

Anxieties during Pandemic: Exploring Parallels between COVID-19 and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract:

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has led to a global pandemic with significant social, economic, and health impacts. Heightened anxiety, fear of death, and uncertainties have permeated modern life, resonating with themes explored in Don DeLillo's novel, "White Noise." This novel, published in 1985, delves into anxieties prevalent in contemporary society, akin to those experienced during the pandemic. Both contexts depict how external factors, such as media saturation and misinformation, influence behavior, relationships, and coping mechanisms. "White Noise" further examines the fear of death and fragility of human existence, echoing anxieties heightened by the pandemic. Amidst the challenges, both the novel and the pandemic illustrate human resilience and adaptability, seeking support and maintaining meaningful connections. Moving forward, addressing misinformation, promoting critical media literacy, and fostering empathetic communication will be crucial in navigating future crises and fostering mental well-being.

Keywords: COVID 19, White Noise, Anxiety

1. Introduction

COVID-19, also known as Coronavirus Disease 2019, is an infectious illness caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. It was first identified in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province, China. COVID-19 quickly spread globally, leading to a pandemic that continues to affect people worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic had significant social, economic, and health impacts worldwide. It has led to widespread disruptions, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, remote work and schooling, and strain on healthcare systems. Efforts to control the pandemic and protect public health continued through vaccination campaigns, testing, contact tracing, and public health guidelines.

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated heightened anxiety due to health concerns, uncertainty, and loss of control. The fear of contracting the virus and its potential health consequences, along with worries about loved ones' well-being, contributed to heightened stress levels. The rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic, including shifting guidelines and information, created uncertainty and a sense of unpredictability, further fueling anxiety. Additionally, the loss of familiar routines, disruption to work and social interactions, and the inability to make future plans or predict outcomes amplify feelings of distress. Coping with the persistent threat of the virus and its wide-ranging impacts has placed a significant mental and emotional burden on individuals, leading to increased anxiety during this challenging time.

This anxiety can be compared with ubiquitous presence of anxiety in the novel “White Noise”. “White Noise” is a novel written by Don DeLillo, published in 1985. While it predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it explores themes that are relevant to contemporary society and can be connected to the anxiety experienced during the pandemic.

“White Noise” also examines the anxieties and fears that permeate modern life, particularly in the face of technological advancements, media saturation, and the constant bombardment of information. The novel follows a professor named Jack Gladney and his family as they navigate their daily lives, which are marked by a pervasive sense of unease and the fear of death. Jack Gladney once says,

How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a little while? We drive a car, we teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same disguise? (88)

The anxieties depicted in the novel can be seen as a reflection of the anxieties prevalent in contemporary society, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid spread of information, often accompanied by misinformation and conflicting reports, amplified fear and uncertainty. The novel's exploration of the fear of death and the fragility of human existence also resonates with the anxieties heightened by the pandemic.

2. The Uncertainties

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people have faced numerous uncertainties, including concerns about their health, the well-being of loved ones, financial stability, and the disruption of daily routines. The constant news updates, statistics, and discussions surrounding the pandemic contributed to this anxiety levels. Additionally, the fear of an invisible threat, the loss of control, and the disruption of social connections can further intensify anxiety.

Failure of political system in acting swiftly and effectively also pushed such anxieties. Especially in countries like USA, where there are Federal and Local government institutions, key decision making was a hassle and it made people distrust the government authority. For example, Maresa Strano points out,

[t]he pandemic has presented new opportunities for Republican state governments to deploy preemption, intentionally or not, as an instrument of confusion. With so many red state mayors taking action in advance of their governors, late-arriving statewide orders have sent local authorities scrambling.... On top of general confusion, local governments fear the possibility of legal action if they maintain measures stricter than the state's. On April 2, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, reversed his position and mandated a 30-day statewide shutdown to combat the coronavirus. But the relief felt by city officials who had spent weeks urging him to take more aggressive action was short-lived. That same evening, DeSantis signed a second order that preempted any conflicting local measures—perhaps by accident. (10)

The confusions and unpreparedness of the governments and involving unscientific decision making ignoring the authorized experts created more damage during COVID-19. Resonating this attitude, characters in “White Noise” undergo similar kind of ordeal and replicate behavior that completely follows misinformation or sensationalized media output.

