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# Cultures of COVID-19: Marginalized Young People's Experiences of a Global Pandemic in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom

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This article attends to cultures—and cultural geographies—of COVID-19. Through a large-scale, qualitative, comparative study with 180 marginalized young people (aged—ten through twenty-four) in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, it reframes debates about the “impacts” of COVID-19 on different demographic groups. Rather, one of the article’s key contributions is to attend to the centrality of cultural practices and popular cultures involving creativity, play, belonging, embodiment, and emotion. Building on recent scholarship in cultural geographies on these themes, and on an identified lack of engagement with popular cultures in human geography, it (re)evaluates notions like obsession, addiction, identity, and transgression. By doing so, importantly, it adopts a very different perspective from predominant scholarship that positions such phenomena as medicalized, pathologized “problems” (especially for young people). Beyond the specific context of COVID-19, the article therefore extends how young people’s everyday lives are conceptualized. Moreover, it offers a novel framework for further analyses of the importance of (popular) cultural practices and cultural geographies in, and beyond, contexts of crisis. **Key Words:** *children’s geographies, cultural geographies, identity and belonging, obsession, popular cultures.*

This article attends to cultures—and cultural geographies—of COVID-19. Through a large-scale, qualitative study with 180 marginalized<sup>1</sup> young people (aged—ten through twenty-four) in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, it aims to reframe debates about the impacts of COVID-19 on different demographic groups. By focusing on what we broadly term cultures of COVID-19, the article moves beyond (but does not seek to efface) how the pandemic and associated lockdowns magnified socio-economic inequalities. On one hand, it offers a fundamental and nuanced rethinking of assumptions about young people’s everyday responses to lockdowns by reevaluating notions like obsession, addiction, and the transgression of rules that were so prevalent in media and policy representations of young people. On the other, it turns the lens away from the impacts of COVID-19 on different demographic groups, and onto

processes of identity construction, community-building and (popular) cultural lives that took place among those groups. These we frame not only as forms of resilience, adaptation, and coping (Moawad and Andres 2023), but as cultural practices involving creativity, play, embodiment, and emotion—the latter two of which have in particular been an established focus for cultural-geographic scholarship (Davidson and Milligan 2004) for at least two decades. Moreover, based on research from 2023 to 2024, the article situates cultures of COVID-19 within wider historical purview, including, for instance, different experiences of crisis before, during, and after the pandemic.

Scholarship on the impacts of the pandemic has proliferated. Very quickly, geographers and others mapped how COVID-19 and associated lockdowns amplified existing social, economic, and geographical inequalities (Goes, Ramos, and Ferreira 2020; Nassif-

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Pires et al. 2021; Turok and Visagie 2021; Tebet, Abramowicz, and Lopes 2022; Clark, Muñoz, and Auerbach 2023). Indeed, social geographers outlined an urgent need for intersectional analyses—both on immediate exposure to the disease and associated morbidities, and how lockdown measures generated additional intersectional burdens for marginalized groups (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020; Ho and Maddrell 2021; Matamanda, Dunn, et al. 2022; Maddrell, Ho, and Lobo 2023). Moreover, there has been widespread agreement that the needs and voices of children and young people—particularly from monetary-poor and minoritized backgrounds—were virtually ignored (Cortés-Morales et al. 2022; Holt and Murray 2022). Although they are less likely to be affected medically by respiratory viruses like COVID-19, recent research has highlighted the negative effects on children and young people's mental health, educational outcomes, and physical activity (e.g., Mitra et al. 2020; Rajmil et al. 2021). Hence, scholarship attending to the impacts on young people of COVID-19—particularly during the pandemic—has emerged rapidly.

Research about aspects of young people's identity formation and everyday cultural practices (e.g., around food or digital media use) has been dominated by research in psychology, public health, and cognate disciplines (Adams et al. 2020). Despite the importance of this work, as we outline later, this means that debates about young people's identities and everyday cultural practices have become dominated by sometimes normative, medicalized, and pathologized approaches to issues such as addictive behaviors and the transgression of lockdown rules. Indeed, when it comes to addictive and obsessive behaviors there is comparatively very little scholarship by geographers or other scholars of childhood and youth outside the psychological disciplines (whether COVID-19-related or not). Such expressions of identities and cultural practices matter generally, and mattered even more during COVID-19—both because of the ways in which addictive or obsessive behaviors were articulated by (adult) policymakers and media commentators, and because of the (often hidden) ways in which young people used such behaviors as key ways to cope with lockdowns and the manifold impacts of the pandemic.

In the preceding contexts, one of this article's key contributions is to supplement, challenge, and reformulate notions such as addiction and transgression by

attending far more deeply to young people's cultural practices. We use the term *cultural* fairly loosely, and as articulated by young people themselves, in context—cognizant not least of ongoing debates that have circulated within human geography about the term (e.g., Rose 2021). More broadly, we open an agenda for researching not only “cultures of COVID,” but how everyday cultural practices emerge, persist, or recede in significance during times of crisis. Given concerns about the multiple, compound crises facing current and future generations of young people (e.g., Kelly, Brown, and Goring 2023), we seek to shift the dial beyond notions of coping, resilience, and adaptation to attend to how young people create, play, communicate, and (re)generate themselves, their friends, and their families.

As we outline in the next section, this requires a twofold engagement with and development of scholarship in cultural geographies: on one hand, extending a long line of work on creativity, play, embodiment, and emotion that has become a mainstay of contemporary geographical writing; on the other hand, responding to recent calls to address the curious absence of popular cultures—including those of young people—from cultural-geographic scholarship (Horton 2019, 2024). As we demonstrate in this article, popular cultures play out in and are contextualized by particular kinds of spaces (including public spaces and youth centers) and spatial policies (specifically the boundaries and regulations introduced during lockdowns). Moreover, our empirically informed analyses of themes such as obsession and transgression offer conceptual languages toward the development of scholarship on popular cultures in geography.

To exemplify the preceding approach, we focus on in-depth research with 180 young people from Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, in the years since COVID-19. We provide a much wider spatial and temporal lens than the majority of previous studies of young people and the pandemic. Although we draw out some key comparative elements, our focus on cultural practices means that we do not attempt to do so in a fully systematic way, and particularly in ways that might enable representative generalizations about COVID-19-related policies or broader socioeconomic or political processes (see Andres et al. 2025 for more systematic comparative analyses). Rather, we explore how particular articulations of key themes such as obsession emerged in complex ways across the three countries

in sometimes similar, sometimes differentiated ways. In each of the three themes in the empirical section of the article, we draw out comparisons in terms of key terms, concepts, societal norms and expectations, or emotions that young people discussed. Hence, we demonstrate the considerable value of a “nexus” approach through which cultures of COVID-19 are placed within the contexts of multiple, compound crises that tie together the lives of young people in different parts of the world as much as they differentiate them. We do, however, in conclusion, draw out key points of comparison in terms of the social and geographical patterning of young people’s experiences.

In what follows, after exploring in more depth existing literatures on COVID-19, childhood and youth, and popular (cultural) geographies, we outline the methodology of the project on which this article is based. The remainder of the article analyzes in depth three key themes that we propose could be part of a framework for future research: obsession, transgression, and identity and belonging.

## Geographies of COVID-19, Childhood and Youth, and Popular Cultures

In this section, we review relevant, broader geographical scholarship on COVID-19, before turning to emerging research on COVID-19, childhood and youth, and (popular) cultural practices. From the outset, a key area of interest in geography was in the intersectional burdens and outcomes placed on particular demographic groups (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020). Within that work, geographers—particularly feminist geographers—argued that the pandemic was intensifying already-existing forms of marginalization and oppression, such that (for instance) women from economically disadvantaged, minoritized backgrounds were experiencing further challenges (Ho and Maddrell 2021; Maddrell, Ho, and Lobo 2023).

