is about the possibly most debated subject for almost a year and it is a *follow-up* or a continuation on the story since the repeated rise of infection numbers. Moreover, the article reflects the notion that this type of news is

produced because it gains a lot of traction by the readership. This is especially relevant with online media since it can bring very fast and clear feedback on what is being read, and in that way the users influence the creation process of the media content (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016: 1474). In trying times like pandemics, it is easy to assume that people are desperate for answers and are therefore more likely to click on news that directly or indirectly passes blame. To conclude, the Jyllands-Posten article was chosen by the project group because it overlapped with the most requirements and will therefore hopefully serve as a great tool to set the interviews into motion.

Analysis

Before the actual analysis it is important to elaborate the choices made when dealing with the data gathered in the interviews. For the data collection, seven people were interviewed, to give a wider and truer picture of the situation. Among our interviewees were three women aged 21, 22 and 23, and four men, one of whom is 22 with the remaining three being 23. All interviewees are students, which is to be expected as the wanted interviewees should be between 18 - 24 years old. The interviewees were contacted through Facebook groups, friends or acquaintances, and as mentioned none of the interviewees is a close contact with any of the group members working on this project. This was an important factor as a close relationship would affect the outcome of the interview.

All interviewees were interviewed individually, three took place physically and four took place virtually via the online meeting service Zoom. It was desired that all the interviews took place physically in order to obtain the best outcome of the interview. However, due to COVID-19 and the closure of the communities, the remaining interviews were conducted online. After further analysis of the interviews, the impression is that the group is of great diversity which is clear in their responses. Although the majority of the interviewees generally shared the same experience of the situation, the degree of it was fluctuating. Moreover, the interviewees had different perspectives on the coverage allowing a more nuanced analysis, as the answers differed greatly. Everyone had at some point followed the media coverage of the COVID-19 situation, most still do, while some stopped due to too much negativity, too much new information, general news saturation, etc.

Upon reading the following part of the project, the reader will notice only certain quotes from the interviews have been used in the analysis instead of whole transcriptions (those are

available in the appendices). Please note that the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Danish, with the selected quotes being translated into English. These parts were chosen to represent the most important points and findings relevant to answering the research question as well as their general affinity with the topic. They will be used to create an image of what has been learned during the interview process. The finished process should reveal insight into young people's perceptions on the Danish media's coverage of COVID-19.

Sensationalizing the Pandemic

As given by the very phenomenon, a pandemic is in itself sensational. However, a problem can arise when a certain demographic, ethnic or societal group and their behavior is sensationalized and pointed out as a reason for the continued growth of this pandemic. When it comes to the COVID-19 coverage in the Danish media, it can be argued whether young people are portrayed as scapegoats by the media or not. However, the interviews conducted as a part of this project gave a deeper insight to the reception of this coverage as a reporting on especially young people and their partying behavior. During the interviews it became evident that very different feelings and opinions were present among the group of interviewees. A way of analyzing these varying reactions - whether to a more or less distinct degree - would be to look at the hostile media effects and if this theory can unfold the perception of the interviewees.

Hostile media effects appear to be visible in multiple of the interviews but especially in the interviews with Christopher and Laura. When discussing the media coverage, they both express negative emotions toward the news coverage on COVID-19, because they both perceive it as being biased against them and their generation. Christopher seems the most affected by it or at least he appears to have reflected the most upon it out of all the interviewees:

"*I think it's very wrong to do* (to focus only on young people)*, it's downright spin so that everybody has a common sinner. My experience is that many young people actually take this very seriously, and most are really scared of Corona and especially of infecting other people.* (...) *So I think it's misleading that we* (young people) *are portrayed as the black sheep"* (see appendix 6).

While Laura may not have been as emotionally reflective as Christopher, she clearly still noticed what she perceived as a media bias targeting young people in Denmark:

"I just think I'm a little provoked. Now obviously, I can't speak on behalf of my entire generation, but in the circle of friends in which I belong, we respect and follow the restrictions and also respect the virus. So, I feel like we're doing ours (...) But I just think I am a little provoked and tired of them (the media) *portraying us as if we only care about fun and games and hugging everyone"* (see appendix 5).

On the other hand, Esben does not in the same way as Laura and Christopher perceive the hostile media effects, though he claims to be very updated on the media coverage and notices the blame against young people. When asked how he feels about his generation being blamed for the increasing infection numbers, he states:

"Fine by me. I see why some people find it (the blame) *annoying, but for me, they can believe what they want. I do not feel like a part of a minority. It's not something I'm affected by"* (see appendix 4).

