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Academic youth during the Covid-19 pandemic: student anticipation of life changes in the face of a crisis situation

Abstract: The reality of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has necessitated adapting to an array of changes affecting almost every facet of life. Socio-economic circumstances and the psycho-physical health of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic have become pivotal factors influencing daily routines, lifestyles, and perspectives of the future. Unstable personal, economic, and professional situations have also impacted academic youth.

The primary aim of this article is to analyze the results of a group study focusing on how academic youth have functioned during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, particularly regarding female students' predictions about the pandemic's impact on their future lives.

The research engaged students from various study programs (N = 1259) and employed a web-based survey questionnaire (CAWI). The findings presented in this article highlight a plethora of life changes that academic youth anticipate as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes are especially apparent in the realm of interpersonal relationships, due to the requirement for social distancing during the pandemic.

The insights offered in this article could prove useful in assessing the psycho-physical, socio-economic, educational, and professional conditions of female and male students under emergency circumstances, such as the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic. This understanding will facilitate the introduction of suitable initiatives and preventive programs to assist this demographic in adapting to the new pandemic (and post-pandemic) reality, and to alleviate difficulties, fears, and anxieties associated with anticipated future life changes.

Key words: COVID-19 – pandemic – academic youth – life changes – crises.

Introduction

The reality of the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic¹ has necessitated a series of adaptations in almost every aspect of human life. The disruption to routine, daily life, and the predictability of daily existence stemming from the sudden change in living conditions has been significant in the realization of established goals and life plans.

Pandemic conditions have necessitated social isolation, regulated by a variety of sanctions and restrictions impacting almost all levels and spheres of human activity (New York Times, 2020). These restrictions have affected numerous areas, including the economy (BBC News, 2020), tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2020), culture (OECD, 2020), and education (UNESCO, 2020). Politics, sports, healthcare, religion, demographics, crime, and numerous other sectors have also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This fact is corroborated by the 3,010,000 scientific papers relating to various fields and disciplines retrieved from the Google Scholar database on 13/12/2022, using the keyword “COVID-19 impact.”

Socio-economic conditions and individuals’ psycho-physical health in the pandemic era have become decisive factors in transforming daily habits, lifestyles, and future perspectives. This situation has affected every social and age group, irrespective of location or origin (Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, 2022; World Health Organization, 2021), posing a challenge to humanity to reorganize and redefine established norms of functioning and reconsider existential questions.

Unstable personal, economic, and professional circumstances have also been experienced by the academic youth (Cao et al., 2020; Chirikov et al., 2020; Kumar & Agarwal, 2021; Marques et al., 2020). This instability was brought about by widespread restrictions to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-02 virus, fears and anxieties related to the threat to life and health, as well as changes in the functioning of educational institutions, including universities (Gambin et al., 2021, Jaskulska et al., 2022). Comparative studies conducted among

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¹ To avoid repetition in this article, the terms “COVID-19 pandemic” and “SARS-CoV-02 pandemic virus” will be used interchangeably to refer to the infectious disease pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

European students indicate the emergence of both global dimensions of pandemic experience and areas of national variation (Toffolutti et al., 2022). Among young adults, social isolation—coupled with loneliness and the necessity of maintaining social distance—plays a pivotal role in the emergence of mental health problems. Interestingly, fear of infection does not represent the most significant factor for this group (Rania, Coppola, 2022). It is noteworthy that, compared to other European countries, Poland has a low rate of confidence in vaccinations and healthcare professionals. Concurrently, there is a higher resistance to the implementation of recommendations and restrictions designed to contain the spread of the pandemic (European Commission, 2022).

The Polish government suspended in-person classes in schools and universities as of March 16, 2020 (MEN, 2020; MNiSW, 2020). Subsequently, from March 25, 2020, educational institutions were required to transition from in-person to remote learning. This obligation was maintained throughout the 2020/2021 academic year due to the ongoing epidemic threat. Consequently, the reality of remote learning became a long-term experience that significantly impacted the functioning of female and male students, extending to other aspects of life such as social activities, entertainment, and work. The pandemic caused numerous changes in the structure of life activities, including the quality of relationships, changes in residence, and alterations in economic situations (Domaradzki, 2022; Jankowiak et al, 2022; Jaskulska et al, 2022, Wieczorek et al, 2021).