Connected with debates about the “multiple intensities” of COVID-19 (Maddrell, Ho, and Lobo 2023, 385), geographers have charted the changing conditions and experiences of time and temporality, especially during lockdowns. For Ward (2020), the pandemic saw the annihilation of time by space, with “waiting” characterizing anything from the banal work involved in queueing at supermarkets to the intensification of delay, loneliness, and isolation experienced by migrants in border spaces

(Ward 2020; Jones 2022; Moawad and Andres 2023). COVID-19 also saw manifold other temporalities take hold, again with differential impacts. For instance, attention has turned to the slow violence of intersectional burdens on female academics (Carruthers Thomas 2024) and how COVID-19’s lumpy, nonlinear, uncertain timeframes unevenly affected the ways racialized groups felt about their futures (Grove et al. 2022).

Hence, a fairly considerable body of work has already developed around COVID-19 and time and resonates with our own research with young people. Rather than repeat these findings, we seek to further develop notions of pandemic and lockdown temporalities toward the differential experience and articulation of identity and obsession. Doing so offers a rather different lens on the emotions and affects of the pandemic to which geographers have begun to attend—focusing thus far mainly on the politicized atmospheres that circulated at national scales via public health campaigns (e.g., Yu 2024). Instead, our work responds to recent calls in cultural geographic scholarship on embodiment to attend to the “geographies closest in” (Browne 2021, 151)—to intimate geographies of activities like hand washing (Glad and Axelsson 2024). Consequently, we build on geographical scholarship to highlight how, across the very different geographical contexts of Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, young people felt about and contributed to such emotional and affective geographies (particularly tied to notions of “belonging”) through a range of cultural practices that extend work on community and care during COVID-19 (e.g. Clark, Muñoz, and Auerbach 2023).

### (Geographies of) Childhood and Youth in/and COVID-19

Notably, research about children, young people, and COVID-19 has been dominated by medical and psychological research into the health outcomes of the pandemic, which we also review and critique here. Before that, though, we offer an overview of rapidly emerging geographical (and related social-scientific) scholarship on children, young people, and COVID-19.

Cortés-Morales et al. (2022) set out an agenda for research on geographies of childhood and youth, in/and COVID-19. The authors identified several key areas for future scholarship, to which this article

responds in part: inequalities experienced by children as a generational group, intersected by other characteristics; changing mobilities and routines; the heightened invisibilization of children and young people; differences in digital access, particularly for learning; and specific methodological and ethical issues involved in researching with young people during the pandemic (on the latter, see also Lomax et al. 2022; Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2024; Krishnamurthy et al. 2024). With a similarly broad purview, Percy-Smith et al. (2022) offered one of the only comparative studies of young people's experiences of COVID-19, although with a (albeit important) politicized emphasis on social action, agency, citizenship, and rights. The issue of young people's (reduced) rights has been a focus in other studies, which have strongly criticized how many lockdown policies simply seemed to disregard young people, beyond provision for their education (Holt and Murray 2022; Million 2022; Christou, Theodorou, and Spyrou 2023; Kwon and Lee 2024; Andres et al. 2025).

In this light, a key aim of geographical scholarship about children and young people (which reflects the broader, foundational aims of subdisciplinary children's geographies) has been to listen to their voices and experiences of the pandemic. Within these rapidly emerging literatures, three areas with broad relevance to this article stand out. First, amidst a larger public health research focus on disruptions to children's physical activity (e.g., Mitra et al. 2020; Rajmil et al. 2021), more critical studies have focused on innovations in children's play and leisure. For instance, Mukherjee (2021) outlined how children's rainbow drawings and teddy bear hunts offered narratives about their leisure practices during lockdowns that demonstrated how young people participated in acts of good citizenship (Clarke and Barnett 2023). Similarly, Russell and Stenning (2023) offered a critical but affirmative study of children's play (beyond simply accounting for their levels of physical activity). Drawing on Deleuzian concepts of desire, they outlined how encounters between bodies and material spaces—such as kerbs—afforded "moments of being well" for children (680). In this article, we look beyond play (and the activities of younger children) and seek to draw out similarly nuanced, critically informed, and (in some cases) affirmative accounts of other aspects of young people's lives—including their accounts of obsession, transgression, and identity and belonging.

Second, there has been emerging geographical research about children, young people, and community during COVID-19, on which this article builds. A central focus, which builds on cultural geographers' wider engagement with the digital (Osborne and Jones 2022), has been on charting digital geographies of care and community: from young people's use of TikTok in Sydney to nurture relationships (McLean, Southerton, and Lupton 2024), to children's use of community radio to offer care for their communities as "community change agents" in New Orleans (Brownell 2023, 55). Interestingly, this work on children's digital geographies of care and community again focuses on social and political action (as per Percy-Smith et al.'s 2022 broader study). This article, however, is also interested in other aspects of children and young people's everyday digital cultural practices, beyond expressions of citizenship or political action.

Third, building on this argument about cultural practices and the cultural geographies of COVID-19, children's geographers (as well as childhood and youth studies scholars) have also examined to an extent time, emotions, and identities. Interestingly, much of this emerging work explores how these key frames are interlinked as young people attempted to navigate life-course transitions during the complex and often confusing temporalities of COVID-19 lockdowns (Bobba et al. 2023; Walsh et al. 2023). As with wider work on emotions and embodiment in social and cultural geography, there has been attention to the different temporal scales and registers invoked through the COVID-19 years—from everyday routines (Barn, Sandhu, and Mukherjee 2022), to the blurring of child and adult in "incomplete" transitions (Gavin 2022), to shifting dispositions to the future (Kelly, Brown, and Goring 2023). Critically, despite the development of these innovative approaches to combining analyses of time, emotions, and intersecting identities, Scott et al. (2023) called for larger scale, qualitative studies of young people's experiences of COVID-19—a key gap that this article addresses.

As anticipated earlier, another important issue that this article broaches (and which geographical research on young people does not) is that most COVID-19 scholarship on children and young people is medicalized, being dominated by the psychological and medical sciences and by approaches that

attempt to evaluate and measure impacts and behaviors. This is particularly the case for behaviors that young people themselves told us in our study were “addictive” or “transgressive,” but that mattered to them in a whole range of ways. When it comes to identity (and intersecting forms of marginalization), characteristics such as income, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity are used as demographic variables rather than articulated as aspects of lived experience. Hence, for instance, many studies have explored how mental health outcomes, substance use, diet, and stress were all adversely affected or exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdowns for young people from minoritized groups (e.g., Salerno et al. 2020; Krueger et al. 2021; Nosek 2023). Similarly, scholarship on young people’s addictive behaviors during lockdowns has cohered around the finding that such behaviors (e.g., around online gaming, smartphone use, and substance consumption) increased across a range of geographical contexts, particularly for young male adolescents (Alimoradi et al. 2022; Han et al. 2022). Although research has touched on how young people assessed and managed lockdown rules and risks (e.g., Albers 2023), there has been a greater focus on evaluative measures of whether young people complied with rules in different contexts (Nivette et al. 2021).

All of this work offers vital insights into the multiple impacts on children and young people of COVID-19. It also raises critical questions, however, about important aspects of their experience—namely identity formation, rule transgressions and addictive behaviors—that have neither been adequately addressed by scholarship in children’s geographies and childhood or youth studies, nor (particularly) in more medicalized research. On one hand, that latter scholarship evaluates young people on a range of outcomes, with identity characteristics being used as variables. By contrast, we flip that approach by emphasizing how young people *articulated* their identities (whether referring to such demographic or protected characteristics or not). On the other hand, we seek to take a less evaluative and normative view of concepts such as transgression and addiction. Rather than assume that such behaviors are necessarily negative (although they might be), we add nuance and complexity to how such concepts and cultural practices are understood by young people—sometimes as potentially positive or generative, at least in contexts of crisis. This is particularly the

case where the kinds of obsessions we articulate in this article extend beyond the most widely understood (and pathologized) addictions, such as substance use, Internet use, food consumption, and gambling (for a brief discussion of the latter in recent children’s geographies scholarship, see Mills, Ash, and Gordon 2024).