The interview with Esben differs greatly from the other interviews, as he does not seem to be affected by the media coverage at all, nor does he fully agree with what the media writes about young people. Despite this, Esben explains how he himself does not follow the restrictions and recommendations as one should:

"(...) I have to admit that my brain could only stick to it (the restrictions) *a few days, then I just couldn't do it anymore. I don't know if my willpower was extremely weak or what it was. I'm very impressed by people who keep doing it... Yes, I'm really bad at it – like a child that can't control my impulses. (...) I threw a huge party during the summer. (...) I think we were about 70 people. (...) I was so sick of it* (COVID-19) *that I just didn't care about the restrictions*" (see appendix 4).

Another interview that deviates from the others is the one with Mathies. This is an interesting interview because Mathies does not seem to be very affected by the blame, even though he notices it. He is aware that he demographically is a part of a group that he describes as being blamed in the media, but he distances himself in the way that he describes young people. He

does this by using "they" and "young people" instead of "we" or "us young people" as it is seen in some of the other interviews. When asked how he feels about the fact that young people are pointed out as a part of the reason for the increase in infection numbers, he answers:

"I'm actually fine with it because it makes sense when the majority of the infection is seen among young people. I would say that this is well-founded due to this possible lack of respect for the government guidelines. I wouldn't call it "hetz" towards young people because this is where the infection is. I think it is very logical to go after those who are sinners, so to speak - and obviously it is because they (young people) *don't follow the restrictions. I think that's fine. I do not take anything personally just because I am a part of that group, demographically"* (see appendix 7).

During the entire interview Mathies clearly distances himself from other young people and even calls them "sinners". It is then evident that he does not perceive the blame and the hostile media effects in the same way as Laura and Christopher due to his emotional detachment from his generation.

As an opposite to Mathies, Christopher definitely feels an attachment to his generation. He even describes how he feels stigmatized in his everyday life due to the stigmatization of young people he detects by the media:

"Yes, for example when I'm grocery shopping. I can feel older people keeping an extra distance from me. They can walk past each other without a problem, but they look at me funny, and if we are walking on the street they will go out their way into a corner in order to avoid me - even though I step aside and keep my distance. So I have definitely felt that there has been a special attention on young people as the ones who carry the infection" (see appendix 6).

The stigmatization incurred by the media can also affect the way you perceive your everyday life. In this case Christopher perceives the fact that people from older generations avoid him in public as a consequence of the negative media coverage of young people's behavior during the pandemic.

This feeling of being stigmatized as Christopher describes can also be explained by the phenomenological approach and its description of a "lifeworld". This will be discussed in more detail in a later paragraph.

In contrast to Christopher, Malou does not recognize the feeling of stigmatization in her everyday life. Although she has also experienced a stigmatization of young people in the media the feeling is nowhere near as explicit as with Christopher. When asked *Have you yourself met skepticism due to your age, from either family, friends or colleagues, or in general in public?,* Malou answered:

''No, not exactly what I can think of at least'' (see appendix 8).

This could lead to the assumption that she probably did not experience repeated stigmatization or one severe enough to affect her emotional state and the way she perceives her surroundings. Still, it is clear that reporting on the subject was repetitive enough that it caused her to notice and remember it months later.

When the interviewee Esben was asked *Have you yourself met skepticism due to your age, from either family, friends or colleagues, or in general in public?* the interviewee answered:

"(...) A few times I have been reminded of it, but I will not say that it has touched me or affected me" (see appendix 4).

As well as Malou, Esben did not experience repeated or severe stigmatization, but as he mentions himself it has not been enough to affect his emotional and mental state.

In conclusion, Laura and Christopher are definitely the ones most affected by the media coverage and those who perceive the blame most strongly. But it is interesting that almost all interviewees mention that the media has had an excessive focus on young people. Barbara, Christopher and Mathies even use the words "scapegoats" or "sinners". An aspect that clarifies the perception of bias against one's own side, is the fact that none of the interviewees mentions the media focus on for example the Somali community in Aarhus during the Summer of 2020 (Jørgensen, 2020). In addition, only one interviewee mentions the recent "mink scandal" which was otherwise heavily covered by the media as the Prime

Minister and government officials killed an entire industry without any legal foundation (Pedersen, 2020). Almost all of the interviewees, except Esben, mention the blame on young people in the media when asked about their general impression of the media coverage - whether it is just something they noticed or something they feel strongly affected by. This could possibly be explained by the hostile media effects.