The primary purpose of this article is to analyze the specifics of academic youth functioning during the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic, particularly in terms of their anticipated life changes due to the pandemic. These considerations are based on the results of a team survey conducted among female students. The subject matter seems pertinent, as it can aid in determining the psycho-physical condition and the socio-economic, educational, and professional situations of female and male students during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. This information will enable the development of appropriate interventions and preventive programs to support this social group in adapting to the new (post-)pandemic reality², and to counteract difficulties, fears, and anxieties associated with future anticipated life changes. Predictions related to life changes in the aftermath of a pandemic are a critical determinant of individuals' mood and psycho-physical condition, as well as their realistic assessment of the pandemic's impact on their future.

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² By using the phrase “(post)pandemic” in this article, we refer to the current situation (as of 17.12.2022), when there is no epidemic state of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Poland (according to the decree of the Minister of Health from May 16, 2022), but the pandemic state is still upheld globally. Most of the restrictions and regulations related to the spread of the virus have been lifted. In public opinion, the pandemic is spoken of in the past tense having in mind the most difficult first waves of the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, one can speak of a post-pandemic reality, however, the COVID-19 pandemic is still officially ongoing – hence the term “(post)pandemic.”

The research issue addressed in this article is part of the broader discourse analyzing the functioning of academic youth in the reality of the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic. It is important to emphasize the timeliness of this issue, as the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being experienced, causing a cascade of difficulties and setting in motion a chain of cause-and-effect relationships that is challenging to halt. Both public debate and scholarly discourse question what post-pandemic reality will look like and what challenges it will pose for young individuals participating in its domain (Dymecka, 2021; Zakaria, 2021).

The considerations undertaken in this article seem valid, as they may aid in determining the psycho-physical condition, parental relationships, and socio-economic and educational circumstances of female and male students during the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic. This information will enable the development of appropriate interventions and preventive programs to support this social group in adapting to the new (post-)pandemic reality, and to counteract difficulties, fears, and anxieties associated with future anticipated life changes.

Academic youth in the COVID-19 pandemic period

The term “academic youth” used in the text refers to individuals with active student status. From a developmental psychology perspective, these are individuals engaged in developmental tasks associated with early adulthood. This phase involves “learning to be an adult” and having the perspective of long-term functioning in adulthood, which significantly impacts life goals and the definition of future plans (Oleś, 2011).

Given these attributes of early adulthood, academic youth grappling with existential uncertainties face the task of reorganizing their future life plans (Klimkowska, 2016). When considering the life plans of academic youth, it is worth mentioning Jeffrey J. Arnett’s concept of “emerging adulthood,” which is characterized by the postponement of adult responsibilities, such as starting a family, securing employment, and achieving economic independence. This “emerging adulthood” stage highlights the anticipation of adulthood, as it encompasses phenomena and processes ascribed to adulthood but not yet realized (Arnett, 2004).

The conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic have undoubtedly impacted the daily functioning, quality of life, and mental health of academic youth. The period of study is a time of particularly intense social life and a quest for a life partner due to the developmental peculiarities of early adulthood. The reality of the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic has complicated the developmental tasks of early adulthood significantly. Faced with the need for sudden adaptation to unprecedented lifestyle norms, perceived fear for one’s own health/life and those of loved ones, and the uncertainty of the future, pandemic conditions can be seen as a factor inducing

psychological crisis in individuals (Babicki & Mastalerz-Migas, 2020). This state is a result of experiencing an event or problem so challenging that effective resolution becomes unattainable due to insufficient resources in terms of coping. A critical feature of being in crisis is its influence on the individual's future trajectory (James & Gilliland, 2006).