### Toward Geographies of (Popular) Cultural Practices

These points about obsession also connect with a final, broader, conceptual contribution of this article—to geographical scholarship (particularly in social and cultural geographies) on popular cultures. Within long-standing and established cultural-geographic writing on the emotional, affective, and embodied aspects of everyday lives (e.g., Laurier and Philo 2006; Bissell 2025), popular cultures, popular cultural artifacts, and multiply-/mass-mediated popular cultures have been curiously absent (Horton 2024). There are some key exceptions, some of which focus on the geographies of young people (e.g., Dittmer and Dodds 2013; Keighren and Norcup 2020; Woodyear and Carter 2020). As Horton (2024) argued, however, social and cultural geographies “are haunted by absences and silences: the peculiar, troubling, persistent effacement of so many popular cultural forms, scenes, figures, materialities and moments from the written canon of Human Geography” (815). Such absences are problematic not only because they efface how popular cultures matter to (especially) everyday geographies (Horton 2010). Rather, there is a double exclusion here: of popular cultural practices, and their spatial expression, that are deemed (at least by some commentators) to be too frivolous, ephemeral, or banal to warrant serious academic attention; and (not by coincidence) of an understanding of the importance of popular cultures to demographic or identity groups whose own experiences have been marginalized in disciplines like geography—including young people.

As Horton (2024) argued, one response—which is conceptual, political, and empirical—is to simply make popular cultures visible, whether by listing (as he does) or through research with producers and consumers of popular cultures (as we do in this article). Another is to attend to the emotional, affective, ethical, and political demands of those popular

cultures—(for instance) the joy, anxiety, fear, exclusions, and senses of belonging that popular cultures beget; again, we pay close attention to these kinds of feelings in articulating young people’s senses of belonging and isolation, obsession, and transgression, in what follows. As Hastie and Saunders (2024) argued, though, there is also a need to develop new languages to explicate the (hidden) geographies of popular cultures. They argued that popular cultures have a “role as a vector for, or entry point into, encounters with places and people, and as a producer of spatiality and social relations,” using the term “(em)placement” to “identify the complex overlaps, imbrications, and interlockings between social, cultural, and technological actors/actants” (Hastie and Saunders 2024, 685, 687). The term *emplacement* refers superficially to the ways in which entities (in this case, popular cultures) are placed “somewhere”. We demonstrate in this article some of this placing, as young people express places that mattered to them in their experiences of lockdown. Borrowing from the geological use of the term, however, popular culture “bubbles up, filling empty spaces, providing potentially valuable deposits for future explorers of the depths of the human experience; [meanwhile, it] functions as a set of dynamic practices that inform, shape, and co-create various milieus of meaning through performance and reception” (Hastie and Saunders 2024, 689) Again, we demonstrate some of this bubbling up and dynamism as young people expressed the emergent ways in which they dealt with COVID-19—both individually and collectively.

Finally, although not a principal contribution of this article, we note that two of the research teams and case study countries are situated in the majority Global South (in Brazil and South Africa). Although this article is not directly framed by decolonial approaches, our broader conceptual, political, and methodological frameworks (the latter detailed in the next section) are—and particularly within modes of participatory and dialogical practice that originate in Paolo Freire’s scholarship. Hence, in focusing on an understanding of popular cultural practices coconstructed with young people, across the three countries, our work sits within and adds further empirical weight to emerging postcolonial, decolonial, and related perspectives on children’s geographies that address and complicate the age-based assumptions and, especially, dichotomies inherent in more simplistic understandings of age (and

youth) originating in the minority Global North (e.g., Khan 2021; Nairn 2024; for a detailed review, see Blazek 2024).

Critically, in this article, we draw on the preceding calls for and framings of research on popular cultures in human geography in general, and cultural geography in particular. Importantly, though, we also develop—via our extensive and intensive work with young people—a conceptual language based around terms such as *obsession* that can enable further theorization of how popular cultures comes to matter, in and beyond spatial processes.

## Methodology

This article is based on a major, three-country qualitative research project that explored the experiences of vulnerable young people in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The project focused on young people aged—ten through twenty-four, living in what are considered to be marginalized or minoritized communities in each country, often characterized by intersecting forms of vulnerability (e.g., income, ethnicity, gender, and dis/ability). We worked with young people living in urban communities, such as peripheral housing estates in the United Kingdom, townships in South Africa, and favelas in Brazil. In Brazil, we worked in São Paulo (particularly in two of the largest and longest established favelas: Heliópolis and Paraisópolis); in South Africa, in Botshabelo (a previous homeland that was segregated during the apartheid time and accommodated Blacks only) and Bloemfontein, working with students at the University of the Free State; in the United Kingdom, we focused on the West Midlands (particularly Birmingham, which demographically is one of Britain’s most diverse cities).

The project not only aimed to examine the impacts of the pandemic but to explore young people’s agency, forms of adaptation, creativity, and everyday lives; as Jeffrey and Dyson (2022, 1331) put it, their attempts to live “viable lives” under conditions of uncertainty and compound difficulty; and, as we frame them in the rest of the article, as cultural practices articulated as obsessions, transgressions, and identity and belonging. We adopted a multiscalar approach, zooming in through iterative work packages. Early phases (discussed further in Andres et al. 2025) comprised a comprehensive,

comparative, desk-based global and national mapping exercise of relevant academic and policy documents, and a total of ninety in-depth interviews with key adult stakeholders in England, South Africa, and Brazil including policymakers, nongovernmental organization practitioners, and social activists.

Although we draw on findings from the early phases, this article is based predominantly on vulnerable young people's own narratives. In total, we engaged 180 children and young people across our case study regions in a program of in-depth, multi-method, qualitative research (forty-four in Brazil, forty-nine in South Africa, and eighty-seven in the United Kingdom). Although not intended to be a fully representative sample, the young people involved broadly reflected the demographic characteristics of each region; more information about young people's intersecting identity characteristics is provided alongside their narratives, later in the article.

The three in-country academic teams developed a common methodological, ethical, and analytical framework. The framework centered around two elements: (1) an individual or group in-depth, semi-structured interview, which lasted on average—sixty to ninety minutes, and (2) a visual mapping exercise, where young people were asked either individually or in small groups to take photographs or bring objects representative of their experiences, which were then placed on a large sheet of paper for them to map the “nexus” of different issues (e.g., food, play, leisure, and socializing) that mattered to them (drawing on Kraftl et al. 2019). To more fully involve young people in the coproduction of the research, we worked with core teams of young people who acted as co- and peer researchers. For instance, in São Paulo, fourteen young people from the Observatório de Olho Na Quebrada, in Heliópolis, who had previously self-organized in undertaking research mapping of their communities, took part in early group discussions about the methods; in Birmingham, fourteen young people from the city's Youth Voice team of the Birmingham Youth City Board participated in detailed co-researcher training, undertook peer research, and coanalyzed data. All data collection adhered to a common ethical framework (nuanced to reflect local practices and regulations), approved by all of the partner universities taking part in the research, and informed by decades

of geographical scholarship discussing best practice in research with children and young people (e.g., Kraftl et al. 2021).

In terms of positionality, our approach to coproduction meant that each of the in-country teams was already embedded within and had prior relations with the groups of young people with whom we engaged. We acknowledge that we all hold positions of relative privilege (as financially secure academics working in well-respected universities) when compared with the young people who took part in our research. We would also note that as the research took place in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, we all brought “baggage” and assumptions with us—whether from media coverage about young people in each country, or from our own (often emotionally laden) experiences of the pandemic. Moreover—and despite these potential differences—we also recognize that, collectively, we brought to the research a commitment not only to hearing young people's voices and understanding their cultural practices during COVID-19, but to amplifying those experiences in subsequent policy recommendations we made at national and international scales. Hence, in each setting—and based on our prior knowledge of and work with different youth organizations and the adults who ran them—we had to carefully negotiate these different aspects of our positionality through detailed preparation, training sessions with young people (where we learned as much as they did about the research process), and involving young people and stakeholder organizations in processes of data analysis.

Data from each work package were analyzed thematically, initially on a country-by-country basis, before being integrated via iterative rounds of coding in team meetings. Repeated, in-depth team meetings (in-person and online) were central to the process of developing and comparing themes across the case study regions. We organized a series of whole-team meetings through which a series of key thematic codes from each country were put forward, tested, and refined; further team meetings were dedicated to the development of each theme in turn, with individual team members responsible for collating, comparing, and systematizing the analysis for a specific theme. We paid particular attention to what we have broadly labeled cultural practices—for instance, not only looking at the intersecting impacts on (particular groups of) young people, but their own

articulations of identity through COVID-19; not only for example assessing access to or problematic consumption of food during lockdown, but the everyday, often shared meanings, feelings, and cultural practices associated with them. This led us to identify three themes that emerged powerfully but differentially across the three countries: obsession, transgression, and identity and belonging.

