

Psychological Correlates of News Monitoring, Social Distancing, Disinfecting, and Hoarding
Behaviors among US Adolescents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Key Points

Question: What are the psychological correlates of adolescent pandemic-related behaviors during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States?

Findings: In this survey study of adolescents ($N = 770$), attitudes about COVID-19 severity, social responsibility values, social trust, and self-interest were associated with news monitoring, social distancing, and disinfecting behaviors. Teens who reported greater severity of COVID-19, less social responsibility and social trust, and valuing their own self-interest over others also reported more hoarding.

Meaning: Emphasizing the severity of COVID-19 and the social implications of pandemic-related behaviors may be important for teens in the United States.

Abstract

Importance: As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, it is critical to understand the psychological factors that influence pandemic-related behaviors (i.e., news monitoring, social distancing, hygiene/disinfecting, hoarding). This may be especially important to study among youth, who are less likely to experience severe symptoms but contribute to the spread of the virus.

Objective: To examine psychological correlates of adolescents' behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design: Self-report survey conducted between March 20th and March 22nd, 2020.

Setting: This is an online survey study of youth from the United States.

Participants: A population-based sample of adolescents were recruited via social media to complete an anonymous survey. Youth were eligible if they had internet access, lived in the United States, and were between the ages of 13 and 18.

Main Outcomes and Measures: Outcomes included COVID-19 news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behaviors over the 7 days after the US declared a national emergency. The correlates measured were attitudes about COVID-19 severity, values related to social responsibility, social trust, and self-interest. The *a priori* hypotheses were that attitudes about the severity of COVID-19, along with greater social responsibility and social trust, would be associated with greater news monitoring, social distancing, and disinfecting, whereas greater self-interest would be associated with more hoarding.

Results: The final analytic sample included 770 adolescents ($M_{age} = 16.34$, 72% female). The majority of teens reported not engaging in pure social distancing (70%), but were monitoring the news (75%) and engaging in at least one disinfecting behavior multiple times per day (88%). Some teens reported engaging in hoarding behavior (19%). Greater attitudes about the severity of COVID-19 were associated with more social distancing, disinfecting, and news monitoring, but also more hoarding. Greater social responsibility was associated with more disinfecting and news monitoring, and less hoarding. Participants who reported valuing their own self-interest over others reported less social distancing and more hoarding. Greater social trust was associated with less hoarding.

Conclusions and Relevance: Emphasizing the severity of COVID-19 and the social implications of pandemic-related behaviors may be important for teens, particularly for those who are not following recommended preventative health behaviors or who are engaging in hoarding.

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The novel corona virus (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020¹ and a US national emergency on March 13, 2020. As of March 22nd, there were over 290,000 confirmed cases worldwide², and over 15,000 confirmed cases in the United States³. Current global efforts are largely focused on slowing the spread and social impact of the virus, which relies on the compliance of individuals with social distancing and proper hygiene recommendations⁴. Similarly, engagement in antisocial behaviors such as hoarding may result in broader social and medical impacts of the pandemic by limiting the availability of personal protective equipment for medical providers and by contributing to shortages of food and other necessities within communities. As COVID-19 continues to spread and overload the medical systems in the United States and in countries around the world, it is critical to understand the psychological factors that influence pandemic-related preventative behaviors (i.e., monitoring the news for updates, social distancing, and hygiene/disinfecting), along with antisocial behaviors (i.e., hoarding supplies).

We examined psychological correlates of news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behaviors among a large sample of US adolescents. Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by expanding autonomy and greater salience of peer relationships⁵, which may contribute to prioritization of peer social interactions over the current social distancing recommendations. Further, pediatric patients appear to experience less severe symptoms or asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 compared to adults⁶; thus, adolescents may be more likely to engage in behaviors that contribute to the spread of the infection (lack of

distancing and hygiene behaviors) and may be less likely to monitor emerging news stories about the virus.

