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DIFFICULTIES IN THE FUNCTIONING OF "EMERGING ADULT" UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN POLAND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Trudności w funkcjonowaniu studiujących „wschodzących dorosłych” w Polsce w czasie pandemii COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the predominant difficulties in the functioning of "emerging adults" in Poland during the COVID-19 and to determine whether the pandemic has had an impact on reconciling one's education with other commitments. In addition, an attempt was made to answer the question about the association between changes in leisure time and difficulties in studying and about its affect the life satisfaction of students. 433 students (18–29), were examined via original questionnaire and the *Life Satisfaction* scale.

The results of the analyses show that shifting education to a virtual learning environment creates difficulties when it comes to paying attention to the transmitted content, online interaction, and carrying out tasks assigned by lecturers. Forced isolation has challenged students' skills regarding leisure time management. The overall increase in difficulties would suggest a decrease in life satisfaction amongst the respondents and an increase in negative emotions.

Keywords: difficulties, students, "emerging adults", COVID-19, Poland, life satisfaction.

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest zidentyfikowanie dominujących trudności w funkcjonowaniu studiujących „wschodzących dorosłych” w Polsce w czasie trwania pandemii COVID-19 oraz określenie, czy pandemia ma wpływ na wzrost trudności w godzeniu nauki z innymi obowiązkami. Ponadto podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy zmiany dotyczące czasu wolnego wiążą się z trudnościami w studiowaniu i w jaki sposób występujące trudności wpływają na satysfakcję z życia studentów. Badania ilościowe, przy pomocy autorskiego kwestionariusza oraz skali *Satysfakcji z życia*, przeprowadzono wśród 433 studentów w wieku 18–29 lat.

Wyniki analiz dowodzą, że przeniesienie całej edukacji na płaszczyznę wirtualnego środowiska uczenia się generuje powstawanie trudności w zakresie koncentracji uwagi na przekazywanych treściach, interakcji online oraz wykonywaniu zadań zleconych przez wykładowców. Przymusowa izolacja zweryfikowała umiejętności w zakresie konstruktywnego zagospodarowania czasu wolnego. Ogólny wzrost trudności implikuje spadek satysfakcji z życia ankietowanych oraz natężenie negatywnych emocji.

Słowa kluczowe: trudności, studenci, „wschodzący dorośli”, COVID-19, Polska, satysfakcja z życia.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of life. Changes have impacted all sectors, however the extent of the forced transformation seen in higher education is creating various difficulties in the lives of students. The effects of the global pandemic are determining not only the types of change taking place in education, but also exacerbating existing problems regarding how students get on in life, jeopardising their proper functioning.

The Polish government, like many other countries' governments, adopted measures to reduce social contacts as its main strategy for fighting the pandemic. Traditional teaching has transformed into a new world of mediated contacts.

A nationwide study conducted in August 2020 among students in Poland shows that remote education is rated less highly than in-person classes (Muda, 2020, 5). Online learning does not provide the possibility of creating "personal" and direct contact (Stewart, 2007, 37). The main disadvantage of remote learning is poor communication between students and lecturers, which is caused by a predominance of asynchronous teaching (Muda, 2020, 12).

"Emerging adulthood" – the term originally proposed by Arnett (2000) to describe life period between 18 and 25 but in subsequent publications, Arnett suggests postponing the age limit to 29 (Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett, 2016).

Given that the majority of students are in "emerging adulthood" between the ages of 18 and 29 (GUS, 2020.12.10), a period distinguished by numerous changes in various aspects of life (Arnett, 2010, 255–275), the effects of the pandemic appear to be far-reaching. "Emerging adulthood" is a period of searching for one's identity, instability, self-obsession, feelings of being "in between", and an age full of opportunities. Explorations of one's nascent adulthood make this period extremely stimulating but at the same time unstable. Arnett writes about the constant change of plans, ongoing adaptation to circumstances or desires (Arnett, 2015).

Students starting university set themselves a variety of goals. In the case of "emerging adults," these include not only the issue of preparing oneself for a career, but also a number of other experiences, such as making new acquaintances, friendships, social relationships, and engaging in leisure activities. Learning reduced solely to online engagement means the loss of many opportunities for personal development and to create relationships.

Such a situation can significantly increase the experiencing of negative emotions and the emergence of concerns about different areas of existence, which can have an impact on life satisfaction. A subjective assessment of life satisfaction is the result of comparing one's situation with the standards one has set oneself. If the outcome of the comparison is satisfactory, it results in a feeling of satisfaction; satisfaction here relates to either momentary or longer-lasting thoughts and feelings, covering not so much a specific area of life but more general constructs (Diener et al., 2004).

The pandemic and the demands inherent in maintaining social distance have had a significant impact not only on matters related to studying, but also on the scope – and people's ways – of spending free time. In the case of "emerging adults", leisure is of particular importance for individual development and identity formation (Layland et al., 2018). Leisure activities can also have stimulating effects. In addition, habits and skills shaped by these activities (such as self-discipline) can be generalised and translate into academic performance (Bergim, 1992).