## Cultures of COVID-19: Obsession, Transgression, and Identity and Belonging

The remainder of this article analyzes young people's cultures—and cultural geographies—of COVID-19. Given the qualitative nature of our research, we do not purport to offer a representative view or comparison of young people's experiences in each country. Nevertheless, we outline key similarities and differences in the ways in which forms of obsession, transgression, and identity and belonging were articulated across Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

### Obsession as Coping and More: “Feeling Good, but a Bit Crazy” During “Lost Time”

Across all three countries, government-imposed lockdowns or social distancing measures left many young people confined to their homes—often their bedrooms—for long periods. As argued earlier, scholars of childhood and youth have begun to attend to the multiple temporalities and emotions associated with being locked down (Barn, Sandhu, and Mukherjee 2022). Significantly, our study uncovered some similar experiences but found that these were experienced differentially by geography and (particularly) gender. For instance, in the United Kingdom, young people represented lockdowns ambivalently—both as time lost and time gained. Omar,<sup>2</sup> a Black eighteen-year-old male from Birmingham, expressed his frustration at losing an entire school year:

I missed out a crucial year, which is Year 10 ... when we have work experience, where we prepare for our GCSE [exams], so I missed on so much, just because of the COVID pandemic; it took such a hard toll on me ... on [the] mental health side of things.

Looking back, though, he also reflected:

I didn't realize how the pandemic also supported me in growing as an individual, giving me the foundation to develop the base skill I had.

The exceptional time of lockdowns gave other UK young people the opportunity to explore new interests and grow their passions away from the pressure of school routines:

To be completely honest, with hindsight, I think, I actually had a really, really good luck during lockdown, I ... actually found myself reminiscing it quite a lot. ... I've been incredibly fortunate to have so many opportunities ... like, having more time to figure out, you know, what I want to do. ... Throughout lockdown, my creativity, it overflowed ... I just got like *really really into things* like drawing stuff, like. ... And I think without that, I wouldn't be able, I wouldn't have found like the passions I have now that I would go on to pursue, if that makes sense. (Christiane)

Again, young people were often ambivalent about COVID-19. For Christiane, a seventeen-year-old White female from the English West Midlands, these contrasting experiences were especially heightened, both in the development of passions and obsessive behaviors such as taking substances and “edibles” (food and drink infused with cannabis). Although Christiane’s is a more extreme case, many young people in the United Kingdom (as well as in Brazil and South Africa) appeared to reproduce wider societal anxieties (among adults) of “lost learning” and a “lost COVID generation”; by doing so they internalized representations of youth as a time for acquiring skills and transitioning into roles necessary for being “productive” within a neoliberal economy such as the United Kingdom (compare Kelly, Brown, and Goring 2023). Looking back on lockdowns a couple of years prior to the research, young people contextualized their experiences both within the expectations they felt were placed on them at the time, and within attempts—particularly in the United Kingdom via so-called catch-up funding<sup>3</sup>—to address those “lost” and “unproductive” pandemic years.

Importantly, some young people—especially girls—experienced intersectional burdens that both blurred their experiences of being a child with the responsibilities and demands of adults (Gavin 2022) and that in all three countries, but particularly in South Africa, impinged on their domestic and social lives. Dimpho and Tindo—both Black young people in their twenties from Botshabelo in South Africa—

highlighted the impacts of COVID-19 on their social lives, and particularly the ways in which in their township lockdown restrictions were especially harsh. Dimpho, however, highlighted the additional burdens (as a young woman) placed on her to undertake household chores to support her mother and younger siblings.

Oh yes, my mother would cook once when we were at school, then she would eat with the children, then we would eat if there were leftovers, and we were forced to cook for dinner because the children would be hungry before they slept.

We couldn't go out anymore. We could not go and relax at the park or go to the library. We couldn't even meet up with our friends. So for me, COVID really affected my social life more than anything.

These kinds of experiences exemplify how challenges related to vital resources—such as preparing and eating food—also formed part of what was “lost” during COVID-19, as some young people went hungry. Extending the experiences of young South Africans, some young girls in Brazil recounted that they had to “mature early,” particularly where family members had become ill. These experiences led to multiple stresses for minoritized and vulnerable young people (e.g., Salerno et al. 2020; Krueger et al. 2021; Nosek 2023). As the second quotation attests, these impacts also extend into a sense of loss for the social and cultural aspects of life: for the missed parties, concerts, and the banal, everyday, embodied aspects of simply hanging out with others (Pyyry 2022). We return to some of these aspects of living with COVID-19 in the next section.

More broadly, young people across all three case study regions talked about how they marked time through confined spatial experiences, which were characterized by both the stilling of time and space in boredom (Anderson 2021) and a sense of waiting not only associated with longer term transitions (Kelly, Brown, and Goring 2023), but the immediacy of inactivity (Bissell 2007). As Bissell (2007) argued, however, waiting—and what some young people characterized as “empty time”—is relational and characterized as much by activity and potentiality as dead time. Therefore, in the rest of this section, and inspired especially by the sense of ambivalence expressed by Omar and

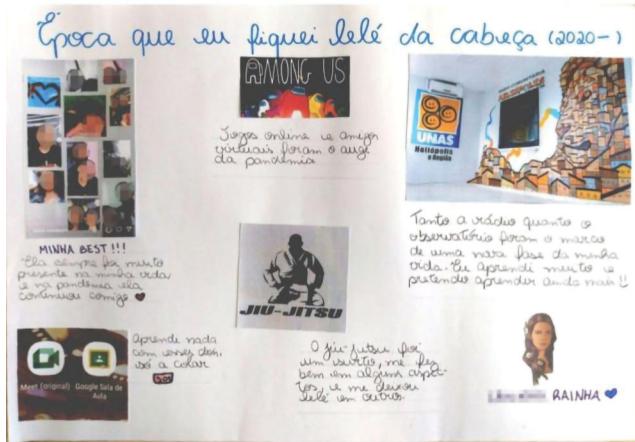
Christiane, we consider a specific but vital way in which young people coped with “lost” time through a more generous, generative understanding of obsession. It is here that the importance of popular (and especially digitally mediated) cultures “bubbles up” in young people’s experiences of spatial restrictions, confinement, and isolation (Hastie and Saunders 2024).

In Brazil, many young people reported obsessive practices (using the term *surtos*, in Brazilian Portuguese) during the lockdown period. As one young person mentioned, as well as a sense of loss, “[b]eing at home as an obligation *me deixou surtada* [made me crazy].” In this context, they (and young people in the United Kingdom and South Africa) mentioned becoming obsessed by or “addicted to” things like learning new cooking skills, playing interactive video games all night, or learning a new language or sport alone through YouTube and other digital platforms.

Notable here are the multiple, perhaps conflicting intensities of COVID-19 (Maddrell, Ho, and Lobo 2023)—as, for instance, some arguably more privileged young people were able to spend time, out of choice, becoming obsessed by the very activities—such as cooking—that were framed as a burden and compromise for others. Hence, the opportunity to frame a particular activity as a cultural practice and leisure activity—rather than yet another domestic chore—illustrated the divergent patterning of lockdown experiences and spaces across social and geographical contexts.

On the other hand, and pursuing our aim to develop conceptual languages of young people’s (COVID-19-related) popular cultures, we were struck by the specific language used to describe such cultural practices—as young people used highly self-aware, perhaps satirical, but certainly colloquial understandings of “being obsessed by x or y.” Whether or not knowingly deployed in the context of pathologized, scientific definitions of obsession or addiction (as reviewed earlier), this language not only describes forms of coping or adaptation during COVID-19 but a playful rendering of both individual and shared experiences that made their lives (slightly) more livable.

