

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC LIFESTYLE: STUDENTS MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

DOI: 10.36740/WLek202111107

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### ABSTRACT

**The aim:** To determine how quarantine restrictions affect the lifestyle of Ukrainian students, and their mental health.

**Materials and methods:** 37 student essays were submitted to the university contest held at Lviv Polytechnic University in May-June 2020. They were analyzed with the help of qualitative thematic analysis and standard qualitative analysis method. Essays are focused on a list of issues important for assessing the social well-being of students during quarantine. Each fragment of essay's answer was coded into the data matrix system according to either multiple or single themes, built in the statements. The thematic analysis identified several categories that determine students' attitude to the pandemic situation and its consequences for them.

**Results:** It is determined that students' lifestyle, including study and leisure, has changed significantly, which has affected their mental health. Learning online provoked a number of emotional disorders. At the same time, the desire for communication in person and self-improvement increased. «Quarantine lessons» were divided into categories: challenges, threats and opportunities. Threats and challenges were considered at the global level, while opportunities affected rather the personal level.

**Conclusions:** Mental health of students disorders: anxiety, restlessness, fear, self-doubt, feelings of loneliness, panic, sleep disturbances, and increased fatigue indicate the negative effects of the pandemic. At the same time, recording such facts as the feeling of satisfaction from communication with loved ones, the ability to help them, the desire for self-improvement, etc. allows to say about the positive effects.

**KEY WORDS:** Covid-19, pandemic, learning practices, lifestyle, mental health, students

Wiad Lek. 2021;74(11 p.I):2723-2727

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant test for the modern world. However, it did not come as a surprise to everyone. Canadian psychologist S. Taylor began studying the danger of a pandemic two years before the COVID crisis. Studying the mental health problems of communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, S. Taylor and a group of colleagues from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom describe the mental problems caused by infectious epidemics and pandemics as a «parallel epidemic» [1-2].

S. Taylor, together with psychologist G. Asmundson, conducted a study of the expansion of fear and anxiety among 7,000 adults in Canada and the United States. 75% of respondents feel well, while the remaining 25% of respondents develop COVID-stress syndrome. People who previously had mental health problems are the most vulnerable [3].

Among the works dedicated to the study of psychological reactions of various social groups in Ukraine during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to mention the publication of a team of authors from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine [4].

Empirical analysis of the reactions of society as a whole and its groups to the problems caused by the pandemic is mainly

based on the so-called quantitative methods, and therefore allows to record the main characteristics of phenomena at the macro social level [5]. For example, according to a study conducted in Lviv among young people aged 14-35, it was determined that the dominant triggers of deteriorating emotional and psychological mood and changes in the lifestyle are the lack of opportunities for travel – for 86% of respondents, the lack of offline communication with friends, relatives – 77%, and the absence of the usual study / work schedule – 75%. Children often enjoy quarantine (60% dissatisfied), and young people are more concerned about such changes (78%). Among the reasons that upset young people the most are a lack of diversity of leisure practices – 65%, shut down of their own business – 22% [6].

Studies, in which the starting point of the analysis is the individual reactions of representatives of certain social groups to these macro social phenomena, are quite rare. For example, Polish researchers studied the factors of youth activity during a pandemic [7]; a team of Canadian scientists studied the impact of the spread of COVID-19 on the symptoms of anxiety and depression among university students [8]; Greek and Ukrainian scientists studied the relationship between religiosity, psychological stability and psychological well-being of nurses [9] etc.

To analyze the attitude of Ukrainian students to their adaptation to quarantine conditions and to determine how quarantine restrictions affect students' lifestyles, their mental health, we conducted a sociological study of essays submitted to the university contest «Pandemic and lifestyle: challenges, threats and new opportunities».

Lifestyle should be understood as a holistic system of life practices that are implemented on a daily basis, inherent in both social groups as a whole and for individuals – their members. We need to outline the methodological principles that were implemented in the analysis:

- life practices are relatively constant and are transformed, first of all, under the influence of changes in the social environment in which they are implemented;
- changes in the system of practices – components of lifestyle are the result of internal, self-controlled factors, which is, for example, intrinsic motivation. Therefore, despite the action of macro social factors common to the whole social group, the individual reactions of the members of this group to them can vary in a wide range;
- systemic life practices – a component of lifestyle implies that they are interdependent, where the change of some components of lifestyle provokes changes in others, the ones they are in constant organic relationship;
- while analyzing these transformations, it is necessary to identify the most significant component of lifestyle, changes in which will determine the main vector of transformations of the whole system. Such a core component of students' lifestyles are learning practices, which are correlated with other components of students' lifestyles;
- the lifestyle of certain social groups in general, and their individual representatives has a significant impact on the mental well-being of these groups and individuals.