Several psychological factors likely contribute to variation in the way youth are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, attitudes about the severity of COVID-19, including beliefs that COVID-19 is similar to influenza, likely vary and may further predict preventative behaviors (or lack thereof). Others have recognized the importance of community attachments—including greater social responsibility values, social trust, and prioritizing others over the self—for engagement in prosocial behavior and avoidance of antisocial behavior^{7,8}. As COVID-19 symptoms appear less severe among pediatric patients, efforts to contain the virus may motivated by community—rather than person—motives. Thus, we propose that attitudes towards the severity of COVID-19 and community attachment values will be especially relevant for adolescents’ news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behaviors given that COVID-19 poses a lower personal threat to teenagers and larger threat to others.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The initial survey was completed by 789 adolescents residing in the United States and between the ages of 13-18 years ($M = 16.34$, $SD = 1.15$). The sample was primarily 10th (19.8%), 11th (30.7%), or 12th (31.4%) graders with fewer 9th (13.6%) graders and college students (3.9%). The sample was composed of slightly more females (72.0%) than males (22.2%) with 4.9% identifying as non-binary. The sample was primarily White/Caucasian (72.5%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (15.2%), African American/Black (5.6%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (10.1%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (3.2%), or other (3.0%). As a proxy for family financial strain (Galinsky, 1999), youth were asked whether their families

had: enough money to buy almost anything they wanted (7.0%), no problem buying the things they need and can also sometimes buy special things (53.3%), just enough money for the things they need (31.8%), or a hard time buying the things they need (7.9%). A small number of participants indicated that they were unaware of COVID-19 ($n = 10$) or that their school had not yet closed and thus strict social distancing was not possible ($n = 9$). These participants were removed from analyses, resulting in the final analytic sample of 770.

Data was collected from 8:00AM on March 20th through 5:00PM on March 22nd of 2020. This study was advertised on various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit) and participants self-selected into the study and completed a 10-minute survey. This study involved no more than minimal risk and thus, passive parental permission was used. Upon selecting into the study, participants were given a link to a letter explaining the study and asked to provide this letter to their parents. All youth who provided informed assent were invited to participate. Those who completed the initial survey were entered into a drawing for a \$250 Amazon gift card. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author's institution.

Measures

Social Distancing. Social distancing was measured using 5-items ($\alpha = .70$) developed for the purpose of this study. Youth indicated the frequency at which they spent time in person with friends, extended family, teachers and neighbors, and any other person who does not live with them in the past 7 days on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). Items were reverse coded, and mean scores were calculated with higher values indicating greater social distancing.

Disinfecting Behaviors. Disinfecting behaviors were measured with 4-items ($\alpha = .64$) developed for the purpose of this study. Youth indicated the frequency at which they used hand sanitizer, washed their hands, cleaned their phones, and used disinfecting wipes in the past 7 days on a 6-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*multiple times a day*). Mean scores were calculated with higher values indicating greater disinfecting behavior.

Hoarding Behaviors. Hoarding behaviors were assessed with a single item that asked youth how often they have hoarded supplies from a grocery store or department store in the past 7 days. Responses were given on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*), with higher values indicating more hoarding behaviors.

COVID-19 News Monitoring. News monitoring was measured with a single item in which youth rated the extent to which they have followed news coverage of COVID-19 on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Higher values indicate greater COVID-19 news monitoring.

Attitudes about COVID-19 Severity. Attitudes about the severity of COVID-19 were measured with 4-items ($\alpha = .80$) in which youth rated their agreement with statements de-emphasizing the severity of the virus (e.g., “The Coronavirus is just ‘the flu’”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Response were reverse-coded and mean scores were calculated with higher values indicating beliefs that COVID-19 is severe.

Social Responsibility Values. Social responsibility values were measured with 3-items ($\alpha = .83$) in which youth rated how important it is to consider the needs of other people, make sure that all people are treated fairly, and think about how their actions affect people in the

future⁹. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). Mean values were calculated so that higher values indicated more social responsibility.