In Figure 1, Adrianne, a White seventeen-year-old female from Heliópolis, explored some dimensions of obsession. She reflected on an online game

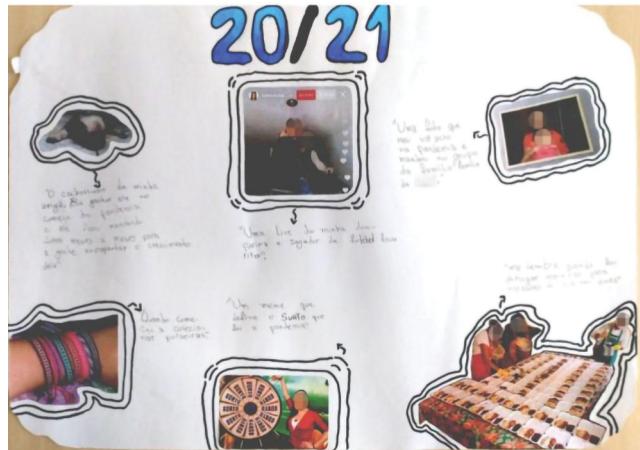


**Figure 1.** Visual web from Adrienne, Heliópolis, age seventeen, female, White, focusing on a popular online game (top center).

popular during the pandemic in Brazil and elsewhere, called Among Us. Adrianne wrote, "Online games and virtual friends were the peak of the pandemic." The picture in the bottom center represents the sport jiu-jitsu, for which she was attending online classes. Adrianne said, "Jiu-jitsu was a 'surto,' it made me feel good in some aspects and left me 'lelé' [a bit crazy] in others."

In Figure 2, the picture in the bottom center of the visual web is a woman with a roulette wheel where *surto* is written in every segment. Maya, a fifteen-year-old White female from Heliópolis wrote, “A meme that defines the ‘surto’ that was the pandemic.” Indicating other activities she was compulsively practicing, there is a picture of the bracelets she made (bottom left) and a video of a couple whose Instagram account she followed (top center). In addition, she represented a picture of her friend’s newly adopted dog (top left) referring to his sharing daily picture via WhatsApp so they could see his growth—indicating how these obsessive practices were also relational with peers.

By contrast, the South African findings—more so than those in Brazil and especially the United Kingdom—emphasize the digital divide inherent in the Global South, and the differential patterning of obsession. Of the forty participants from Botshabelo, only eight mentioned that they became obsessed with social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Molle (female) and Zanda (male), both Black young people from Botshabelo, talked instead about how—given their circumstances—they did use phones but that TV was also an important source of information and entertainment.



**Figure 2.** Maya's visual web, showing her compulsive making of bracelets and use of Instagram.

My consumption increased, I watched a lot of TV and was always on social media using apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, etcetera. (Molle)

Before I used to watch TV, use my phone and the Internet but used books more, during COVID my usage of these increased because we relied on TV and our phones for updates, I also used a little bit of YouTube to study. After, I now rely on videos to help me understand subjects. (Zanda)

Given the patchiness of digital access in South Africa, most mentioned that watching TV was the major pastime they got obsessed with. Stembile, a twenty-two-year-old Black female from Botshabelo, recounted, “I used to be indoors watching television because we were not allowed to be in the fields due to the lockdown.”

Young people's obsessions were not, however, all (solely) digitally mediated. Food, for instance, became an obsession among young people across all three countries. Whereas others complained of not having enough food, some respondents found comfort in eating as they had nothing else to do at home. In South Africa, Micah, a twenty-year-old Black female from Botshabelo, indicated that "it was very painful for me. I felt very isolated from my choir family. I substituted singing by just staying indoors and eating." Likewise, John (a twenty-one-year-old-Black male from Botshabelo) mentioned that "during Covid, I ate more, still had three meals a day but there was a lot of snacking. I used to want a lot of junk also. After COVID, we have kind of reduced our eating because either we have a big lunch and miss dinner or eat lunch very late then skip dinner."

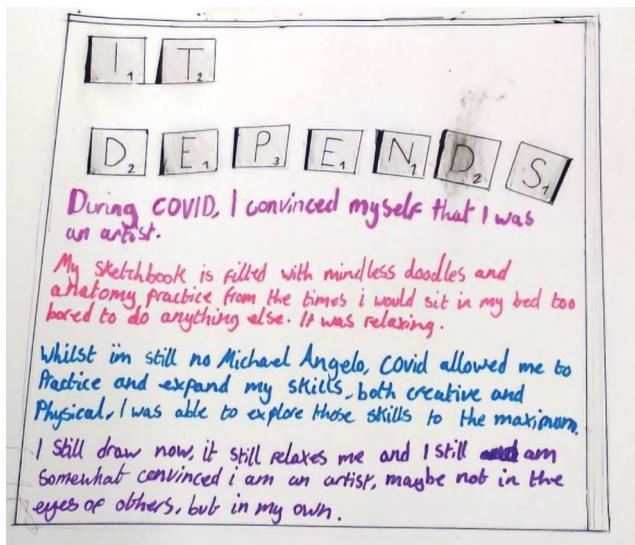


Figure 3. Christiane's visual web, outlining how she became convinced she was an artist during COVID-19.

Christiane, a White seventeen-year-old female from the West Midlands, who was quoted earlier, expanded on how art—like food—was for her a generative obsession. So meaningful was this practice that she physically brought along her sketchbook to the research activity and included it in her visual web (Figure 3). She explained obsession in the sense that she became “convinced” she was an artist, exploring those skills to the “maximum”—while noting that with hindsight, it was (and now is, without the intensity of COVID-19) equally important that art provided the opportunity for “relaxation.” Indeed, with the opportunity to look back, Christiane characterized how such experiences felt so much more intense for many young people, elevating cultural practices—like art—from something relaxing to the level of an obsession. She also articulated this “passion” within a broader, honest account of her identity and social positioning, and her journey of self-discovery during, through, and after the pandemic:

I was so insecure, so desperate to be liked that I changed myself ... to try and get others to like me. Because I was bullied in school as well, you know .... It took me a while to actually rediscover who I was, and that was an interesting process, um, but it was better than having the pressure from just around me, within school and stuff. I hardly spoke to anyone during lockdown, I obviously didn't do my work, I just, I hardly even left my room, it was just, myself, so

I didn't have to conform to who I thought my mum wanted me to be, kind of thing. It was just me, and who I wanted to be.

Hence, cultural practices came to matter in ways that extended beyond how, for instance, popular cultural fashions matter in the lives of young people during less “extraordinary” times (Horton 2010). We have, in this section, sought to frame obsession as a cultural practice, patterned by the often ambivalent spatial and temporal constraints and opportunities of COVID-19 lockdowns. As we develop a conceptual language for interrogating how (young people's) popular cultural practices and spaces matter, especially during times of crisis, it is important to recognize how the colloquial use of words like obsession or *surto* was a linguistic device used to frame particular kinds of leisure experiences, as well as obsession with cultural practices (e.g., being “convinced” they were artists). Obsession was also a means to cope and adapt with the pressures—whether societal or self-imposed—of loss: of lost time, lost access to physical and social spaces, lost opportunities to socialize, and lost learning. Again, obsession was not simply framed as good, but ambivalent: something that both include but exceed binary, medicalized, and often moralizing notions of healthy versus harmful behaviors,, where obsession can make you feel “good” and “a bit crazy” at the same time; something that makes you waste and gain time alike; something you “get lost in” and find purpose through.

Finally, however, as we have already suggested, these senses of ambivalence are produced by and must be set into the broader geographical and social contexts of young people's experiences, as well as their own longer term biographies. Even within the relative socioeconomic disadvantage faced by all of our participants, what for one participant was an obsession was for another an obligation—perhaps starkly differentiating between those who became addicted to cooking videos on YouTube and those who had no choice but to (learn to) cook for their families. These experiences were contextualized by longer term conditions of vulnerability that varied across the three case study regions: from the compromising of informal food networks in South Africa during lockdown, to the ongoing effects of austerity policies in the United Kingdom, to then President Bolsonaro's closing of a number of social programs aimed at reducing hunger in Brazil. These

wider contexts become more evident in cultural practices associated with transgression, which we analyze next.

