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## The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Psychosocial Condition of Students in Poland and Ukraine

**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the results of research on the psychosocial condition among Polish and Ukrainian students during lockdown. The research aimed to verify the impact of the pandemic and its accompanying phenomena on the well-being of youth. To achieve this goal, the CAWI online survey method with double measurement was used. The first measurement carried out at the beginning of the lockdown resulted in 3659 completed surveys in Poland and 739 in Ukraine. The second measurement conducted at the end of distance learning brought 1978 completed surveys in Poland and 411 in Ukraine. The results of the research indicate that the lockdown had a negative impact on the psychosocial condition of youth. A deterioration of the emotional condition and the increase in mental disorders has been observed. Due to the pandemic and distance learning, the mental health of youth deteriorated significantly. Polish youth were negatively influenced by the pandemic to a greater extent than young Ukrainians.

**KEYWORDS:** The COVID-19 pandemic, students, mental health, psychosocial condition, Poland-Ukraine.

### Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Poland and Ukraine resulted in numerous negative consequences in society. Not only has the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on health been observed, but also on the economy, society, and politics. Lockdown has been imposed, and schools, universities, institutions, and services have been closed down. Society is facing the risk of

unemployment, a breakdown of the economy, and the loss of current financial resources. Travel restrictions, social isolation, and not being able to satisfy one's basic needs result in increasing frustration and aggression. The long-term effects of social and economic problems which arose due to the pandemic are noticeable in the streets of many countries, where people, most often youth, demonstrate against the governments imposing further limitations.

The world in the face of the pandemic has become unpredictable, the future has become uncertain and the society is losing the sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). The coronavirus pandemic is a global phenomenon and a destructive force. The example of social reactions to the threat gives grounds to claim that a moral panic has arisen, which is expressed by increased anxiety, global society's fear of the disease, and death (Cohen, 2011). Another concept that allows to explain the social meaning of the observed phenomenon is the theory of trauma by Piotr Sztompka (2000). The rapidly growing number of infected and thus far unprecedented number of fatalities came as a shock to society. Especially the fear of death and disease, aggravated by media reports, might have permanently damaged the sense of social security. After the first wave of trauma, the second wave occurred. It has been given rise due to the introduced restrictions, the lockdown of the economy, and imposing quarantine. Problems connected with of the inability to satisfy one's social needs and increased anxiety with regard to the future manifest themselves through psychosomatic symptoms, tension, and mental discomfort. Social unrest, protests, and acts of aggression against sacred places and other people may indicate the presence of social trauma.

In the conditions of a rising social crisis, there is a deterioration of the mental condition of youth. A review of survey research shows that the lower the age the higher the indicators of anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic disorders. Such a situation is observed in Poland (Gambin et. al., 2020), Italy (Mazza et. al., 2020; Roma et. al., 2020), Spain (Gómez-Salgado et. al., 2020), Great Britain (Hyland et. al., 2020), Canada (Mental Health..., 2020), and many other countries.

The deteriorating mental health of students due to the pandemic is also reported by people who work with students at Polish universities (Uczelnie..., 2020). Due to the lockdown of universities, students have the feeling of loneliness and anxiety regarding their uncertain future. They are more frustrated, anxiety or panic attacks or symptoms of depression are observed among them. Psychiatrists notice that the pandemic may result in acute stress disorders among individuals. The symptoms include obsessive-compulsive disorders, mood disorders, dissociative disorders, avoidance symptoms,

and hyperactivity (Heitzman, 2020). Symptoms of anxiety disorders, panic disorders, generalized anxiety disorders, and depression may occur as well (Babicki, Mastalerz-Migacz, 2020).

The hypotheses stated above are confirmed by the results of research conducted among German youth, in whom an increase of mental strains resulting from the lockdown, in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, has been observed (among 71% of the respondents). The risk of occurrence of mental disorders has increased among 31% of the respondents. Moreover, two-thirds of the respondents claim that daily routines connected with e.g. education are more difficult during the pandemic than before its outbreak, which has had an impact on high mental strains of the youngest citizens of Germany. Among the most common psychosomatic problems, irritability (54%), insomnia (44%), headache (40%), gloominess (34%), hyperactivity (24%), emotional coping problems (21%), and difficulties with maintaining discipline (19%) have been observed. Over two-thirds of the respondents maintain that the responsibilities connected with education during lockdown are more difficult than during regular education (Ravens-Sieberer et. al., 2020). The deterioration of mental health has also been observed among Spanish (Ezpeleta et. al., 2020) and Italian (Orgilés et. al., 2020) youth.