Social Trust. Social trust was measured with 3-items ($\alpha = .82$) taken from past research⁹ (e.g., “Most people can be trusted.”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were calculated with higher values indicating higher social trust.

Self-Interest Values. Self-interest values were measured with 2-items ($r = .30$) in which youth rated how important it is to put their own needs before the needs of others, and to do what you want, regardless of what other people might want⁹. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). Mean scores were calculated so that higher values indicated more self-interest.

Demographic Covariates. Adolescents reported their age, gender, race/ethnicity, parents’ education, and family financial strain. Parents’ education was recoded on a 3-point scale with 1 (*neither parent completed high school*), 2 (*at least one parent complete high school*), and 3 (*at least one parent completed college*). Participants also reported on their political ideology on a 5-point scale from 1 (*very conservative*) to 5 (*very liberal*) with an option to indicate “I don’t know”.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among study variables as well as frequencies of news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behaviors over the last 7 days are presented in the Supplemental File. Overall, only 30.5% of youth engaged in pure social distancing (no in-person contact with those outside their household) during this period. Youth frequently engaged in various disinfecting behavior, with 88% reported engaging in at least one type of disinfecting behavior multiple times per day. Additionally, a small subset of

youth engaged in hoarding behaviors (19.7%) at least a little during this time period. A subset of youth (25.8%) indicated that do not follow COVID-19 related news at all, with the remaining 74.2% following COVID-19 news at least a little.

Table 1 presents estimates from four multivariate regression models predicting adolescents' news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behaviors. Primary independent variables included attitudes about the severity of COVID-19, social responsibility values, social trust, and self-interest. Demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, parents' education, family financial strain, ideology) were included as covariates. All models were estimated using R. Low levels of missing data (< 5%) were estimated using multiple imputation.

[Table 1 about here]

When predicting social distancing and after accounting for demographic characteristics, youth who endorsed greater attitudes about the severity of COVID-19 engaged in greater social distancing. Additionally, greater self-interest values were associated with less social distancing. When predicting disinfecting behavior, youth who endorsed attitudes about the severity of COVID-19 and greater social responsibility values also engaged in greater disinfecting behavior. Attitudes about the severity of COVID-19 and social responsibility values were also associated with more frequent news monitoring. When predicting hoarding behavior, youth who endorsed greater beliefs about the severity of COVID-19 and those who endorsed greater self-interest values engaged in greater hoarding behavior, whereas those who endorsed greater social trust and social responsibility values engaged in less hoarding behavior. Significant results are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Discussion

COVID-19 is an imminent public health concern. To manage the spread and social impact of this pandemic, it is imperative that US citizens engage in preventative behaviors such as social distancing and personal hygiene, stay up to date on virus-related news, and limit their engagement in hoarding behaviors that can result in a shortage of resources for communities and medical professionals. Understanding individual differences in these behaviors is especially important among teenagers, who may be less likely to present with symptoms even when carrying the virus⁶ and who may experience greater social pressure to avoid limiting social contact with peers. Findings from this study indicate that adolescents' beliefs about the severity of the virus, the extent to which they value social responsibility, their social trust, and their prioritization of their own self-interest over others are independently associated with their news monitoring, social distancing, disinfecting, and hoarding behavior in the days following the US declaring COVID-19 a national emergency.

Results from this study have important implications for the social response in the United States to the COVID-19 pandemic. US adolescents may be more likely to engage in prosocial and less likely to engage in antisocial COVID-19 related-behavior if we emphasize the social value of distancing, disinfecting, and monitoring the COVID-19 progression, along with the social impact of hoarding supplies. While some of these values (e.g., social responsibility, self-interest) may demonstrate considerable stability and may be slow to change, targeting these psychological beliefs directly may be an effective medium to promote positive health behaviors. Emphasizing the severity of COVID-19, along with using social responsibility and the needs of others to frame messages related to the importance of preventative behaviors during the

pandemic may improve adolescents' compliance with health official and government recommendations. Additionally, framing messages to emphasize social responsibility and the interests of others, along with building social trust within communities, may serve to limit hoarding behaviors. These efforts may be aided by informing youth about potential asynchronies between the effects of COVID-19 on youth versus adults. Lastly, findings from this study stress the importance of increasing youths' social responsibility values and decreasing self-interest values as a preventative measure for future pandemics and public health concerns.