In “White Noise” the fear of death is a pervasive undercurrent throughout the narrative. Characters grapple with the notion of mortality, contemplating their own lives and confronting the inevitability of death. Jack Gladney, the central character experiences anxiety about his own mortality and seeks ways to cope with the fear of dying. The novel examines how society, saturated with media and technology, influences and amplifies these anxieties, creating a sense of collective unease.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fear of death has become a central concern for many individuals. The rapid spread of the virus, its high fatality rates in some cases, and the uncertainty surrounding its long-term effects have contributed to heightened anxieties about mortality. The pandemic has forced people to confront the fragility of life and grapple with the possibility of losing loved ones or even their own lives. In both the novel and society, the fear of death impacts people's behavior and decision-making processes. In “White Noise” characters seek various forms of distraction and protection from the existential dread. They become consumed by consumerism, rely on technology, and try to find solace in the noise and chaos of modern life. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people have adopted different coping mechanisms to manage their anxieties, such as seeking information, practicing self-care, or engaging in activities that offer a temporary sense of control or distraction.

Additionally, in both contexts, the fear of death exposes the vulnerabilities and anxieties that exist within human relationships. The pandemic has emphasized the importance of human connection and the profound impact that loss can have on individuals and communities. The novel explores the complex dynamics of relationships in the face of mortality, depicting the ways in which characters seek comfort and meaning through their interactions with others.

It is worth noting that while “White Noise” serves as a fictional exploration of these themes, the implications of death and the anxieties surrounding it are very real in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The collective experience of facing a global health crisis has led to introspection, existential questioning, and a reevaluation of priorities in many individuals' lives.

3. The Self Medication

Another concept that makes “White Noise” and Covid-19 society similar is of ubiquitous and unminding use of drugs and self-medication. In “White Noise”, self-medication and drug use are depicted as coping mechanisms employed by some characters to navigate their anxieties and uncertainties. This theme can also be observed in society during the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals may turn to substances as a way to cope with stress and emotional distress.

In the novel, characters often resort to self-medication, primarily through the use of prescription drugs, to alleviate their fears and anxieties. This includes characters like Jack Gladney, who takes a variety of medications to combat his fear of death and existential unease. The novel portrays how these substances provide temporary relief and a sense of control over their emotions.

The Gladney family becomes dependent on a mysterious drug called Dylar as a means to confront and evade their fears of death. This dependence is particularly evident in the character of Babette Gladney, who goes to extreme lengths, such as engaging in a sexual relationship with Willie Mink, to obtain Dylar. Despite the uncertainty surrounding its effectiveness, the Gladneys consume the drug, driven by their desperate desire to find relief from the existential anxieties that plague them.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, self-medication and drug use as a means of coping with the various challenges and uncertainties was prevalent everywhere. In both the novel and society, self-medication and drug use are portrayed as attempts to regain a sense of control and escape the

overwhelming anxieties of contemporary life. However, they often serve as a superficial solution that fails to address the underlying causes of anxiety and can lead to additional problems.

False news and dangerous self-medication during the COVID-19 pandemic have had detrimental effects on public health. The widespread circulation of misinformation and conspiracy theories has led to confusion and misguided decision-making among the public, while dangerous self-medication practices based on unproven treatments have put individuals at risk of harm. These behaviors undermine public health efforts by creating skepticism towards scientific guidance and vaccination campaigns, and they contribute to a false sense of security, hindering the adoption of necessary safety measures.

4. False Media

In “White Noise” and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions, amplifying anxieties, and influencing behavior. In “White Noise”, the characters are bombarded with a constant stream of media messages, advertisements, and news reports. The media is portrayed as a powerful force that shapes the characters' perceptions, influences their desires, and contributes to their anxieties. The characters become consumed by media saturation, leading to a sense of information overload and an inability to distinguish between reality and the constructed narratives presented by the media.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has played a crucial role in disseminating information, updates, and news about the virus. While media serves as a valuable source of information, it can also contribute to increased anxiety and confusion. The constant news coverage, varying perspectives, and sensationalized headlines heightened fears, perpetuate misinformation, and create a sense of panic.