For further investigation, it would be interesting to see how an older generation for example people aged 40 to 49 perceive the news coverage. Would this age group also notice the blame on young people, and would they mention the coverage of young people partying when asked about their general impression of the media coverage? Or is this blame only perceived because young people experience a bias against their own generation? This is to be further elaborated in the discussion.

The Lifeworld and Its Impact on the Perception of News

In the phenomenological perspective, meaning is thought to emerge through human experience. This would imply that if an interviewee for example is not an avid news reader and does not pay attention to what the media is communicating, then he/she may not form the same meaning regarding a certain topic as someone who follows the news closely (Egholm, 2014: 105). Out of the interviewees, it was noticeable that the ones who indicated that they regularly seek out news coverage, were more opinionated and even skeptical towards the media's coverage of young people during the pandemic. In contrast, others who had a more passive approach towards news in general had an easier time distancing themselves from the negative coverage surrounding young people. This is evident when you compare the interviews of for example Barbara and Christopher.

When asked about how intensely she had followed the general coverage of COVID-19, Barbara replied:

"Yeah a little bit. I subscribe to the TV2 app, so I get some notifications on my phone, so I kind of follow the news" (see appendix 3).

When probed for a more elaborate answer of what she knew of the COVID-19 coverage, she mentioned some of the headlines from the last months, but did not divulge any further:

"Well, there was a lot of focus on the mink story, but more in relation to what was right or wrong, not about Corona. (...) there was a lot of focus on that, but yeah otherwise I don't know… I don't feel like there were a lot of different updates, you know? Of course, there has been a lot about the young people because it was primarily them (those who were infected)*, but I wouldn't say that it was something I paid attention to like that"* (see appendix 3).

In contrast, Christopher actively follows the news, especially in connection to breaking news, and in general makes sure that he is updated weekly. In addition, he frequently expressed awareness of the fact that every news outlet has a motive when it comes to covering a story. This can be concluded from the following:

"I think it's very rude, it (the media coverage) *portrays us as second-class citizens in some way. It is important to them* (the media) *that everything has an angle that fits with their audience, those who read the papers etc. And this without including any other perspectives to a case. It depicts a very one-sided media coverage"* (see appendix 6).

Although Barbara and Christopher appear to be polar opposites in regard to following the news, a third type of media user emerged from the interviews - Malou. She stated that she monitored the news closely during the early stages of the pandemic but subsequently experienced saturation in the following months that resulted in her losing track of the reporting. When asked *What is your overall impression of the media coverage?* She stated that:

''I think there was a period - it was probably this summer, where the focus was directed rather negatively at young people. But I think it has become more general now, and that it is important that everyone gets together - just like it was to start with in the spring'' (see appendix 8).

Although Malou claims to have experienced a type of news saturation, the following statement indicates that she is in fact reflecting on the COVID-19 coverage and is not a passive information receiver. During the interview with Malou, her answer to the question *If you think about the article you just read and the raised finger at young people. How do you feel about young people being highlighted as a reason for high infection rates?* resulted in an interesting observation:

"Well, I can understand that. There is, in a way, a good reason for this, because at the time the spread of infection was at its greatest. But at the same time, it was drawn up in black and white, because there are also many young people who are exposed in connection with their jobs - if they work in a shop or a café and serve customers. And they usually have a much larger circle of friends than older people. You have friends who live in dormitories, etc. But that part has just not been highlighted in the media, I think. That is, young people have an everyday life, which is often far different from the lives of adults and requires greater adaptation" (see appendix 8).

This response reflects at least some level of criticality towards the information received from the media and also appeals for another perspective in the COVID-19 coverage.

As earlier mentioned, meaning emerges through human experience. In this case Esben has been following the media coverage closely so he is aware of the situation, and thereby he has become more skeptical towards the media coverage of young people during the pandemic. When asked if the chosen article is true and fair when it describes "no responsibility" he mentions that he experiences something different than what the media describes, and thereby he does not feel affected by the coverage:

"I'm surprised that so many young people – not myself, but in general – how strictly people have been following the rules (...) I thought the youth was more rebellious. But I think they have been very good at respecting the restrictions and following the recommendations" (see appendix 4).