## Transgression

Building on cultural-geographical scholarship on these themes, this section presents a deeper analysis of the embodied, emotional ways in which young people transgressed, resisted, or otherwise circumvented lockdown restrictions—both as and through cultural practices that involved often careful spatial strategies. It also draws out significant differences in attitudes to transgression among the three case study regions. As we have already indicated, scholarship on young people’s responses to lockdown restrictions in terms of their play, mobilities, and socializing has tended to focus on the creative appropriation of space for play, and (more normatively) the extent of “rule-breaking” among young people. Building on both sets of work, we explore more overt (and not only “playful”) forms of transgression that might have been desirable, generative, or even necessary for young people to live viable lives during lockdown (Jeffrey and Dyson 2022) given the kinds of social and geographical contexts in which they were living. Moreover, as we argue in the final section of our analysis, some forms of transgression—although not all—might also have enabled forms of communal belonging, care, and community building that could mitigate the effects of COVID-19. As Rowan, a young ambassador for a UK charity, argued:

I do remember that we elaborated rule-breaking strategies during the lockdown in order to go to each other's houses. ... For fourteen- and fifteen-year-old kids, that meant the world to them. This really helped them stay afloat because you can't lock a thirteen-, fourteen-, fifteen-year-old child in their own homes with no other form of entertainment. (Rowan)

Understood thus, rule-breaking strategies were not only posited as an assumed psychological facet of young people’s “need” to break the rules or resist adult forms of governance but as a crucial form of socialization that enabled young people to “stay afloat.” Although the “need” for entertainment might be understood as a specific facet of (some) twenty-first-century lives, the point here is that more extreme forms of boredom, lack of stimulation, and isolation can have significant effects on a person’s health and well-being (Rajmil et al. 2021).

As we have already argued, forms of addiction to and obsession with a range of cultural practices characterized one set of responses to such boredom and isolation. Young people in our study, however—across the three countries—outlined a range of complex and nuanced forms of transgression. Although not ignorant of the risks of their behaviors—particularly of transmitting COVID-19—they highlighted why and how rule-breaking was necessary, especially when it would have fairly minimal health risks to others. Indeed, interestingly, despite the need for socialization, some young people engaged in individual cultural practices in public spaces outside their homes. In Heliópolis, Bernardo, an eighteen-year-old male from Heliópolis, mentioned that he started practicing capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian art and ancestral bodily practice that is associated with resistance, self-defense, and identity preservation. He mentioned how it was a strategy of stimulating his body and mind through meditation on a slab near his house, from where he could watch the sky and the sunset (the picture in the center of [Figure 4](#)). He wrote a traditional song from capoeira: “*Eu vou encontrar o sol, canarinho da Alemanha quem matou meu curiô* [I’ll find the sun, the German canary killed my curio].”

In the rather different context of the Caribbean, Noxolo and Niaah (2022) demonstrated how histories, geographies, and politics of in/security are wrapped up with spaces and practices of dancing, such as dance halls (to which we return briefly later). In both contexts, however—and recognizing that capoeira involves song, martial arts, and spirituality as well as dance—opportunities for



**Figure 4.** Bernardo's visual web, focusing on his practicing of capoeira in particular private and public spaces (shown in the photographs) during lockdowns.

transgression and creativity among Black communities combine to generate forms of security within insecurity in “discursive, corporeal and visual modes” (Noxolo 2018, 40). These are, as Noxolo (2018) argued, forms of (bio)power that, unlike precarity as an effect of governmentality, are understood as negotiations of agency within compound constraints (for Bernardo and many other young people in our study, the ways in which lockdown measures amplified forms of racial, social, and economic marginalization).

Building on these forms of negotiated agency, and mirroring long-standing research in children’s geographies (e.g., Matthews et al. 2000; Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2021), many young people highlighted a pressing need to transgress spatially. Ronaldo, a seventeen-year-old Indigenous male from Paraisópolis, noted, “[t]he virtual class on the cell phone was very bad (demotivating) and I would leave the cell phone on and go out and play ball on the broken-in courts.” A head teacher from a local school in the community of Heliópolis also mentioned the use of the school’s court by young people, because there was a (historical) lack of leisure and cultural spaces in the area. Again, although broadly supportive and keen to empower young people, she explained how this arrangement had to be constantly negotiated—and presented a range of challenges—as young people often used the space for parties and left garbage.

We get there on a Monday, it’s awful, there’s a condom, a can of beer, a tip of marijuana. It’s difficult, the PE teacher has a class there on Monday at 7 a.m. So there are a series of conflicts that arise from trying to open the school. We’ve been talking to the neighbors, to get to know the kids who are there: “If you organize yourselves properly, I’ll leave the bathroom key with you.” But it’s something that takes time. (Head teacher from an elementary school from Heliópolis)

Whereas transgression was woven into the (popular) cultural practices of young Brazilians, by stark contrast, in the United Kingdom, young people did not talk much about rule-breaking during interviews, even if prompted. In fact, many criticized transgressing COVID-19 restrictions as selfish and inconsiderate, showing a rather normative attitude. There could be various interpretations of these views—not least, the performative dimension of interviewing, which could have affected interviewees’ disposition

to talk about transgression. Nonetheless, some participants did highlight that they had “heard about” peers’ rule-breaking practices, putting them in a context of lockdown restrictions that ignored young people’s needs. Again—as with obsessive practices—some young people felt rather ambivalent, “understanding” to an extent transgressions such as partying, but “not completely”:

Yeah, no, people in COVID were rebelling. Like people my age would still have parties. They’d go up and smoke. They’d drink at such a young age. I didn’t, but I know some people my age was like, oh yeah, I don’t care about anyone, I only care about myself. Because I think, you know that phrase, like, if you have a strict parent, you’ll rebel more. ... Which, I think, was a bit insensitive, but at that age, you know, like ... people needed it. So yeah, no, I, I understand it in a sense ... because it was hard times ... not completely, but I understand. (Sunita, West Midlands, sixteen, female, Asian)

The South African context was different again. There, the army and the police were deployed to enforce lockdown restrictions, particularly in communities like Botshabelo. Recounting again the intersectional burdens of lockdowns, young people from Botshabelo lamented that they patrolled their neighborhoods and seemed to be on the lookout for transgressors. Zuda, a twenty-year-old male, pointed out that “we were instructed to stay strictly within our yards and it was broadcasted on the news that we were not going to school. I saw more police outside patrolling the streets.” Many young people, however, went out to play on the streets or went to malls during curfews:

There was one time when I was at Shell garage after hours, and they [the police] gave me, along with the people I was with, tickets that fined us R3000.00 [approximately US\$150]. Others, when they broke the rules, would get beaten up by the cops so that a person could go home. (Rama, twenty-four-year-old male from Botshabelo)

This quotation illustrates the lengths to which young people went in trying to access play and leisure spaces and how important such cultural and leisure practices were to them in trying to cope with the spatial restrictions of lockdowns. However, there was an important gendered perspective to how the police treated girls and boys. As Dimpo (a young woman, cited earlier) explained, “Girls were treated

better because if girls were outdoors, police officers would just keep quiet, but if it was a boy they would tell him to go indoors."

Moreover, the wearing of masks in public spaces was heavily enforced in South Africa. Yet many young people did not take heed. One young person from Botshabelo indicated, "Yes, I did (transgress). The police abused us. I remember one day I went to the shop and forgot to put on a mask, they were very rude to me and treated me very harshly." For those not wearing masks "the police would pick you up and take you to the police station then you would be given a letter that shows they have given you a fine, then you go to court with it and had to pay, it costed R180." Reflecting to an extent the ambivalence expressed by UK participants, however, Masudi (a twenty-two-year-old Black male from Botshabelo) commented that the transgression by some young people was out of ignorance: "I think most children did not understand why there were rules or restrictions." Masudi's point echoes wider emergent findings that risk communication during COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa was ineffective and marginalized certain groups, and actually prompted increased incidences of transgression (Matamanda, Nel, et al. 2022).