Also in Poland and Ukraine, research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health is conducted among members of society (Psycho-emotional..., 2020; Ukraine under..., 2020; Wpływ epidemii..., 2020; HOMO-COVIDUS..., 2020; Korona Monitor..., 2020). Despite numerous studies into the mental health of Poles and Ukrainians, there is a scarcity of research on the mental well-being of young people. To increase our knowledge on this subject matter, research among students in both of these countries has been conducted. The research shows the impact of the pandemic on the youngest citizens of both countries.

## **Research methodology**

The survey method was used to collect data. It makes it possible to study large groups of respondents. The survey is based on asking a selected group of people questions which are mainly closed questions and then they are subject to quantitative analysis. The CAWI survey (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) was used in the research.

The online survey is an inexpensive and fast method to carry out social research on large groups of respondents. Nonetheless, its disadvantage is the lack of representativeness, however, it is a way to obtain relevant information.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling. The sample was selected based on the availability of the respondents. The students who wanted to fill out the online survey took part in the research. Recruiting participants was based on sending the invitation to the research together with a link to the survey. The notice about the research was also published on universities' websites and social media. The teachers at different universities in both countries were also asked to forward the invitation to the research to their students.

In order to capture the impact of the pandemic on the mental condition of students, the plan of longitudinal research must have been applied, since in such a case at least two measurements take place. Due to such an approach, a potential impact of a stimulus on social reactions may be observed.

Therefore, the research was conducted in two points of time. The first stage of research was conducted at the beginning of distance learning. In Poland, it was conducted between March 18 and March 21, 2020, on a sample of 3659 respondents. In Ukraine, it was carried out between March 5 and April 6, 2020, on a sample of 739 respondents. The second measurement was conducted among the students of the Pedagogical University of Kraków and the students of pedagogy at the University of Lviv. The research was conducted by the end of the semester between October 1 and June 10, 2020. In Poland, 1978 correctly completed questionnaires were collected, whereas in Ukraine there were 411 questionnaires.

The research aimed to find answers to the questions connected with the negative impact of the pandemic. The main issue was the impact of the pandemic on the psychosocial condition of young people.

- Did the mental condition of students deteriorate together with the lock-down and distance learning?
- Are there any differences between Polish and Ukrainian students in terms of their mental health?

## **The research results**

The analyses begin with presenting the interest in media reports about the coronavirus among students. The research results indicate that interest in the pandemic among students has been changing. In the first period of the outbreak of the epidemic in Poland and Ukraine, 95% of the respondents in Poland and 87% of the respondents in Ukraine declared their interest in information about the pandemic. Three months after the outbreak, in both countries, there was a decrease in interest in information about the pandemic.

In Poland, the interest dropped to 75% (a decrease by 20%), whereas in Ukraine to 79% (a decrease by 8%). Detailed analyses have shown that a lower interest in the issues related to the pandemic was observed among students declaring a high interest in the subject matter in the first study.

It could have been expected that after a few months from the outbreak, there would be a loss of interest in the pandemic. The media are constantly reporting about the pandemic, therefore, students may be tired of the ongoing flow of information about the epidemic. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that despite a noticeable decrease in the interest in the pandemic between the first and the second measurement,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the respondents still express their interest in the pandemic. This may result from the high status of the threat and fears connected with getting infected with COVID-19. Following these developments may be rooted in the desire to have cognitive control over the phenomenon.

An additional question verifying the level of interest in the pandemic was the question about the number of infected people, which was asked during the first measurement. The data shows that in Poland 95% of the respondents knew the answer, whereas in Ukraine 89% of the respondents answered correctly. This confirms the prior assumptions that a vast majority of young people were well aware of the issues related to the pandemic and its development.