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Table 1

Regression Models Predicting Adolescent Social Distancing, Disinfecting, Hoarding, News Monitoring Behaviors

<i>Predictors</i>	Social Distancing			Disinfecting			Hoarding Behavior			News Monitoring		
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
(Intercept)	4.24**	0.38	3.50, 4.99	0.40	0.58	-0.74, 1.55	2.02**	0.45	1.15, 2.90	2.75**	0.57	1.63, 3.88
Gender: Female	0.16**	0.06	0.04, 0.28	0.17	0.09	-0.01, 0.35	0.03	0.07	-0.11, 0.17	-0.04	0.09	-0.22, 0.14
Age	-0.05*	0.02	-0.09, -0.01	0.05	0.03	-0.01, 0.11	-0.03	0.02	-0.08, 0.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.07, 0.05
Race: White	-0.15**	0.05	-0.25, -0.04	-0.01	0.08	-0.17, 0.15	-0.18**	0.06	-0.31, -0.06	0.02	0.08	-0.14, 0.17
Ethnicity: Hispanic	0.05	0.07	-0.08, 0.18	0.21*	0.10	0.01, 0.40	0.05	0.08	-0.10, 0.20	0.13	0.10	-0.06, 0.33
Family Financial Strain	0.03	0.03	-0.04, 0.09	0.07	0.05	-0.02, 0.17	0.01	0.04	-0.07, 0.08	-0.09	0.05	-0.19, 0.00
Parents' Education	0.01	0.04	-0.06, 0.08	-0.04	0.05	-0.15, 0.07	-0.03	0.04	-0.11, 0.06	-0.03	0.05	-0.14, 0.07
Ideology	0.06*	0.02	0.01, 0.10	-0.10**	0.03	-0.17, -0.03	0.01	0.03	-0.04, 0.06	-0.04	0.03	-0.11, 0.03
COVID-19 Severity	0.09**	0.02	0.05, 0.13	0.14**	0.03	0.08, 0.19	0.06*	0.02	0.01, 0.10	0.20**	0.03	0.14, 0.25
Social Responsibility	0.01	0.03	-0.06, 0.07	0.35**	0.05	0.25, 0.45	-0.09*	0.04	-0.16, -0.01	0.20**	0.05	0.10, 0.29
Social Trust	0.01	0.02	-0.02, 0.05	-0.04	0.03	-0.10, 0.01	-0.05*	0.02	-0.09, -0.01	-0.03	0.03	-0.08, 0.02
Self-Interest	-0.06*	0.03	-0.11, -0.00	0.06	0.04	-0.02, 0.14	0.07*	0.03	0.01, 0.13	-0.02	0.04	-0.09, 0.06
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.089 / 0.076			0.130 / 0.117			0.046 / 0.032			0.106 / 0.093		