In this section, we have highlighted how some young people in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom felt the need to transgress—via (popular) cultural practices such as dance, play, and partying—given feelings of boredom and sociospatial isolation. Experiences and perceptions of transgression varied in each region, however, with (again) a greater sense of ambivalence about transgression in the United Kingdom and South Africa. Yet regardless of their views on the transgression of lockdown restrictions, the preceding accounts show powerfully that in each country—as, indeed, in most contexts globally—lockdowns exposed the lack of leisure, play, and cultural spaces for older young people, particularly in more peripheral urban areas that are often densely populated and have—in some cases for decades—been marginalized in terms of services and infrastructure (Eboo Alwani, Day, and Kulkarni 2024). As a young male from Heliópolis pointed out, this lack of opportunities for young people, combined with the extension of free time because schools and other institutions they used to go were closed, led to overcrowding and underage drinking in specific spaces like the "baile funk" (parties in which popular Brazilian funk music is played

that are a cultural expression of marginalized communities; compare Noxolo and Niaah 2022, on dance hall in/securities). In other words, the pressure on such cultural centers exemplified the lack of provision for diverse groups of young people, and hence lack of attention to their rights for sufficient spaces for play, rest, leisure, and recreation (as per, e.g., Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; see Casey and McKendrick 2023; Andres et al. 2025). Transgression—understood in the ways articulated in this section—is, then, a second core component of a conceptual language for understanding the geographies of (young people's) popular cultures, because it matters to them. Young people framed rule-breaking as crucial to both their own health and well-being, as well as a necessary evil that enabled them to provide support for others in their community. It is to that need—and to expressions of care and belonging—that we turn in the final part of the article.

## Identity and Belonging

In previous sections, we have argued that young people's cultural practices and spatial agency during COVID-19 were characterized by forms of obsession and transgression. Implicitly, such experiences affected young people's senses of identity and their feelings of belonging (or not) within family, friendship, and community spaces. In this final section, we analyze how a range of cultural practices resonated with and helped young people to directly express senses of belonging and identity—not only in terms of popular cultures or common interests, but in terms of their values, spirituality, and religious beliefs (the earlier capoeira example also reflected this). We bring new insights into how everyday cultural practices and spaces enabled (and constrained) young people to articulate their identities in building viable lives during the pandemic.

During COVID-19, religious institutions extended beyond their usual roles to provide many kinds of support for young people and their families. This was particularly evident in South Africa, although was an important trend across all three countries and in many other contexts globally (Andres et al. 2025). As Thembie, a twenty-year-old Black female from Botshabelo, put it, in reflecting on the intersectional challenges affecting her family:

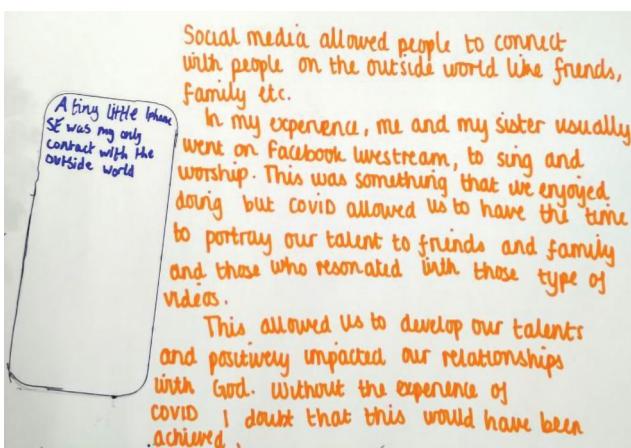
My mom nursed a sick person that had an amputated leg in section J [area of Botshabelo] and she was

getting paid for it, but during COVID the family of the person took her and my mother didn't have a job anymore. This was in 2020. My father lost his job in late 2019. So, when it came to food, we were helped a lot by the church because we went to school, my sister didn't work. ... So, because the shops were closed, [church representative] would buy us food.

In addition to the role of religious organizations providing vital support for young people, young people opened up about a range of ways in which their own religious identities and practices mattered, and in turn could support others. These in turn intersected with their investment in popular (digital) media cultures. Accompanying her visual web in [Figure 5](#), Yasmine, a Black seventeen-year-old female from the West Midlands, talked about how

[s]ocial media allowed people to connect with the outside world like friends, family, etcetera. In my experience, me and my sister usually went on Facebook livestream, to sing and worship. This was something that we enjoyed doing, but COVID allowed us to have the time to portray our talent to friends and family and those who resonated with those types of videos. This allowed us to develop our talents and positively impacted our relationships with God.

Yasmine's experiences resonate with earlier work on the geographies of young people and religion, affording a sense of her agency (Hopkins et al. 2011; Hemming and Madge 2012). It extends that work, though, by illuminating the ways in which her use of digital media in live-streamed performances formed a part of intra- and intergenerational religious identities. Yet, these experiences were not only about expressions of, or contestations around,



[Figure 5](#). Yasmine's visual web, explaining how Facebook was key to her individual and collective sense of religious identity.

religious identities. Rather, Yasmine argued that their singing and worship offered both opportunities for connection and belonging, and strengthened their belief—such that senses of community and spirituality mattered as much as the more representational aspects of performance on social media (Quinones and Adams 2021; Horton 2024).

Again in the United Kingdom, other young people highlighted the importance of religion to senses of family and community belonging. In her visual web (not shown here), Sunita, whom we heard from earlier, wrote simply “culture + religion—sense of community and belonging.” Above that, Sunita included a picture of her favorite Indian food, *pav bhaji* (a spicy vegetable curry with buns). Critical here is an embedding of culture and religion again not only in performances or displays, but—building on earlier points, in terms of the importance of food—in banal, material, everyday (but vital) geographies of eating (Zara et al. 2022). Sunita noted:

*Pav bhaji*, it's an Indian dish; it resonates with me because, it just keeps me with my culture. We've been having it since I was quite little, so, I enjoyed having it with my family, like, I just remember me and my family sitting at the table, having like some *pav* and just talking and everything. We had that during COVID, too, and I still eat it today, I so love it!

Hence, food encapsulated senses and spaces of cultural identity and belonging. The *pav bhaji* image, which Sunita placed within a wider web connecting family practices, culture, religion, and community, represented her Hindu culture, which “got (her) through” COVID, and it mattered profoundly in the years before and after.

Beyond—although not necessarily excluding—religion, young people in Brazil and the United Kingdom connected the lack of things to do, and obsession, with their efforts to actively build and support communities through specific cultural and leisure practices and spaces in their communities.

Within his visual web (and not readable in [Figure 6](#)), Rodrigo, a Black nineteen-year-old male from Heliópolis wrote:

Everything in these photos correlates with the pandemic. That's where I got a job and started going out more because times were very difficult in our slum. Through my work, I was able to help the community where I was born, doing various actions: handing out masks, alcohol gel and we also handed out condoms, female and male, for sexual prevention. And my



Figure 6. Rodrigo's visual web, showing how various aspects of obsession and belonging came together for him in a community space in Heliópolis.

hobby, outside of work, was playing ball, but it was not just any hobby, to this day it's my therapy and snooker is also part of that. Snooker is where I meet up with friends to chat and have a laugh.

Rodrigo's words neatly draw together much of what we want to argue about young people's (popular) cultural practices and cultural geographies during COVID-19. Key to Rodrigo's narrative is a sense of "correlation" between young people's social agency and volunteering, the importance of that work (supporting other young people's sexual health), Rodrigo's investment in snooker (as therapy, not only a hobby), and this leisure space as a key place for socialization. As with other examples from Brazil and elsewhere, Rodrigo highlighted that playing snooker (another pursuit that could be added to Horton's [2024] list of popular-cultural phenomenon ignored by cultural geographers) continues to matter to him and his friends, even after COVID-19 lockdowns ended.

Finally, Rodrigo's experience also speaks to wider reflections from young people on the treatment of gender identities and sexualities during the pandemic. In dialogue with young people in Brazil, among the various criticisms of schools and educational policies during and after the pandemic, particular attention was drawn to the difficulties schools faced in addressing issues of sexuality and gender. These reflections pointed to the limited availability of spaces for listening and support within educational institutions. Importantly, these issues—and the burdens they placed on some communities—

were once again intersectional (Ho and Maddrell 2021). The pandemic experience, as well as engagement in collective actions—such as those led by young people in Heliópolis—enabled greater awareness of intersectional dynamics: "We realized, during this time, that there is intersectionality in Heliópolis, that there's a profile of people who are the pillars of the community—women, heads of households, mostly Black and single mothers" (Jonathan, twenty-two, male, Black). Indeed, in response, during the pandemic, the observatory group conducted a local research project on the burden placed on young Black women, due to the accumulation of caregiving responsibilities and income generation.