## THE AIM

The aim of this article is to determine the impact of quarantine restrictions on the lifestyle and mental health of Ukrainian students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical base was processed by the method of quantitative content analysis of student essays, within which the procedure of thesaurus selection and calculation of frequencies of words and combinations of language elements was implemented. In the course of data analysis, units were categorized, the text was divided into categories according to thesauri and the number of units corresponding to one or another category was counted, and their comparison was made.

**Sample.** The array of texts for analysis is formed from essays submitted to the competition, held at Lviv Polytechnic University in May-June 2020 and dedicated to the changes that have taken place in student life due to quarantine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the analysis of the content of student essays, thematic analysis was used, which is attributed to the methods of

qualitative analysis [10]. Thematic analysis was conducted by a single researcher (Larysa Klymanska). After reviewing the data, initial thoughts and impressions about the similarities and differences in the answers were recorded. Based on the codes formulated in the thematic analysis, from this initial analysis a system of initial classification was created, improved over several iterations. A random ten percent of responses were independently coded by another researcher (Mariana Shkoliar). As there was 100% agreement in these cases, the responses were not further analyzed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of essay texts. As already mentioned, the contest of student essays «Pandemic and lifestyle: challenges, threats and new opportunities» was held at the National University «Lviv Polytechnic» on the initiative of the Department of Sociology and Social Work with the support of the University Administration in May-June 2020. Under the terms of the contest it was offered to write an essays focused on a list of issues important for assessing the social well-being of students during quarantine, in particular – changes in attitudes to learning, leisure, interactions with the social environment, those that are crucial for shaping students' lifestyles, affect their mental health. The format of the essay competition was chosen in order to make the collection of information less formal and, consequently, to attract more respondents into this process. 52 essays were submitted to the contest, but only 37 texts were analyzed, the authors of which complied with the conditions of the contest. The thematic analysis identified several categories that determine students' attitudes to the pandemic situation and its consequences for them.

The main issues that were mentioned in the terms of the competition are grouped into six categories, three of which are directly related to the issues of this article:

1. Lifestyle – participants' reproduction of daily practices of learning and spending their free time, their transformation and assessment of these changes in lifestyle;
2. Life changes – participants' assessment of the changes taking place in the world, in the country, society, at the University, the higher education system;
3. The outcomes of quarantine – in a broad sense, along with perceptions of the pandemic and assessment of changes that have taken place at the individual level, in the university community, in Ukrainian society in general, as a result of reflection on the situation.

The largest (excluding the image of a pandemic) part of mentions in the texts are categories related to education (Table I).

The lifestyle of students, as noted in most essays, has changed significantly. This applies to both learning and leisure activities that affected their mental health.

First of all, more time is dedicated to training («I think I spend more time on studying during quarantine» (2) [here and below in parentheses is the code number of the essay that was assigned to it for research purposes]; «Almost all of my time I dedicate to study «(9);»... I study every day

**Table I.** Generalized categories highlighted in the texts

| Generalized categories | Content units of text content analysis               | Number of repetitions in the text                                 |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Teaching               | learning, study, learn, distance learning, education | 407   |
|                        | teachers, students, professors                       |   |
|                        | lectures, trainings                                  |   |
|                        | zoom, MS   |   |
| Lifestyle              | Virtual learning environment                         | 324   |
|                        | change of lifestyle                                  |   |
|                        | new forms of communication                           | life, live, survive   |
|                        |  | lifestyle, way of life  |
|                        |  | social networks (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube) |
| Time management        | to communicate, communication                        | 118   |
|                        | time, on time, not in time                           | 362   |

for an average of eight hours... Sometimes twelve hours in a row «(9);» At this stage, studying takes up most of... my day «(20)), it comes to the point where most of the responders note that «learning takes almost all of my free time» (32). In one of the essays, there was a phrase «it is kind of university-dependence» (12). It was the «increase in training» that triggered the development of time management skills – «Every weekend I make a schedule for the next week, alternating it when necessary ...» (2); «After sitting in quarantine for three months, I realized that the problem is not in the lack of time... The problem is that I do not know how to use this resource right.» (6).