There were also misinformation peddled by independent content creators and social media proponents. Especially through paid advertisement and sponsored content they could disperse and influence gullible people. In a study on false news and its impact it is observed that,

Anti-quarantine protest participants may have seen themselves as part of a spontaneous grassroots movement. But the coordinated marketing and messaging around the Facebook pages used to organize the protests was supported by organizations with long histories and deep pockets. Thanks to dogged reporting by several news organizations, it became clear that the emergence and expansion of these protests were made possible in no small part to the support of politically influential, well-funded backers including the National Rifle Association. (Nathalie, Rebecca and Dheere 19).

People were influenced negatively and a false sense of autonomy was protruded during the lockdowns and quarantine. Failure to mitigate the impact COVID-19 by the governments further fueled distrust on authority and propagated such false narratives which further hampered the public well-being.

Media also influences behavior in both contexts. In “White Noise” the characters' consumption of media influences their consumerist tendencies and their desire to seek control and escape through material possessions. The media's influence on their desires and aspirations is depicted as powerful and pervasive. It is observed by Gladney in the novel,

The family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Over-closeness, the noise and heat of being. Perhaps even something deeper like the need to survive. Murray says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of

hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security. The deeper we delve into things, the looser our structure may seem to become. (41)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, media coverage and messaging have influenced behavior in various ways. Media reports on the severity of the virus, guidelines for safety measures, and updates on vaccine availability have shaped public perception and behavior. Media platforms have also provided a space for sharing personal experiences, raising awareness, and mobilizing collective action. Moreover, Fear mongering during the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant concern, as it spread unnecessary panic and misinformation. Through sensationalized reporting, misleading information, conspiracy theories, and exaggerated language, fear mongering contributed to heightened anxiety, undermined public trust, and hindered effective responses to the crisis.

In both contexts, it is crucial to engage with media critically, verify information from reliable sources, and strike a balance in media consumption to avoid being overwhelmed by negativity or anxiety-inducing content. It is also important to complement media consumption with other sources of information, such as scientific research, official guidelines, and expert opinions.

In both the novel "White Noise" and society during the COVID-19 pandemic, media and external factors have an impact on relationships. In "White Noise" media and the noise of modern life often disrupt and complicate interpersonal relationships. The characters' constant exposure to media messages and the pervasive influence of consumerism creates a sense of detachment and superficiality in their interactions. The novel portrays how the noise of media and consumer culture can erode genuine connections, leading to a loss of intimacy and authentic communication between characters.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, media and external factors have had a significant impact on relationships. The increased reliance on technology and virtual communication due to social distancing measures has altered the nature of interpersonal interactions. While digital platforms have allowed for connectivity during times of physical isolation, they may also contribute to feelings of disconnection and impersonal communication.

Additionally, media coverage and external factors during the pandemic heightened tensions within relationships. Differing perspectives on safety measures, vaccine opinions, and information overload can lead to conflicts and strained interactions among individuals. The constant exposure to pandemic-related news and anxieties can also take an emotional toll on individuals, potentially impacting their ability to nurture healthy relationships.

However, it's important to note that in both contexts, relationships can also be strengthened and resilient. In "White Noise" some characters find solace and support in their relationships despite the external noise. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals have found ways to adapt and maintain meaningful connections through creativity, empathy, and mutual support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the profound impact of global health crises on individuals and societies. Heightened anxiety, fear of death, and uncertainties have permeated modern life, resonating with themes explored in Don DeLillo's novel, "White Noise." Both contexts depict how external factors, such as media saturation and misinformation, influence behavior, relationships, and coping mechanisms. The novel's themes of consumerism and self-medication mirror society's responses during the pandemic. Amidst the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has also showcased resilience and the human capacity to adapt, seeking support and maintaining meaningful connections. Moving forward, addressing misinformation, promoting critical media literacy, and fostering empathetic communication will be crucial in navigating future crises and fostering mental well-being.

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