*Notes: *p < .05, **p < .01.*

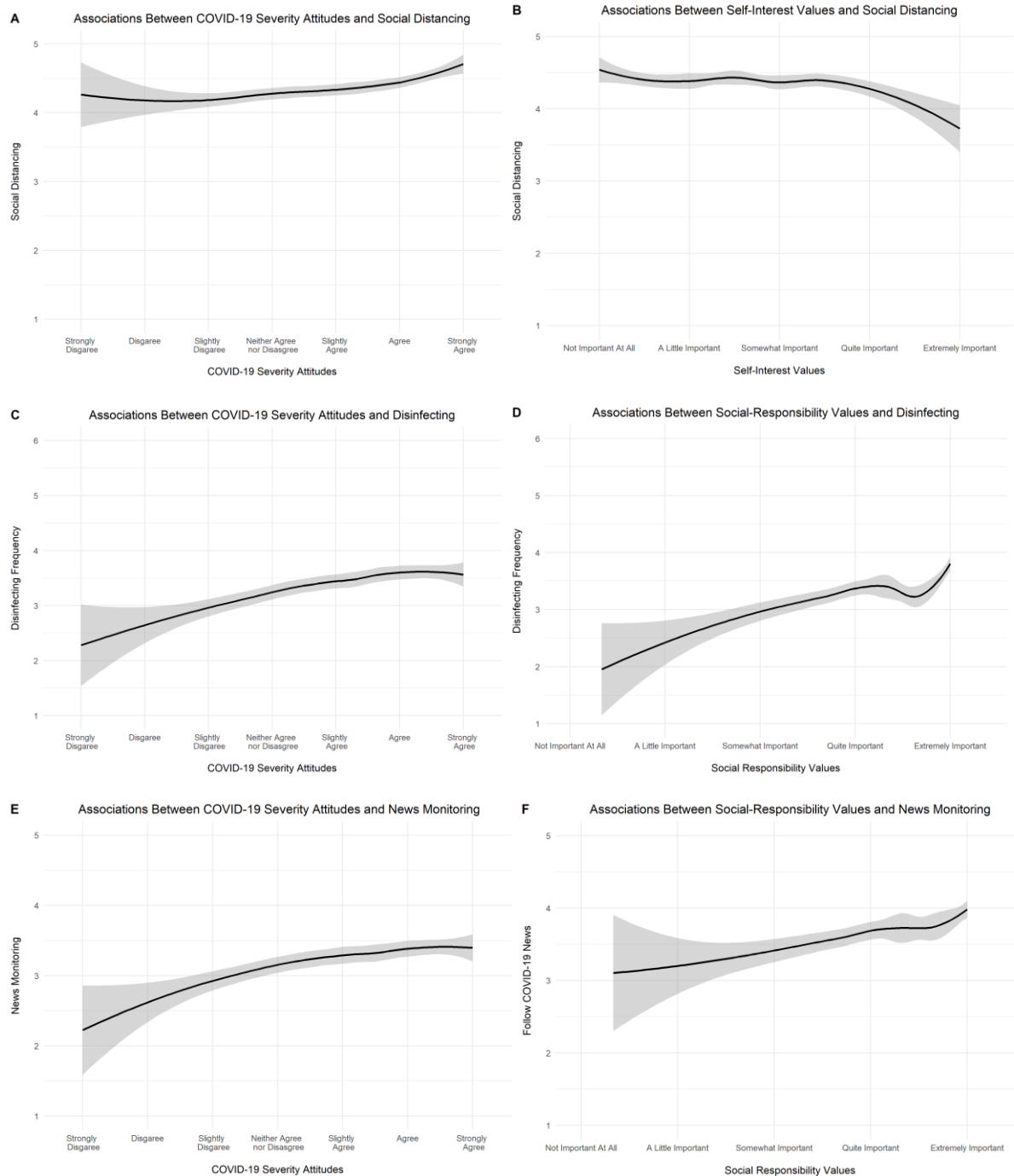


Figure 1. Figure 1a: Associations between Adolescent COVID-19 Severity Attitudes and Social Distancing. Figure 1b: Associations between Adolescent Self-Interest Values and Social Distancing. Figure 1c: Associations between Adolescent COVID-19 Severity Attitudes and Disinfecting. Figure 1d: Associations between Adolescent Social-Responsibility Values and Disinfecting. Figure 1e: Associations between Adolescent COVID-19 Severity Attitudes and Following COVID-19 News. Figure 1g: Associations between Adolescent Social-Responsibility Values and Following COVID-19 News.