By contrast, in the United Kingdom, young people spoke about intersectionality but in terms of their engagement with, and the importance of, digital spaces, which offered important opportunities (rather than challenges) during COVID-19 lockdowns. They also discussed intersections between age, gender, and dis/ability (particularly neurodiversity) more than intersections with ethnicity. Online platforms, especially during lockdown, offered young people spaces to explore and experiment with gender identity. In contrast with the more pathologizing literatures outlined earlier in the article, gaming, as a cultural practice, provided a playful yet meaningful way to try out different roles and presentations. Ivy, a twelve-year-old White female from the English West Midlands, told us:

Brookhaven is like a role-play game where you can dress up as what you want to do. I decided to dress up as a boy the once. Someone came up to me and said, (mocks the voice) "Do you want to be my girlfriend?" I said, "Okay." So I followed them home, obviously you're not in real life, and she told me to follow her upstairs ... (laughs)

Through games and digital content, young people engaged with alternative narratives and found language to describe their experiences—sometimes in contrast to the limited recognition they encountered in offline spaces, especially school (connecting with the challenges faced by young Brazilians in finding support, outlined earlier). Alex, a seventeen-year-old White, autistic, transgender male, recounted being bullied at school and how he felt safer at home during lockdown. Alex articulated his experience within the (for him) difficult process of becoming an "(un)diagnosed autistic trans man":

I used to get bullied really bad in high school. So, and I used, and one time it was so bad that I was, like, beat up in the corridor just for being there. Because they didn't like me at all, so I definitely liked being at home better, and I used to get myself in trouble so I could stay at home. So COVID was like my favorite time. ... Honestly, it sounds terrible, but I want coronavirus back. I want it back. I want to be at home. I want to do my work from home, on my laptop, just type it up all nice and be happy and chill and just relax.

In summary, as well as reflecting the importance of “looking back” at COVID-19 with young people, this section has highlighted the vital—but hitherto virtually unexplored—role of cultural practices and geographies for young people during COVID-19. Such practices were not only intrinsically important to young people, but also formed key pillars for their wider social agency during the pandemic and their expressions and understandings of (gendered and sexualized) identities.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed how 180 young people from Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom reflected on their experiences of living with COVID-19 and associated lockdowns. In distinction to much research about young people, it has sought to emphasize not only their perceptions, feelings, and actions, but the centrality of (popular) cultural practices in terms of phenomena (e.g., obsession) that are too often medicalized, pathologized, and normalized in academic scholarship. Consequently, it has explored, in depth, the cultural geographies of COVID-19, wherein the cultural practices that young people articulated were ineluctably linked to the spatialities of lockdown and adaptation, and to the (often marginalizing and disempowering) social and geographical contexts in which they lived—from dealing with isolation at home, to spatial strategies involving the transgression of rules in outdoor spaces already lacking in services and infrastructures, and from the significance of particular cultural or community spaces, to the creation and maintenance of senses of belonging across spatial scales. Although the spatial processes and practices that we have examined in this article are significant across a range of geographical and social contexts, we would urge geographers (and others) to further extend their analyses of the diverse

ways in which cultural practices come to matter during crises—and how those practices are very often “emplaced” (Hastie and Saunders 2024).

This article offers a framework and, we hope, a stimulus for further analyses of the importance of cultural practices and cultural geographies in and beyond contexts of crisis. Thus, its contribution is not only to call for, and evidence, a move away from the impacts of a crisis on young people, nor to simply celebrate their resourcefulness or agency. Rather, we argue that conceptualizations of obsession, transgression, and identity and belonging that we have developed in this article offer important prompts for thinking through the ambivalent, uncertain, changing ways in which cultural practices such as cooking, drawing, or worshiping might unfold during a crisis, but also before and afterward. Future research could seek to carefully, critically, and comparatively draw out other aspects of young people’s cultural lives and practices that are similarly pathologized and normalized, particularly in times of crisis—not limited to, but including, their use of a range of digital and social media.

A further critical frame developed in this article—lacking from much scholarship on young people and COVID-19, but reinforcing the importance of a geographical perspective—has been the focus on examining experiences of young people from Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, as they look back on the pandemic. Despite the scale and ambition of our study, we do not suggest that either the young people, or the case study regions in which we worked, are representative of all young people, even in the three countries. Rather, this article has explored the multiple spatial and temporal scales at which an analysis of (young) people’s experiences of a crises might proceed in geographical scholarship and beyond. It therefore examined manifold similarities and differences in their experiences, patterned by both their geographical and social positioning—although several key comparative findings emerged in our analyses, as follows.

In terms of obsession, there were important differences between how ambivalent many young people were in the United Kingdom about COVID-19-related lockdowns and the burdens that were placed on the lives of young (especially female) South Africans. Moreover, young people from all three countries agreed that they had become “obsessed” with various cultural practices—but digital spaces and media were more important to both acquiring and expressing those practices in Brazil and the United Kingdom.

When it came to transgression, some young people in the United Kingdom were again ambivalent about breaking (spatial) rules during lockdowns, although they did indicate strategies that they had developed; opportunities to transgress were far more restricted for South African young people, where the police and army operated stricter controls. In Brazil, in particular, however, young people highlighted not only how examples of transgression were symbolic and creative (e.g., through practicing dance) but how there were efforts made by more powerful adults (e.g., teachers) to enable limited, alternative uses of public spaces during lockdowns.

Young people's experiences of identity and belonging during COVID-19 were highly diverse. Interestingly, religion mattered in all three contexts, albeit in divergent ways—in Brazil and South Africa, young people talked more about religion and religious organizations as sources of community support, whereas in the United Kingdom, those young people who did mention religion talked more about the development of their spirituality—both as individuals and as family and friendship groups. There were also important differences in how sexuality and gender intersected with other aspects of young people's identities—in the Brazilian case, ethnicity, and in the UK case, neurodivergence—to pattern their experiences of the pandemic.

In articulating the kinds of comparisons outlined earlier, and drawing on and developing long-standing work in cultural geography on emotion and embodiment, we have demonstrated young people's ability to "look across" (Jeffrey and Dyson 2022) domains of life in recounting their experience—domains including education, art, dance, religion, food, and community. Further scholarship could expand such comparative perspectives even further than we have done in this article—for instance through quantitative or social media analyses that enable larger scale, more direct, and more systematic comparisons between a greater number of countries.

Finally, and just as important, in this article, we also attend—and call for further attention—to young people's careful articulation of the complex, ambivalent, and nuanced meanings of (popular) cultural practices. Young people deployed terms like *obsession* and *transgression* that (both within and beyond the time of COVID-19) were and are aimed at them, by powerful adults, in pejorative ways. They do so in ways, though, that subvert and knowingly satirize those terms, as well

as appropriating them to demonstrate how important they were and are—in a positive sense—for their coping and adapting to challenging circumstances, including COVID-19 lockdowns. As we have argued, this means attending to the ways in which popular cultures—such as social media crazes or playing online games—matter profoundly to the experience of everyday lives and spaces. Future scholarship could explore how notions of popular cultures can be further unpicked, particularly through decolonial approaches that are developing rapidly in children's geographies, but that have similarly not yet engaged systematically with children and young people's popular cultures (see, e.g., Blazek 2024). Thus, this article not only attends to important recent calls for social and cultural geographers to engage with popular cultures (Hastie and Saunders 2024; Horton 2024)—it offers the beginnings of a conceptual language, driven by diverse young people themselves, for developing this important line of scholarship in the future.

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## Notes

1. The term *marginalized population* has been adopted, understanding that it expresses a social condition historically produced, primarily by agents and factors external to these communities, which involves high exposure to risks and significant intersectionality. Particularly in Portuguese, though, other terms could be used, such as *peripheral* or *unprotected*, for example.
2. All young people's names are pseudonyms.
3. For further details about UK Government "catch-up" funding, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/catch-up-premium-coronavirus-covid-19/catch-up-premium> (last accessed April 24, 2024).

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