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, an emergency situation fraught with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, students have pondered the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on their future plans and life changes (Skalski, 2021). Considering the psychosocial specificity of academic youth and the developmental tasks of early adulthood (Przetacznik-Gierowska & Tyszkowa, 1996), it is important to note that the current modifications necessitate special skills to adapt to pandemic conditions and to consider their impact on life transitions and future outcomes.

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic among Polish academic youth reveals a decrease in mental health due to pandemic conditions and identifies subsequent transformations in students' daily lives (Wieczorek et al., 2021, Marciniak et al., 2022). These trends were observed among both academic and younger cohorts. Factors positively correlated with physical and mental health and general well-being include social support, life and social engagement, high self-esteem, whereas factors negatively associated include COVID-19 anxiety (Turska, Stępień-Lampa, 2021, Marciniak et al., 2022, Jaskulska et al., 2022). Adolescents also reported feeling unprepared for pandemic conditions, due partly to a lack of social competence but also insufficient psychological support from educational institutions (Domaradzki, 2022; Jankowiak et al., 2022).

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapidly changing life situation of youth and its multifaceted effects have underscored the need for interdisciplinary debates on current developments in this area. Varying conditions of existence have prompted numerous changes in many areas of youth activity, becoming subjects of academic interest for sociology, pedagogy, psychology, and economics. The necessity of updating information due to changing living conditions has led to many research reports detailing the specifics of life in the pandemic era and its impact on the quality of life. Just four months after the declaration of the pandemic, a report titled "Everyday Life during a Pandemic" was published (Drozdowski et al., 2020). This research, carried out in March 2020, examines sentiment and changes in people's functioning during the earliest period of the pandemic. The higher education system (Mazur, 2021; Szczęsny, 2020), the experiences of male and female students (Długosz, 2020), and the psycho-physical condition of students and university employees (Patient Ombudsman, 2020) have all been subjects of empirical analysis during the early stages of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

The situation of the young during the pandemic reality is described in numerous research reports that analyze specific issues related to the functioning of male and female students under the threat of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The

changes these students experience during this period affect various aspects of their functioning and are most often observed on multiple levels. These include areas of labor market activity, education, and interpersonal interaction (Mascherini & Campajola, 2020), as well as experiencing difficult emotions and anxiety (Cao et al., 2020), disruption of daily life rhythms (Kumar & Aragwal, 2021), and deterioration of mental health (Chirikov et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2020).

Methodology of the research

This article presents selected results from a research study conducted within the framework of a scientific project titled “Academic Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic”. This study was dedicated to analyzing the changes experienced and anticipated by female students in areas such as career, family and peer relationships, spirituality, and civic engagement. The fundamental assumptions of the model constructed for this study are based on the belief that the aforementioned spheres of activity of academic youth are likely to undergo changes, differentiated by factors related to perceived fears, the need for transformations in their daily functioning, activity limitations (including lockdowns), and individual characteristics relating to personality traits.

The research project was quantitative in nature, enabling the determination of the scale and magnitude of the ongoing changes with relative accuracy, while considering the most and least vulnerable areas during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

A diagnostic survey method was used to gather statistical data relating to facts about the described phenomenon, which is the change in the aforementioned areas of the lives of academic youth. Experienced and anticipated life changes can significantly impact the behaviors, decision-making processes, and daily functioning of female students. The results of this study allowed us to determine the scope, intensity, and extent of these changes.

The research technique employed was a Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) online survey. Given the need for social isolation during the pandemic, this method proved to be an appropriate way to collect data. However, due to limitations arising from both the questionnaire distribution method and sample selection (i.e., the characteristics of volunteers who are more likely to participate in various types of scientific research), the results of this study lack representativeness. Therefore, the study is of an exploratory nature.

The research tool used was a proprietary survey questionnaire prepared on the ZOHO web portal, which ensures data protection and respondent anonymity.

The questionnaire covered selected areas of academic adolescents’ lives (professional, friendship relationships, family and partner relationships, spirituality, and socio-civic involvement), aspects of functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and personal characteristics along with other demographic and situational data.