Secondly, the training became more intensive- «I continue to study more actively than in regular classes.» Probably, there has been a reassessment of the very value of learning in a life-threatening situation. The attitude towards such intensification of the educational process is ambiguous: from the realization that learning is a contribution to the further development of a person – «I study a lot and invest the maximum in my development» (17) ,and that “intensive learning leaves no room for anxiety and «overthinking»(10), to the claims that the complicated course of the educational process has repeatedly caused stressful situations -» with distance learning a lot of work was added, and the deadlines remained the same; I have some rest only when sleeping, but I haven’t had a sound sleep for a long time ”(12). There was even «my parents suggested that I quit my classes as they could see how it affected my health, and especially my mental stability» (12). Before exams there are traditional fears «I might fail» (9); «The first virtual exams will cause great fear» (35).

It is obvious that the intensification of learning, the complexity of the learning process, that were accompanied by stressful situations, increased fear, sleep disorders were evidence of negative emotional dynamics that threaten mental health.

At the same time, we can state that the attitude to distance learning, as well as to quarantine, has changed over time. At the beginning of the «quarantine life» there was a state of euphoria about the next unexpected vacation – «I remember from school how happy and cheerful the words sounded that we are going to quarantine ... No more deadlines, you learn when you wish to»(6); «We imagined a three-week vacation, how we would relax and hang out with friends...» (8). Time was a sobering factor «... but no one expected it to take so long» (23); «It seemed fun until the quarantine was extended» (6).

Students recorded their unpreparedness for new challenges, one of which was online learning. “Initially, distance learning «was so alien, unusual and scary» (11). Later came the period – «small steps» of «entering» the essence of new forms and platforms of learning: – «slowly learn how to work in VNS, Zoom and Teams «(11). There was a statement- «Learning in this format is a kind of going out of your comfort zone, the opportunity to try to learn differently» (34) and expressions of being interested in changing forms of learning – «I always thought that virtual learning is difficult and boring, but in reality it turned out to be even more difficult than studying in person, but nevertheless classes are as interesting as regular ones ”(37). «It is quite interesting... my dreams came true and I am able to study at home, staying with my family» (13).

As the quarantine continued, students began to experience «all the beauties»of distance learning» (11): distance learning is as tiring as usual one (10); (8); distance learning forced students to sacrifice (10); (4).

Thus, online learning is a challenge for students. First and foremost, the challenge for mental health. It provoked fatigue from being overstrained, the appearance of a number of negative emotional states (frustration, fear, anxiety, panic attacks, sleep disturbances) («I have neither enthusiasm nor desire to do something») (26). At the same time,

such realities have strengthened the need for in person communication and have become for many students an incentive for self-improvement.

The authors of the essays also focused on the changes caused by the pandemic. Hypothetically, they can be viewed from several perspectives. First, it is a personal change. The point is that this situation allowed us to look back at our pre-quarantine life – “It seems to me that I have had a «retirement effect». When you have a close look at your whole life and you can clearly see what was crucial for you»(1), the value of money is brushed aside -» I do not want to give up my sleep for money, which I will then spend on some material nonsense «(1). There are reflections on the topic of «before» and «after» quarantine: «My own views, which previously seemed to me completely correct, now mean almost nothing to me. They have changed, as have I. I also realized that we have only one life and it is, unfortunately, very fast paced and fragile (19).

Secondly, among the changes that accompany the life of an individual in quarantine, the most frequently mentioned are those that can be seen on the surface of human existence: the «mask» requirements, social distance (3); spending more time in social media and limited live communication(14), huge interest in sports and meditation practices, «quarantine self-expression» as another type of creativity (16).