Furthermore, when asked *Do you recognize articles like this one?* and *What do you think when reading an article like this?,* it once again becomes clear how little the blame-game affects Esben and how skeptical he is about what is written in the articles. To the questions he answered:

"*I easily recognize it. We've heard so much about it; the youth should stop partying. I think we've heard that for a long period of time (...) I think it disappears in all the articles about the subject. I think I've become resistant – it doesn't really get to me"* (see appendix 4).

According to the phenomenological perspective, the phenomena, in this case the media coverage, cannot be separated from the subject or the interviewees/ young people. This means that indifference to the media can also be viewed as an action and an "intention" based on human experience as Husserl describes it. By ignoring or disregarding media coverage, the subject/interviewees are still in fact creating meaning.

The concept of the lifeworld cannot be ignored when analyzing the data collected from the interviews. The lifeworld or the context from which the individual interviewees approach each phenomenon they encounter, plays an incredibly important role in how they form meaning on different "topics". Since language, from a phenomenological standpoint, is one of the main mediums through which meaning is created, this also plays an important part of any news coverage and its subsequent perception. This also means that if there are discrepancies between the way the media covers a story and the language used by young people, misunderstandings are bound to arise. Although, it is probably worth noting, that young people are not likely to be the target group of most Danish media outlets.

Framing a Pandemic

It is a well-known fact about media coverage that the sender desires to shape a story in a certain way i.e., to make it more sensational or interesting to the recipients and thus get them to read the story. This theory indicates that the communicator (the media), conscious or unconscious, makes framing judgements when deciding what message to send. Framing suggests highlighting certain plot points but also to leave out unwanted points of the story, such as certain details, perspectives and statements. Thereby, the message contains frames, that are manifested by the presence or absence of certain aspects or details. This can be viewed as a way of manipulating the foundation on which the recipients draw conclusions based on what is highlighted and what is left out. In the case of the media coverage of young people's behavior during the pandemic, the main focus has been to point out all the things young people have done wrong. This was mentioned by several of the interviewees, as they explained how they felt that significant details of the coverage were missing in order to gain a truer, more factually balanced view of the situation.

All interviewees were in the interview shown statistics of the distribution of infection numbers (see appendix 1). This spurred different reactions, but the common denominator was

a general degree of surprise. The statistics showed that even though infection rates were the highest among the 20-29-year old it was only by a fraction from other age groups like 50-59-year old. By using the statistics in both the background research as well as in the interviews, it was to some extent possible to confirm the assumption that the media have in fact been using framing in their coverage. In this specific case, the media chose to push the idea that young people cause the most infection while failing to mention that the difference between them and some other age groups is virtually statistically insignificant. After learning this, Malou stated:

''Well I don't know what the numbers look like now. These figures were from September 20th, but I think that when you draw such clear lines in relation to young people and the corona, you must also have evidence for it. You have read a lot about young people during the corona, especially young people in Copenhagen, and when the difference is so small it just seems a little silly - or not very nuanced at least'' (see appendix 8).

When asked about the same statistics, Esben answered:

"*To me it looks like the problems are over-dramatized (...) Yes, there are many cases within 20-29, but it's very close to other groups. This could suggest an overreaction*" (see appendix 4).

From this statement, it can be deducted that the interviewee regards the coverage of young people as a case of framing, as there is no valid correlation between the infection numbers shown in the statistics and the emphasis or blame put on young people by the media.

An interesting aspect that came out of the interviews, is the fact that all interviewees, except Christopher, were surprised by the distribution of the infection numbers from the statistics. They all thought that young people would contribute with a higher number out of all the infected. On a few occasions, this led to frustration among some of the interviewees, specifically Laura, Malou and Tobias, and for some interviewees this frustration was not to be traced in the same way before they were shown the statistics. This is an example of how framing impacts the readers so much that even the group pointed out as scapegoats would perceive themselves as being just that. And this even though they described how they have all

followed the restrictions as well as they could. An example of this is Tobias. He described how he thinks the media generalizes even before he is shown the statistics:

"I have seen for myself how many young people have thrown big parties and have met. But I also think that when I look at my own group of friends, we have all been good at constraining ourselves. So, it's not because we don't think about anything else other than drinking and don't care about corona. I think that they (the media) *generalize in that way and describe all young people as if we only drink and party"* (see appendix 9).