Due to the complex nature of the text, it analyzed respondents' answers to the question regarding anticipated life changes: "Do you have a feeling that your life will definitely change as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?" The response options were: "No, it won't change" and "Yes, it will change, in what way?". The distribution of responses to the closed part of the question was analyzed, taking into account personal factors and situational considerations that appeared to significantly differentiate them statistically (using the chi-square test, at $p = 0.05$).

Survey distribution was conducted through the Student Service Offices at selected universities that agreed to participate in the survey. Data collection was carried out during the social isolation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in two time cohorts: 05–07. 2020 and 10.2020–01.2021. The first round of data collection coincided with the beginning of the pandemic (the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020). This was a period of adjustment to new realities, including compliance with restrictions associated with the spread of the virus and the necessity for social isolation, which significantly impacted individuals' psychophysical conditions and emotional spheres. The second round of data collection occurred during the so-called second wave of the pandemic, which brought about the realization of the long-lasting nature of pandemic conditions, necessitating a reorganization of future plans.

The survey questionnaire was distributed to students starting in May 2020. It should be noted that this period was characterized by strict restrictions on the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including stay-at-home orders. Therefore, it is likely that respondents completed the questionnaire during the period of highest fear and crisis, living amidst high uncertainty and having to adapt to numerous constraints and changes. The fact that the questionnaires were completed in two rounds allows for comparative analysis between the two periods of lockdown.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the research sample

The research project focused on academic youth; hence, the respondents were students. The research sample was selected purposively and randomly (students were purposively selected, while the selection of female representatives of this group was random).

A total of 1,259 individuals participated in the survey. $N = 648$ participated in the first stage of the survey (May–July 2020), while responses from $N = 611$ were collected during the second measurement (October 2020–January 2021).

The subjects surveyed were male (7.2%) and female (92.8%) students from across Poland, both from full-time (69.2%) and part-time (30.8%) study programs.

The vast majority of the surveyed individuals (91.6%) were students from public schools, while the remainder (8.4%) were from non-public schools. They were mainly students in humanities (39.2%) and social sciences (53.5%). The

remaining majors included science and natural sciences (2.5%), medical (2.2%), engineering and technical (1.4%), and arts-related (1.2%).

More than half of the respondents (69.2%) are full-time students, while the remaining (30.8%) are part-time students.

The respondents ranged in age from 21 years old to over 25 years old, with the following distribution: 21 years old (15.1%), 22 years old (26.5%), 23 years old (21.8%), 24 years old (13.8%), 25 years old (9.4%), and over 25 years old (13.5%).

Nearly half of the respondents (42%) reside in rural areas, while one in three (29.5%) come from small towns with up to 50,000 residents. Additionally, 14.7% of respondents are from medium-sized cities (with populations ranging from 50,000 to 200,000 residents), and the remaining 13.8% are from large provincial cities (with populations exceeding 200,000 residents).

Due to the pandemic, almost half of the students (46.1%) returned to their family homes during the lockdown.

Predictions of academic youth about life changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – findings in the light of demographic changes

To identify potential future changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, survey participants were asked: “Do you feel that your life will definitely change as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?”. This question was semi-open, with “yes” or “no” as possible answers. If respondents chose “yes,” they were prompted to specify how they anticipated their lives would change. The survey results revealed that 64.4% of respondents do not anticipate any life changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while 35.6% of the respondents expect life changes resulting from the pandemic.

Among female respondents, 64.4% anticipate life changes, compared to 62.4% of the male respondents.

When examined by age, respondents under the age of 21 had the highest percentage (41.5%) predicting life changes due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, while the lowest percentage (30.8%) was seen among those aged 25.

Full-time students (38.2%) more frequently predicted life changes than part-time students (30%). The anticipation of life changes due to COVID-19 was declared most frequently by respondents from large cities with over 250,000 residents (41.7%). In contrast, the least frequent anticipation of such changes was from respondents hailing from small towns with up to 50,000 residents (33.1%).

Analysis of responses to the question: “Do you feel your life will definitely change due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?”, due to the variance based on family situation, revealed that singles and those in civil unions most frequently confirmed anticipated changes (37.8%). In contrast, married individuals gave the least such responses (26.8%).