The next question was aimed at indicating the level of threat experienced by the students. In the first stage of the research, the students' evaluation of the level of threat posed by the coronavirus was verified. 68% of the respondents in Poland and 66% of the respondents in Ukraine agreed with the statement that the coronavirus is a threat to society. Furthermore, 21% of the respondents in Poland and 39% of the respondents in Ukraine agreed with the statement that the coronavirus is a direct threat to the respondents.

The above results indicate that youth more often assumed that people other than them may get infected. In both countries, the same mechanism, called defensive, unreal optimism by psychologists, is active. It is based on a common tendency to increase one's own chances (in comparison to the chances of Others) to various positively evaluated events, together with lowering one's own chances in the case of negative events (Weinstein, 1980). The confirmation of the above thesis is found in the subsequent question, which was aimed at estimating one's risk of getting infected with the coronavirus. In the first study, the students, when asked to estimate their individual chances of getting infected on a scale from 1 to 100, claimed that the chances are 38% in Poland and 35% in Ukraine. During the second measurement, the result was 34% in Poland and 38% in Ukraine.

The obtained results indicate that the students estimate the risk of infection rather low. In both countries, this perception of the probability of contracting the infection is almost identical. What is important, the individual level of threat remains almost identical between the first and the second measurement. This could mean that the students have a more or less constant evaluation of the threat.

The students were also asked to evaluate the actions undertaken by relevant services responsible for combating the coronavirus. In Poland, 49% of the respondents claimed that the actions are sufficient, and 21% of the respondents evaluated them negatively, maintaining that their efforts are insufficient. 21% of the respondents evaluate these actions neither positively nor negatively. In Ukraine, only 28% of the respondents appreciated the actions undertaken by authorities, 45% of the respondents evaluated them negatively and 25% were unable to evaluate them. During the second measurement in Poland, 28% of the respondents evaluated the government's actions as positive, 28% of the respondents evaluated them as negative, and 36% of the respondents were unable to evaluate them. In Ukraine, 23% of the respondents evaluated those actions as positive, 37% of the respondents evaluated them as negative, and a third of the respondents were unable to evaluate them. It is shown that together with the increase of infections and the introduction of restrictions in both countries, the number of positive opinions about the actions undertaken by the governments decreased. Only approximately every fifth respondent in both countries evaluated the actions undertaken by the governments as positive.

The main subject matter discussed in the research was mental well-being. Satisfaction with life is characterized in the first place. During the first study, at the beginning of the lockdown, 80% of the respondents in Poland were satisfied with their lives. In Ukraine, the level of satisfaction with life was at the level of 76%. During the second measurement, 74% of Polish students were satisfied with their lives. In Ukraine, the percentage was 81%. As shown, the level of satisfaction was similar in both groups. It is hard to determine whether the lockdown changed the mental well-being of the respondents, as the changes in the results are insignificant. At this point it is necessary to agree with the theory that the feeling of happiness is a deeper value. The attractor of happiness which is resistant to external disturbances is discussed in the literature. Its function is to mobilize a person to undertake activities that could improve their objective life situation. In the face of stress and threats, people express their will to fight and may strive to improve their living conditions (Czapiński, 2004). Well-being in the conditions of the epidemic has an adaptive function and allows for combating the threat.

The next table shows the factors of internalizing disorders. These include emotional and behavioral problems in which the experienced problems are internalized, and the feeling of mental and physical discomfort is dominant (Radziwiłłowicz, 2020, p. 411).

The following results indicate how the lockdown and distance learning influenced the mental well-being of the students.

Table 1. Internalizing disorders in Poland and Ukraine (in %)