Even though this was his impression, he is still surprised when shown the distribution of the infection numbers:

"That's not how I thought it would look. This is actually a bit surprising, also in terms of the way they have angled the articles. The media made it seem like there wasn't any doubt - the biggest problem layed there (with young people). *I mean, it may have been a little bigger* (the number of infected young people compared to other groups), *but the difference is not very big"* (see appendix 9).

These quotes show that even though Tobias describes a media generalization and stigmatization of young people, and even though he thinks that he and his friends follow the restrictions, he still expects young people to represent significantly higher infection numbers than those from the statistics. The way that all interviewees, except Christopher, are surprised by the distribution of the infection numbers indicates that the media has built and set a significant frame. This repeated framing has shaped the perspective of society - even of those who are the victims of the negative framing. As the interviews show, even young people who are blamed think that they are causing high infection numbers, although they know that they follow the restrictions, as most of the interviewees mention.

The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn in relation to the above mentioned is that backing news with a more complete spectrum of evidence that supports what is said was not always practiced during the COVID-19 coverage. Instead it appears that the use of sensationalizing and perhaps even fearmongering were more frequently applied, as was noted by the interviewees. Even though speculative, the idea that singling out a certain group can even cause further unwanted behavior is easily imaginable and is an unfortunate human trait.

A different approach could conceivably have improved the overall battle against the spread of the virus. This also leads to a discussion on whether or not this perception of young people causing high infection numbers would exist in society, as argued in the framing theory, if infection numbers would be posted in every article about young people.

As earlier mentioned, the interviewee Esben mentions that he is impressed with:
"*how strictly* (young) *people have been following the rules,"* and when asked if he thinks this aspect is adequately covered by the media he answered:

"*Only in a few articles written by young people themselves, I think – I can't think of anything specific, but I've come across a few call outs about young people actually doing better than described (…) but not in the broad state of media"* (see appendix 4).

By this statement the interviewee mentions a missing point of view. If the media also covered the positive perspective in addition to the negative perspective, this could probably lead to a fairer discussion rather than just a blame-game. When asked *What is your overall impression (of the media coverage)?,* he mentioned:

"*Not so good, I would say (…) I think they have focused a bit too much on the unimportant parts (…) It is a more philosophical question; how much is a life worth? How much should we give up in order to prevent someone from dying and what shouldn't we? I think this discussion is missing. That very ethical and philosophical discussion of the worth of a human life. I know the politicians don't care about it, but the media could have made that story"* (see appendix 4).

With this comment, the interviewee seeks another perspective, also focusing on people giving up a lot of things in order to save human lives. Instead of just focusing on all the restrictions and what everyone can do to prevent the virus from spreading, the interviewee seeks a discussion about the consequences hereof.

As with Esben, Laura also requests other perspectives in the media coverage. When asked what she thinks of the media's COVID-19 coverage, she answers:

"(...) I think it's aggravating that this is the only way we are portrayed by the media when it comes to corona. We develop as young people in relation to other people and might have another need to see people than other generations have. And especially that, I think, the media could highlight more. That it is due to a need of human contact more than it is due to indifference from our side" (see appendix 5).

In the same way as Laura, Tobias misses more perspectives from the media. According to him, it might be true that some young people have partied and neglected restrictions and recommendations, but it is far from all. As he explains:

"It might be true that some young people have been partying and have met with a lot of people, but it doesn't involve all young people. In my opinion, the majority follows them (the restrictions) *and limits the number of people they see and so on. Looking at it from two perspectives would be nice, instead of only focusing on all the bad"* (see appendix 9).

As mentioned in a previous paragraph, Christopher perceives the media coverage as one-sided. He calls for the inclusion of young people as sources instead of just being the media's target, as he describes it. He states:

"(...) include young people in the media and not just do interviews with virologists and politicians, but also interviews with young people and their impressions" (see appendix 6).

He adds that even though the media has done some interviews with young people, it feels like those interviewees have been cherry picked to further an already established narrative.

The overall conclusion gathered from the interviews is that everyone is missing different and more nuanced perspectives in the debate. Although all the interviewees express what they miss from the media coverage, even in a utopian world, there is no certainty that the blame would disappear completely. It could also be argued that the motivation of the media has in fact not been to make a scapegoat out of young people specifically, but rather that they were just the unlucky group that was made an example out of in order to unite the rest of the Danish nation in the battle against COVID-19.