Considering employment type, respondents with casual, non-contractual work were the most likely to anticipate changes following the pandemic (49.2%), while those in contracted employment were the least likely (28.2%).

The survey also showed a notable difference in responses based on the respondents' financial situations. Nearly half (47.7%) of those with difficult financial situations anticipate changes due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, while less than one in three (28.9%) with very good financial situations do.

Respondents who experienced fears and anxieties related to extended social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic were significantly more likely (46.1%) to anticipate changes due to the epidemiological situation than those who reported no such fears or anxieties (22.1%).

Predictions of academic adolescents on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on life changes – results of research in the area of response categorization

Upon receiving an affirmative response to the question, “Do you feel your life will definitely change due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?”, respondents were asked, “In what way?”. This allowed for a qualitative analysis of responses, providing a broader view of how academic youth function in the pandemic reality of COVID-19. Notably, 35.6% of survey participants anticipate life changes as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

The responses were categorized by grouping them into content sets corresponding to the functional area affected by these changes. The responses were grouped into the following six categories: economic changes, work-related changes, interpersonal relationship changes, mental health changes, changes in habits/plans, and life affirmation.

Respondents most frequently anticipated changes in the area of interpersonal relationships, influenced by social isolation, restrictions on public spaces, universities' transition to remote learning, and changes in residence during the pandemic. One in four survey participants (25.4%) who expect their lives to change due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic emphasized alterations in their relationships and social lives. This aspect is particularly crucial to the lifestyle of academic youth. Testimonies from female respondents further indicate fears and anxieties concerning interpersonal contact. The following examples of respondent opinions illustrate these trends: “I’ve always struggled with social interaction. Due to quarantine, I isolated myself at home, devoid of contact with anyone outside my household. Going outdoors now triggers panic attacks, and interacting with people causes intense anxiety” (A187); “People fear social contact and isolate themselves” (A320); “Studying remotely, there’s no chance to meet people from my field of study” (A593); “Certainly, interpersonal relationships have changed.

Trust has become harder, we're cut off from student life, and our best times are slipping away" (A612); "Constant interaction and connections with others are diminishing. We're missing real, necessary conversations that a computer screen can't replace. I personally miss real contact and closeness with people" (A613); "I find it hard to reconnect with my loved ones" (A642); "Household relationships are strained" (A679); "People will become distrustful and closed off" (A731); "I've begun to notice that I don't trust strangers. Their proximity, like standing too close in a line at a store, disturbs me" (A805); "This is a time in my life when I should enjoy life, have fun, meet new people, spend time with friends. The pandemic took that away" (A911).

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic conditions also resulted in numerous difficulties in the mental health area for the surveyed students. A mental health crisis was declared by 15.1% of those who anticipate life changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents emphasized experiencing anxiety related to social interaction, fear for their and their loved ones' health and future, emotional instability, and lowered mood. This sentiment is encapsulated by these statements: "Due to excessive worry and isolation, I'll likely need to consult a psychologist to improve my mental health" (A35); "Fear accompanies me often" (A422); "I believe the whole situation — isolation, e-learning — has significantly deteriorated my self-confidence. My eating disorder has worsened, I don't leave my house, and the only people I interact with are my parents and sister" (A727); "Limited social contact has negatively affected my mental state. I believe the pandemic has worsened my condition (Graves-Basedow disease)" (A827); "My sense of stability is bound to change. I suspect the fear will linger" (A859); "I don't see a promising future for myself. The whole situation is immensely overwhelming. Nothing will ever be the same" (A872); "My perspective of the world has changed. Life is no longer certain. Many things have lost their importance. I have become more introverted" (A991).