The so-called «quarantine lessons» – the «quintessence» of individual reflection on the quarantine situation – are also analyzed. We categorized them into: challenges, threats and opportunities, plus taking into account the level at which they are considered by the authors of essays (global, personal). Regarding the category of «challenges», we came to only one conclusion, which can be considered global – «quarantine has become a challenge for us and made it clear that the simple things in life make us happy» (6). Threats are mainly addressed at the global level – quarantine «will be a lesson to all mankind that we must stop and start solving global problems such as: environmental, food, use of the oceans, peace and disarmament, prevention of a new world war» (7); «The coronavirus showed us the unattractive truth of what a cruel world we have created and how much we ourselves suffer in it» (22). At the personal level, the threat is seen through a change in views on social interactions – «I saw the attitude of people to each other in terms of restrictions in both social networks and reality. ... People have started to prioritize themselves, they want to benefit and get rich on the misery of others.»(5).

Most attention in the essays was paid to the opportunities (both in terms of the number of reviews and the quality of statements). At the same time, most of the opportunities that students wrote about were not related to the global, but rather the personal level:

- from the philosophical comprehension (rethinking) of one's life – «the world has given us a chance to change, to improve our lives, to see who is who» (32); «Reconsider views on the world and realization that humanity must change its lifestyle in order to have a future» (2); Rethinking what life is and what it means to «live» (26); «Find yourself» (11); «Reboot and understand what is really

needed in life and what to strive for» (34); opportunities for significant personal change – «this is a very good time for the reincarnation of the individual» (20); the ability to realize the importance of simple things – «the situation (with quarantine)... proved the importance of simple things, which make up our lives and which can not be taken for granted» (10);

- from the awareness of one's own belonging to the group: the opportunity and need to «learn empathy and get out of their small social aquariums» (30); the realization that «personal responsibility for one's own health, the routine of washing hands no longer becomes a personal but a collective responsibility» (30); «The pandemic has made all Ukrainians feel again that we are one body. COVID-19 has caused a worldwide epidemic of kindness»(22);
- to pragmatic instrumental skills: opportunities for «development of multitasking» (15); «Learn something new, know yourself and improve» (17); to acquire new skills – «we now know that distance learning is possible and even very real» (23); «Improve the level of organization of their lives – through time management» (9).

Thus, the method of thematic qualitative analysis of essays allowed to obtain empirical material not only less formal than in mass surveys using standardized questionnaires, but also to record individual observations of students concerning social processes that go beyond their individual existence.

Rather critical moment was noticed in the students' feelings of the pandemic, especially what prevails in it: seeing it as danger, challenge, crisis and at the same time as an opportunity to change something in University life and society as a whole. Such mental health disorders as anxiety, uneasiness, fear, self-doubt, loss of interest in learning or any extracurricular activities, feelings of loneliness, panic, sleep disturbances, increased fatigue indicate the negative effects of the pandemic. At the same time, a sense of satisfaction with communication with loved ones, the ability to help them, the desire to care for other, a sense of shared danger of coronavirus infection and confidence in the community's ability to emerge from a pandemic with achievements – experience of self-development and responsibility for your own health and life and health and life of relatives and other people – allows us to tell about the positive effects. It is noteworthy that in the texts of essays the reference to the pandemic as a source of change and the use of opportunities is significant – 268, while the pandemic as a challenge has been mentioned half less-123.

## CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of available sources of information in comparison with the results of our study of student essays allows us to conclude that the mental health of students in quarantine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been significantly affected by both external social factors and internal, individual.

These macro-social changes have affected the mental health of student youth. Despite the high level of com-

puter efficiency of students, the constant online life has proved to be a real challenge for their mental health. On the other hand, the results of the study revealed the positive aspects of adaptation to pandemic conditions and quarantine measures – awareness of new opportunities for both self-development and the formation of responsibility for life and health at the level of mass consciousness. Of course, to determine the relationship between the positive and negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of student youth, it is advisable to conduct additional research.

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*The work is a fragment of the research project «Research Initiatives and Practical Implementation of Social and Political Projects to Resolve Social Problems of Modern Ukraine», state registration No. 0118U000886.*

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## Conflict of interest:

*The Authors declare no conflict of interest.*

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**Received:** 04.06.2021

**Accepted:** 13.10.2021

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**A** – Work concept and design, **B** – Data collection and analysis, **C** – Responsibility for statistical analysis, **D** – Writing the article, **E** – Critical review, **F** – Final approval of the article