		Poland		Ukraine	
		1st measurement	2nd measurement	1st measurement	2nd measurement
Headache	Yes, several times	5	9	8	14
	Yes, a few times	18	23	11	20
	Yes, 1–2 times	33	33	38	28
	I haven't felt any	44	34	43	38
Stomachaches	Yes, several times	2	5	1	5
	Yes, a few times	9	16	5	16
	Yes, 1–2 times	22	25	24	25
	I haven't felt any	67	52	70	54
Dizziness	Yes, several times	2	5	3	4
	Yes, a few times	6	12	4	12
	Yes, 1–2 times	15	20	15	19
	I haven't felt any	77	63	79	65
Insomnia	Yes, several times	7	17	16	17
	Yes, a few times	14	22	12	21
	Yes, 1–2 times	20	21	24	24
	I haven't felt any	59	39	49	38
Nervousness	Yes, several times	20	33	17	22
	Yes, a few times	27	31	13	26
	Yes, 1–2 times	28	23	29	29
	I haven't felt any	25	13	41	23
Gloominess, bad mood	Yes, several times	14	25	13	16
	Yes, a few times	24	30	12	22
	Yes, 1–2 times	28	26	34	32
	I haven't felt any	34	18	41	30
Lack of energy, fatigue	Yes, several times	13	30	14	18
	Yes, a few times	21	32	13	27
	Yes, 1–2 times	31	24	32	28
	I haven't felt any	35	13	41	28
Irritability, bad mood	Yes, several times	12	24	10	15
	Yes, a few times	23	30	11	22
	Yes, 1–2 times	32	28	31	28
	I haven't felt any	33	18	48	35

Source: own research.

The research results indicate that the students most often experience irritability, bad mood, lack of energy, fatigue, and gloominess.

The respondents also experienced headache often. The remaining somatic symptoms, such as insomnia, stomachaches, and dizziness were less common. The symptoms discussed above manifested themselves similarly in both countries. Mental symptoms were prevalent over somatic symptoms.

The comparison of the data from both measurements indicates that the lockdown resulted in an increase of internalizing disorders among students in Poland and Ukraine. Young people staying at home, the deprivation of needs, and social distance may have resulted in the deterioration of mental and physical well-being. It is worth stressing that worse well-being was observed among students in Poland. Ukrainian students at the beginning of the lockdown and at the end of distance learning expressed better mental health.

Table 2 shows the strategies for coping with the threat of coronavirus. The obtained observations indicate that the most common strategy was becoming involved in doing various activities to distract themselves. Mobilization and attempts to prepare oneself for the pandemic were other common strategies. The strategies based on asking others for help and advice as well as praying to God were also common.

Table 2. Strategies for coping with the threat of the pandemic (in %)

	Poland		Ukraine	
	1st measurement	2nd measurement	1st measurement	2nd measurement
I ask others for advice and help	38	36	12	30
I become mobilized and try to do everything to protect myself against it	88	79	87	87
I resort to alcohol, tobacco, other psycho-active drugs	9	10	8	8
I comfort myself with the thought that it could be worse, at least I am healthy	60	63	48	80
I give up, don't know what to do, don't know what is going to happen	6	7	8	8
I take sedatives	4	6	8	14
I pray to God for help	40	39	27	75
I focus on other things that distract me from the pandemic and put me in a better mood	83	77	83	90

Source: own research.

Activities aiming to change one's emotions using psychoactive drugs or medicine were undertaken less often. Not many students felt hopeless in the face of the rising pandemic.

The comparison of the results also shows certain differences between both groups. Polish students more often asked others for help. There were no significant differences between the first and the second measurement. In Ukraine it has been observed that the proportion of prayers and comforting oneself "that it could have been worse" increased. During the second measurement, Ukrainian youth more often asked others for help.

The last aspect discussed in this paper is the question of educational burnout. It is defined as exhaustion due to stress and pressure which result from the tasks and duties of students towards their universities and studies (Jang, Franc, 2005).

Studies in the form of distance learning are exhausting both for the students and the teachers. By researching the impact of the pandemic on the mental well-being of students, we also wanted to verify how distance learning affects their functioning.

Table 3. Educational burnout in Poland and Ukraine (in %)

	Poland	Ukraine
I feel tired	64	31
I feel physically exhausted	36	32
I feel mentally exhausted	62	50
Even after a weekend break, I don't feel rested	56	44
I do even fewer additional activities connected with the university	45	18
I am involved in studying less than before	45	18
I express negative emotions	38	27
Showing myself and my environment during online video lessons is stressful for me	50	23
I have less patience for my classmates and lecturers than before	31	10
I am less creative than before	34	17
I am less motivated to learn than before	59	36
Doing the same activities connected with my studies takes more time than before	54	42
My relationships with other students are poorer than before	52	34
My relationships with lecturers are poorer than before	52	40
My relationships with my parents are poorer than before	7	6
I am having mood swings	60	52

\* I strongly agree and I agree

Source: own research.