Finally, 15.8% of respondents anticipating life changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the need to alter their daily habits and life plans. The pandemic reality forced individuals to revise their life plans, raising awareness of fate's unpredictability and the external factors that can shape the future. Changes have also manifested in daily habits and routines. Pandemic conditions have spurred the development of new habits, especially those related to hygiene. The emergence of these changes is exemplified by the following statements from survey participants: "I had different plans, especially for completing my bachelor's degree" (A424); "I will certainly continue to use disinfectants forever" (A472); "I will pay more attention to what I touch, where I am, and who I interact with. Additionally, I've acquired skills that I'll undoubtedly use in the future, like baking my own bread" (A504); "Much of my time has been lost to unproductivity, changing lifestyles, and postponing plans" (A605); "It's uncertain what the next few months will bring, and whether our future plans will materialize" (A693).

13% of respondents anticipating a life change as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic highlighted the affirmation of life, re-evaluation of personal values and priorities, existential reflections, the importance of everyday minutiae, gratitude, and the value of health and relationships. These insights, they believe, are effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some representative responses: “I will appreciate more of what I have” (A55); “I look forward to appreciating life without constant anxiety” (A136); “I’ve begun to value health more” (A190); “I hope to truly notice and be sincerely grateful for everything I previously took for granted” (A349); “I’ve started to recognize what’s really necessary for a normal life and what’s simply a marketing ploy. Our loved ones, our families – that’s what truly matters!” (A369); “I will value the opportunity to commune with nature more” (A685); “I will appreciate many things much more than before. The pandemic has shown me the importance of staying connected with others” (A714); “I will extract even more from life than before” (A798); “I believe I’ll start recognizing what I have and complain less” (A834); “I think I will value my family and the small good things that happen daily more” (A981); “My value hierarchy will change, mainly in the scheme of having or being?” (A1020); “Health will be my priority” (A1068); “I had more time to understand myself and discover my needs, who I am, what I do and why. I’ve grown more self-loving” (A1161); “Life will definitely change. COVID-19 has taught us that we can’t predict what will happen next. I think I’ll focus more on the present and worry less” (A718).

A worsening economic situation was reported by 10.2% of respondents who expect life changes due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In order to make an in-depth analysis of the change in the respondents’ material situation, their statements on the subject were analyzed qualitatively. The analysis revealed that the economic crisis was significantly influenced by challenges associated with personal or a loved one’s employment, the global economic situation, rising prices, and difficulties saving money. These trends are suggested by the following selected statements from female respondents: “I’m sure I’ll continue to have financial problems for a long time to come. I had to give up studying abroad due to a lack of funds this year: (A534); “It may negatively affect my husband’s business and our finances” (A564); “I am afraid of not having enough to live on, let alone enjoy life” (A657); “I am worried about the economic crisis, which may impact my family’s financial stability” (A626).

Inextricably linked to the financial situation is the state of professional functioning. In this realm, 20.4% of female survey participants who anticipate life changes due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic noted alterations. The most common changes were job loss, difficulty finding employment, and the necessity to switch careers. The lack of professional stability is illustrated by these statements from survey participants: “As a student, I won’t find a job for a long time”(A19); “There are few opportunities for college graduates, making it harder to enter the labor market” (A30); “My plans to start work earlier due to downsizing at schools have

unfortunately been delayed” (A457); “I’m having trouble finding a summer job” (A569); “I will be forced to change jobs” (A677).

Predictions of academic youth on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on life changes – results of a study comparing two stages of data collection

Data collection for the study was conducted in two time cohorts: the first stage spanned from May 2020 to July 2020, while the second stage ran from October 2020 to January 2021. The two periods differed significantly in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and its effects on individual functioning, as well as the public mood at the time. The first wave of the pandemic was characterized by uncertainty, a need to adapt to new conditions, and fear for personal and loved ones’ health. The second wave, on the other hand, was a time when individuals had already adjusted to the realities of the pandemic, and there was a growing awareness of the longevity of this state.

A quantitative analysis based on the survey’s timing was conducted, asking: “Do you feel that your life will definitely change as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?”. Considering the affirmative response revealing a premonition of life changes following COVID-19, the results indicate that in the second data collection period (November 2020-January 2021), female respondents were more likely to anticipate such a life change (43.5%) compared to the first time cohort of the study (26.5%). No premonition of life changes as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was declared by 73.5% of respondents in the first survey period, whereas in the second period it was 56.8%.