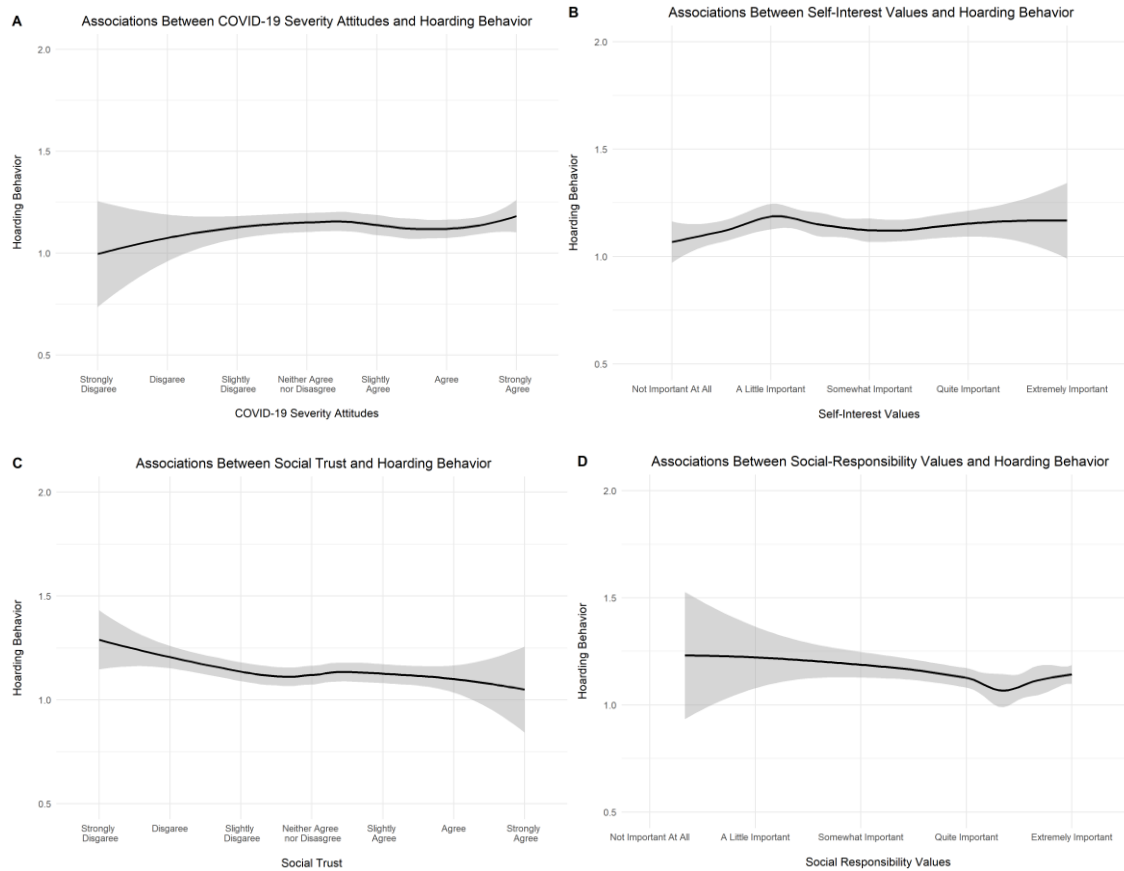


Figure 2. Figure 2a: Associations between Adolescent COVID-19 Severity Attitudes and Hoarding Behavior. Figure 2b: Associations between Adolescent Self-Interest Values and Hoarding Behavior. Figure 2c: Associations between Adolescent Social Trust and Hoarding Behavior. Figure 2d: Associations between Adolescent Social-Responsibility Values and Hoarding Behavior.

Supplemental File

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables.

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Disinfecting Behaviors.

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Social Distancing.