Delimitations

Disregarding any notion of this project being positivistic, it is necessary for the researchers to be reflective on their own research approach as well as any obstacles encountered during the process. These delimitations have in one way or another had an impact on the final outcome of the research and are therefore relevant in order to give the reader a better understanding of the empirical world as well as the following discussion and conclusion.

Ironically, one of the first setbacks the project group encountered was also one of the cornerstones of the project itself – COVID-19. At the beginning, the plan was to interview more people and do all the interviews in person in order to obtain representable data. It soon became clear that people were more hesitant to meet up with strangers during these months even with promises of necessary safety measures. This resulted in fewer interviews of which about half had to be conducted via online platforms (Zoom).

Another problem encountered by the group was that the subject matter used to cultivate a response from the interviewees was predominantly created in the past. The reporting on social gatherings of young people spreading COVID-19 was carried out periodically throughout the year. This could create a challenge when conducting the interviews since many people would have trouble remembering past coverage or did not regularly follow news media and therefore could not visualize a pattern in reporting. For this reason, every interviewee was shown the previously mentioned article.

Furthermore, collection of the data and its analysis was at times a challenge since analyzing emotions or even getting people to talk about them is a difficult task which was even more aggravated when conducted on Zoom. For this reason, the decision to only do only seven interviews has actually proven useful because it allowed the interviewer to be more attentive and careful with the subjects. The interviewer also had to use additional or improvised questions if they noticed that the person being interviewed was being too reclusive or hesitant with their answers.

The project group also experienced some frustration with the time frame available for the completion of the project. Initially, it was desired to conduct a whole additional quantitative analysis of Danish media in an attempt to prove a level of stigmatization or bias. But with the development of the project and further discussion it became clear that time restraints would

not allow this additional effort. Also, the duration of the project did not allow the group to be very selective with the choice of the interviewees.

Additionally, there were a few minor setbacks that the group experienced such as the language barrier and the combination of interviews in person and on Zoom. Most of the group members are native Danish speakers while only one member is not. Since the project is in English this did not present a lot of problems, but it required some additional planning with the division of tasks regarding the interviews and their interpretation since they were in Danish to obtain the most authentic responses possible. Also, switching between interviews in person and on Zoom demanded more or less attention when observing the interviewees and the same regarding the effort in regard to the questioning.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the possibility of this research not being objective, or representative is very apparent to the project group. Using a sample of only seven people is not considered large enough to faithfully represent a population or a group and the enclosing circumstances greatly influenced the choices made during this research. This is also the reason why phenomenology has been applied. Still, this project can prove to be an interesting look into the mindset of young people during taxing situations like the current pandemic.

Discussion

This part of the project will be based on the data gathered through primary sources like the qualitative interviews and secondary ones like the literature review and the quantitative data (statistics). The results will be discussed with respect to the aforementioned theoretical frames in an attempt to further develop the themes discussed throughout the project.

The first things to be discussed will be the technical aspects of the project such as the data collection and the group dynamics. As previously mentioned, many similar studies related to disease and placing blame, have focused on quantitative data. Since this project is focusing on qualitative data, surveys were not conducted - they would also not be representative due to limited resources. Another data collection method that has been disregarded is focus groups. Although focus groups are qualitative, the dynamics between the interviewees can affect the outcome of the data. For this reason, the group considers that individual interviews were the preferred choice even when taking into consideration the possible lack of quality due to the inability to conduct some of them in person. Furthermore, even though the process of

translation may have caused additional complications and perhaps a minimal amount of meaning getting lost in translation, it was worth it in order to collect the most representative responses from the interviewees whose mother tongue is in fact Danish. Using Danish in combination with individual interviews provided the interviewees with the most comfortable surroundings as possible. It is fair to assume that this would allow the interviewees to feel more relaxed and open with their responses. The project group itself was mostly made up of young Danes with only one member being an international student. Problems like the language barrier were already discussed in the limitations part of the project but the group considered the following would fit best into the discussion. Since the project group consists primarily of Danish students, this brought on the possibility of certain biases in relation to the topic of the project. On the other hand, having an international member of the group was useful in the sense that it brought some balance when discussing topics that were so close to the rest of the members as a sort of sounding board for potential biases.