Regarding the temporal perspective of data collection in the qualitative analysis of affirmative responses revealing a premonition of life changes in the aftermath of COVID-19, the results show percentage differences. In the first survey period, the economic crisis was indicated by 18% of female respondents, compared to 6% in the second. A labor crisis was signaled by 25% of female respondents in the first stage of data collection, versus 17.9% in the second stage. The relationship crisis affected 14% of respondents in the period May–July 2020, but in the period October 2020–January 2021 it was 31.5%. The mental health crisis affected a similar group of respondents (about 15%) in the two time cohorts. Changes in habits or plans affected 20% of people in the first period of the study, while in the second period it was 13.6%. Appreciation of life was declared by 8% of female respondents in the first wave of the pandemic, while in the second wave, 15.8% signaled this change.

As time progressed during the pandemic, individuals adapted to the new prevailing conditions and developed coping strategies to deal with the current reality, as evidenced by one respondent’s statement: “At first I didn’t cope with the

new situation, I struggled with studying remotely. It was bad for me, however, over time I learned new coping skills” (A792).

Discussion and conclusions

The research findings presented in this article point to the multitude of life changes anticipated by academic youth as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes particularly manifested in the area of interpersonal relations, due to the need to maintain social isolation under pandemic conditions. The period of study is a time of particularly intense social life and a quest for a life partner due to the developmental peculiarities of early adulthood. The reality of the SARS-CoV-02 pandemic has complicated the developmental tasks of early adulthood significantly. The relationship crisis became particularly noticeable during the second period of data collection, suggesting a potential long-term deterioration of interpersonal relationship difficulties during subsequent waves of the pandemic.

The specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic had significant implications for the financial conditions and job situations of the surveyed academic youth.

Given the experience of the SARS-CoV-02 virus pandemic, it's reasonable to suggest that this was a time when individuals, including university students, frequently found themselves in psychological crises, and consequently needed to revise their life plans. The scientific findings presented in this article support this claim.

The study's results confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the daily functioning, quality of life, and mental well-being of academic youth. Faced with the need for sudden adaptation to unprecedented lifestyle norms, perceived fear for one's own health/life and those of loved ones, and the uncertainty of the future, pandemic conditions can be seen as a factor inducing psychological crisis in individuals (Babicki & Mastalerz-Migas, 2020). This state is a result of experiencing an event or problem so challenging that effective resolution becomes unattainable due to insufficient resources in terms of coping. A critical feature of being in crisis is its influence on the individual's future trajectory (James & Gilliland, 2006).

The perception of risk, defined as an individual's beliefs formed from subjective evaluations of values and feelings in a situation prior to the occurrence of specific damage as harmful outcomes of that situation (Renn, 2006), also significantly impacted people's states during the pandemic era. This perception of risk, as understood here, influences the behaviors an individual adopts, including preventive and prophylactic measures. Compared to the general adult population, student adolescents faced more diverse challenges, including limitations in developing work experience, a lack of broad-based support, and a lack of coping strategies. This made them particularly susceptible to psychological difficulties and issues (Vagni et al., 2022). Negative life experiences combined with relatively

lower adaptive abilities and lower levels of psychological resilience make young people aged 18 to 25 particularly vulnerable to disorders due to experiencing extreme stress (Mozid, 2022). At the same time, substantial individual variation in responses to stressors is observed (Hanson et al., 2020). Notably, countries experiencing long-term lockdowns, such as the United States, have reported a significant increase in psychological difficulties, especially among vulnerable populations, including youth (Wang et al., 2020).

In assessing the perception of a situation as difficult or crisis-ridden, the personal resources of individuals are important, particularly resilience or mental toughness. This is perceived as flexibility and adaptability to changing conditions, and mental resistance to difficult, problematic factors (Glen, Schiraldi, 2019) This competence aids individuals in quickly adapting to existing conditions and helps prevent stress-related disorders such as anxiety and depression. This is a crucial justification for fostering this trait in today's unpredictable sociocultural reality. Therefore, resilience has proven to be a valuable resource for individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among young people (including academics), and could be a key recommendation for preventive measures in this regard.