Based on the data collected in the second measurement, an attempt is made to estimate the impact of distance learning on the well-being of youth. In Table 3, the main symptoms of educational burnout among both groups of students are presented. Among Polish students, symptoms such as mental strains, mental exhaustion, and mood swings were most common. Students often experienced lowered motivation to learn than before, they were tired after weekend breaks. It is worth noticing, that 50% of the respondents claimed that showing themselves and their environment was stressful. Half of the respondents declared that their relationships with peers and tutors were poorer than before.

The gathered observations indicate that Polish students are experiencing burnout with distance education. They are less motivated to take action and are both physically and mentally tired. This means that distance education is a crucial factor in terms of mental health.

Among Ukrainian students, fewer symptoms of educational burnout were observed. These differences are clearly shown in Table 3. Only in terms of mental exhaustion and mood swings approximately half of the respondents reported such symptoms. It may be indicated that often reported symptoms include tiredness even after weekend breaks and increased time required to accomplish assignments, as well as the deterioration of relationships with lecturers.

The analysis of responses to the question from Table 3 indicates that the problem of educational burnout occurs among students. Nonetheless, higher levels of tiredness with distance education is observed among Polish students rather than Ukrainian students. This phenomenon is similar to previous results, which indicate that during the lockdown Polish students have worse mental well-being than Ukrainian students.

## Conclusions

The research carried out among both groups of students indicates that the pandemic and associated phenomena such as the lockdown, social distance, and distance learning harm the psychosocial condition of youth.

A high level of interest in the issues related to the pandemic has been observed among students in both countries. High interest in the coronavirus may indicate the fact that the students are afraid of the disease. Moreover, as indicated by research, often searching for information about the pandemic has a negative impact on the mental health of youth and increases the fear of getting infected with coronavirus (Długosz, Kryvachuk, 2020).

The respondents in both countries maintain that the coronavirus pandemic is a serious threat for other people, rather than for themselves. The phenomenon of defensive optimism (Weinstein, 1980), which is based on lowering one's own chances of getting infected in comparison to other people is clearly noticeable here. The validity of this interpretation is confirmed by further data, which is concerned with estimating the probability of getting infected by the students. The probability is determined as average and, what is important, does not change during the lockdown. It has a constant value and the changing number of infections does not influence it.

The difference between the two groups is revealed in terms of evaluation of the government and services combating the epidemic. The actions undertaken by the government are evaluated higher in Poland than in Ukraine. Nonetheless, a decrease of positive assessments among the respondents from both countries is observed. This may result from tiredness with the pandemic and blaming the authorities for the state of affairs.

Satisfaction with life is high and fails to change during the lockdown in both countries, which may confirm the 'onion' theory of happiness, which maintains that the sense of happiness is a deeper personal feature that is resistant to external disturbances (Czapiński, 2004).

The research indicates that internalizing disorders which include emotional and behavioral problems are observed among students. The respondents' well-being was more often disturbed by emotional problems rather than somatic issues. Their increase in the period of lockdown is also observed. It concerns Polish students more than Ukrainian students.

In the face of the rising threat of the pandemic, strategies can be observed aiming to cope with this problem. In both groups, the most common strategies were mobilization to combat the threat, distracting oneself, and comforting oneself that "it could have been even worse". In this case, confrontative coping and distancing occurs (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984).

The research results indicate that the lockdown, especially distance learning, was an exhausting experience. It may be said that it resulted in educational burnout. It is worth adding that experts suggest that the deterioration of youth's mental health occurred even before, together with their transition into the digital reality (Twenge, 2019). This was the phenomenon present during distance education. All contact with lecturers and peers took place over the Internet. Constantly spending time online might have a negative impact on the mental health of the students.

To sum up, it is worth stressing that Polish students had a worse psychosocial condition than their Ukrainian peers. It is difficult to determine

the causes of those differences. Perhaps the pandemic intensified the problems that were present before. The PISA research indicates that Ukrainian youth had better indicators of psychological well-being than their Polish peers (OECD, 2019).

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