Table 4: Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Hoarding Behavior and News Monitoring.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Gender	-	-														
2. Age	16.32	1.14	-.02													
3. White	-	-	-.01	-.00												
4. Hispanic	-	-	-.05	.06	-.22**											
5. Financial. St.	2.59	0.73	-.01	-.00	.12**	-.18**										
6. Parent Edu	2.57	0.69	.01	-.03	.21**	-.17**	.29**									
7. Ideology	3.65	1.06	.14**	-.03	.02	-.09*	.07*	.11**								
8. Social Resp.	4.26	0.73	.13**	.02	.06	.02	-.03	.07*	.14**							
9. COVID Att.	5.13	1.28	.10**	.09*	.04	-.06	.10**	.11**	.26**	.30**						
10. Social Trust	3.91	1.25	-.02	.06	.01	-.06	.08*	.12**	.01	.13**	.06					
11. Self-Interest	2.57	0.88	.04	.00	-.10**	.05	-.09*	-.01	-.06	-.10**	-.09**	-.02				
12. Self-Distancing	4.39	0.65	.13**	-.03	-.08*	.01	.02	.02	.11**	.10**	.21**	.02	-.10**			
13. Disinfecting	3.41	1.02	.11**	.08*	-.00	.08*	.04	-.02	.01	.29**	.22**	-.01	.02	.03		
14. Hoarding	1.31	0.74	.03	-.03	-.13**	.05	-.03	-.04	-.00	-.06	.05	-.10**	.09*	.00	.01	
15. News Mon.	3.74	0.98	.01	.00	.00	.06	-.07	-.00	.05	.20**	.27**	-.01	-.04	.10**	.27**	.12**

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. COVID Att = Attitudes about the severity of COVID-19. News Mon. = News monitoring of COVID-19.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Disinfecting Behaviors

	In the past 7 days, how often have you cleaned and disinfected surfaces in your home with antibacterial wipes?		In the past 7 days, how often have you used anti-bacterial hand sanitizer throughout the day?		In the past 7 days, how often have you cleaned your mobile phone?		In the past 7 days, how often have you washed your hands for at least 20 seconds?	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Not at all	117	15.21	160	20.81	278	36.15	12	1.56
Once or twice	251	32.64	212	27.57	242	31.47	25	3.26
3 or 4 times	170	22.11	134	17.43	114	14.82	42	5.47
5 or 6 times	62	8.06	46	5.98	30	3.9	37	4.82
Daily	120	15.6	99	12.87	76	9.88	182	23.7
Multiple times a day	49	6.37	118	15.34	29	3.77	470	61.2
Missing	1	0.13	1	0.13	1	0.13	2	0.26

Notes: Total N = 770. Total scores indicated that a total of 88% (n = 676) of youth used at least one disinfecting method multiple times per day.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Social Distancing

	In the past 7 days, how frequently have you spent time with friends in person?		In the past 7 days, how frequently have you spent time with extended family members (that doesn't live with you) in person?		In the past 7 days, how frequently have you spent time with others (e.g., teachers or neighbors) in person?		In the past 7 days, how frequently have you spent time with someone else who does not live with you in person?	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Not at all	412	53.58	546	71	575	74.77	316	41.09
Once or twice	222	28.87	153	19.9	138	17.95	271	35.24
A few times	85	11.05	49	6.37	37	4.81	114	14.82
Often	27	3.51	14	1.82	12	1.56	44	5.72
Very often	23	2.99	7	0.91	7	0.91	24	3.12
Missing	1	0.13	1	0.13	1	0.13	1	0.13

Notes: Total N = 770. Total scores indicated that a total of 30% (n = 242) of youth did not spend time with any person outside of their household in the past 7 days.

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages for Adolescent Hoarding Behavior and News Monitoring

In the past 7 days, how frequently have you hoarded supplies from a grocery or department store?			To what extent are you following news coverage of the coronavirus, COVID-19?		
	<i>N</i>	%		<i>N</i>	%
Not at all	618	80.26	Not at all	199	25.84
Once or twice	98	12.73	A little	262	34.03
A few times	31	4.03	Somewhat	227	29.48
Often	13	1.69	Much	74	9.61
Very Often	10	1.3	A great deal	8	1.04
Missing	0	0	Missing	0	0

Notes: Total N = 770.