The unexpected and unusual circumstances of a pandemic disrupting the routine of daily life, combined with the uncertainty of predicting the future and the knowledge of impending life changes, undeniably constitute a stressor associated with the experience of crisis and anxiety. Stress, as understood in R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman's transactional theory (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984), is "a particular relationship between a person and the environment, which the person assesses as taxing or exceeding his resources and endangering his well-being" (Terelak, 2001, p. 70–72). In the experience of stress, the objective factors are not as crucial as the subjective evaluation and perception of these factors by the individual, which is related to planning and anticipating future events. The cognitive context of the situation being evaluated and the subjective perception of it as threatening are therefore important. The pandemic reality undoubtedly threatened individuals' well-being, but the intensity of this perceived threat is also linked to individuals' activities, the relationship between the individual and the environment, and chosen coping strategies. These strategies proved particularly relevant during the pandemic as conscious, purposeful actions taken in response to a situation perceived as stressful. These actions helped regulate emotions and focused on actively resolving problems or at least improving difficult circumstances. The popularity of activities such as sewing masks, shopping for the elderly, and supporting medical personnel (for instance, by organizing food deliveries by the food industry) reflects the importance of individuals' efforts in combating the pandemic. Dealing with difficult, stressful factors through active, task-oriented strategies has also been highlighted in studies by A. Bokshanin, relating to adolescents' stress in response to a flood disaster, which may be comparable to a pandemic situation (Bokshanin, 2002).

The reality of the pandemic necessitated changes in existing behavioral patterns, both in terms of daily life and in the long term. Breaking routine, instability, insecurity, and difficulty in predicting one's future are distinctive experiences of people (including female and male students) during the initial phase of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic. The reality of constant change brought about by the pandemic has led to flexibility and adaptability becoming defining characteristics of individuals within it. However, it's important to note that an outcome of these traits is the increasingly perceived uncertainty of future outcomes, the difficulty in predicting the future, and a focus on the present. This is related to humans' need to feel a sense of security based on routine, consistency, and predictability (Giddens, 2010). Consequently, a dissonance emerges between the need for constancy and functioning under conditions of perpetual change. The resolution may lie in the belief that one can trust oneself and one's competencies first and foremost, rather than the conditions of the external environment (Mamzer, 2008). A shift towards self-development and a focus on one's inner spiritual experiences and feelings are noticeable trends that serve as a coping mechanism with the challenging, crisis conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Keeping in mind the psychosocial specifics of the functioning of academic youth and the developmental tasks of early adulthood (Przetacznik-Gierowska, Tyszkowa, 1996), it is crucial to underline that these changes required special skills to adapt to the pandemic conditions and to undertake contemplation of their impact on life changes and future paths.

Any change in a person's life can be marked by its developmental, regressive, or destructive nature (Matuszewska, 1997). It is challenging to clearly categorize the changes in careers, interpersonal relationships, civic engagement, and spiritual life brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of the academic youth studied. Like other transitional situations (Anderson et al., 2011), they can have short-, medium- and long-term effects that are hard to predict. Most of them are characterized by a negative peculiarity, but their final outcome doesn't necessarily carry negative connotations for one's existence. Indeed, some crises and challenging situations can have developmental significance and lead to a more satisfying life (Polukhina, 2018; Robinson, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013).

The data presented here highlight areas of student activity that require increased support and intervention from counselors and professionals, particularly in the realms of mental health and career development. They can also inspire future research analyzing the situation of young people during a pandemic. Indeed, more in-depth data would aid specialists in choosing more suitable intervention methods. The design and planning of support for academic youth in psychological and counseling services should take into consideration the significance of individual experiences during the pandemic period.

In conclusion, restrictions on study, work, and social life due to the need for maintaining social distance and enduring long-term social isolation were

associated with numerous changes in the lives of female and male students, as evidenced by the results of the empirical studies undertaken.

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