Secondly, when talking about the results themselves, the problem of group affiliation is still present. Is being a part of a certain age group something that you deeply relate to and therefore perceive bias against? Can the different perceptions of the "blame" truly be described by the interviewees' relation to their age group? Is it relevant whether or not they feel emotionally attached to the age group as a collective or just demographically and in numbers and statistics?

As mentioned earlier, COVID-19 made the sampling of interview persons challenging. Since the project focused more narrowly on the age group of 18 to 24-year old, it would be the most beneficial for the final data if all ages were represented in the interviews. However, due to the current situation, this was not possible, which is the reason for the lack of representation of the ages of 18, 19, 20 and 24. This definitely could have had an impact on the outcome of the analysis of the interviews. Usually there is a big difference between an 18-year-old and a 24-year-old both as far as the mental state and life situation. As it was pursued from the beginning of the project to do all interviews in person, it might have been a better strategy, keeping the changing COVID-19 situation in mind, to just decide on virtual interviews from the beginning. In this way it might have been possible to collect more interviewees - and for them to represent a wider spread in age.

Another reflection emerged after the analysis of the interviews. It was clear that the interviewees noticed a more extensive focus on young people when asked how they

perceived the general news coverage of COVID-19. This led to a reflection of whether this bias is only apparent when interviewing young people or if for example 40-49-year old would have the same overall impression of the media coverage. This could be a way of confirming if the hostile media effects had its impact on the perception or not. One should bear in mind that it might be more beneficial to choose an age group that does not represent opposite values as young people. It is imaginable that older people at the age of 65+ might already have a negative image of young people as can be explained by their lifeworld. Thus, this lifeworld could easily impact their perception of a narrative in the media. Otherwise, one could interview representatives from the entire age spectrum in order to create a full picture of the overall perception of the media coverage on COVID-19. Then afterwards the answers of the different age groups could be interpreted both separately and collectively with framing and the hostile media effects theory in mind. This could possibly reveal the same outcome as in this project as well as bring other nuances or maybe it could result in a completely different outcome and final conclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project sought to answer the research question *How do young people receive the media discourse regarding their social gatherings during COVID-19?* In order to answer this, it was decided to base the exploration on qualitative data collected from single person interviews. Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological framework, meaning that the individual's creation of meaning as determinative for the final perception was the leading perspective of the analysis. As with the phenomenological approach, the theories of framing and hostile media effects were used to understand, analyze and unfold the perception of the interviewees.

In general, this project reached a few central conclusions. Firstly, it can be concluded that all interviewees, except Esben, mention the coverage on young people and their behavior when asked to describe their overall impression of the news coverage on COVID-19. The findings could be explained by the hostile media effects where a certain group, in this case young people, experience a bias and stigmatization against them. Most importantly, this finding can be interpreted as one of the most concrete revelations found through this research. Based on the fact that most of the interviewees noticed a pattern in reporting when it comes to people their own age, it is safe to assume an existence of such a trend. The reasons or motivation behind this could be debated to a far greater extent but a possible prediction could simply be

as a means for the media to increase readership. As explained through the news values, there are certain principles that are used to determine what makes an event newsworthy. More often than not, following those principles will potentially result in more people showing interest in a story. While these are speculations, the aforementioned pattern in reporting was noticed by a statistically large number of participants that act as grounds to make these conclusions. This can at least be done to in the extent of this project since the sample was not large enough to be representative on a larger scale. However, since the phenomenological approach is ideographic in its nature, a broad generalization was never the end goal.

Furthermore, the analysis found that the emotional responsiveness to this reporting differed greatly depending on the interviewee, without a clear sign of prevailing feelings on the matter. Some interviewees like Christopher or Laura showed clear signs of annoyance or even worry when talking about the subject, while others like Esben seemed to barely be fazed by the reporting or the statistics. Further comparison shows that this could be connected with the amount of news consumed on the subject. The participants who said that they regularly follow the news on COVID-19 had stronger opinions on the matter than their 'saturated' counterparts.

Moreover, when talking about such negative topics, the idea of improvement comes up quite naturally. From the participants' answers, the researchers learned that most of them were irritated by the statistics they were shown during the interviews. When they learned that, although the highest, the percentage of infected young people was only slightly bigger than some other age groups, which seemed to make most of them upset. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that instead of looking for a scapegoat, using and emphasizing factual reporting would possibly evoke more responsibility in young people instead of placing them into categories that increase their chances of revolting.

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