The process of learning, which is specific to adult man, leads to a profound transformation in the way he perceives and interprets himself and the world and makes changes to the reality around him (Mezirow, 1991, 11). This transformation, which is a kind of revolution in the individual development of man, involving an attempt to reach the truth about himself and the world and to increase the scope of his own independence in thought and action, was undoubtedly subject to certain limitations resulting from the pandemic reality. The frame of reference, as an individual interpretative system constituted by habits of minds and points of view (Mezirow, 1997, 5), thus acts as a filter that influences the interpretation of experiences. By gaining the capacity for critical self-reflection, adults thus gain the ability to change the way they interpret their experience. This reflective capacity is not uniquely adult and certainly occurs in emerging adulthood, the transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood. Critical self-reflection can result in changes to the existing frame of reference, a kind of reframing (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007).

Purpose of the research

Changes to student life include not only remote learning, but also limits to certain aspects linked to the desocialisation and socialisation of young people. The requirements to maintain social distance have led to changes in direct contacts and the way people spend their free time. This especially affects the lives of "emerging adults", as opportunities to experiment with roles are limited.

1. In order to investigate the difficulties faced by "emerging adult" students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following research questions were asked:
2. What difficulties do surveyed Polish students face in studying and functioning during the pandemic?
3. Does the pandemic have an impact on the increasing difficulties involved in reconciling learning with other areas of life? What socio-demographic variables affect difficulties of respondents with learning during the pandemic?
4. Do changes in leisure time involve difficulties in studying according to respondents' experiences?
5. How do difficulties affect respondents' life satisfaction and negative emotions?

Methods and tools

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was conducted using two survey questionnaires:

Life Satisfaction scale (SWLS) – by Diener et al. (1985) adapted for Polish use by Juczynski (2001). The results obtained using the SWLS scale were recalculated and expressed as sten scores according to how the test author recommended they be interpreted. Next, subgroups were identified according to the overall level of life satisfaction (low, average, and high scores).

An original survey questionnaire written by the author, which contains questions about: difficulties learning during the pandemic, difficulties in reconciling learning with household duties, family and professional commitments, as well as leisure time, and the intensity of negative emotions.

The research was approved by the Scientific Ethics Commission of the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw. The survey was conducted online, in accordance with the principles of ethical scientific research involving human subjects.

Selecting the sample and the characteristics of the subjects

The participants were selected using a non-random (purposive) selection method (Łobocki, 2010; Babbie, 2007). The subjects were found at higher education institutions by asking them to complete a survey (prepared in MS Forms) provided at the given link, as well as by using the snowball method. The results of the study based on non-random, targeted selection cannot be generalized to the entire population (Rubacha, 2008). Despite the awareness of the limitations of the above-mentioned selection method, this decision was dictated by the conditions for conducting research during the pandemic (Łobocki, 2006) – the need to obtain consent for research at individual universities and the availability of respondents.

Choosing respondents from among the "emerging adult" students took place based on the assumption that this group (due to frequently having to combine their studies with other responsibilities) is particularly vulnerable to various difficulties in the learning process, including combining education with other areas of life, which can result in a decrease in life satisfaction.

The study was conducted among 433 people aged 18–29 (Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett, 2015), of which 78.98% were women, 20.32% were men, and 0.69% identified as "other". Their average age was 18–29; $M = 21.69$.

The statistical analysis of the obtained results was carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics computer program (version 6.0. Windows). The analysis used nonparametric tests.

Results

Difficulties experienced by students

Subjects' responses indicate that focusing (26.8%) and speaking in synchronous classes (22%) is most difficult. On the other hand, keeping up attendance (61.7%) and using remote learning tools (29.6%) proved to be the least problematic issues.

The analysis showed significant correlations between different difficulties, indicating cumulative difficulties among the tested students (Figure 1). The interpretation of the correlation coefficient is in accordance with the instructions of Górniak & Wachnicki (2004, 202) and Wieczorkowska & Wierzbinski (2007, 278).

Figure 1*Correlations between difficulties (n = 433)*

	Concentration during online classes "live"	Preparing for classes	Performing tasks assigned by lecturers	Working with other students	Using remote learning tools	Speaking in discussions during live online classes
Maintaining attendance	0.215**	0.254**	0.277**	0.172**	0.198**	0.059
Concentration during online classes "live"		0.433**	0.297**	0.212**	0.223**	0.307**
Preparing for classes			0.554**	0.248**	0.265**	0.205**
Performing tasks assigned by lecturers				0.318**	0.347**	0.250**
Working with other students					0.333**	0.277**
Using remote learning tools						0.324**
<0,1						
0.1–0.199						
0.2–0.299						
0.3–0.399						
0.4–0.499						
0.5–0.599						

The largest proportion of respondents identified difficulties in reconciling learning with work responsibilities (22% – definitely yes; 36% – likely). When it comes to reconciling learning with family and household responsibilities, the majority of respondents declared that there were no difficulties.

The analysis shows significant positive correlations between difficulties in reconciling learning with family commitments, indicating the coexistence of the difficulties included in the study. A very high correlation can be seen between difficulties in reconciling learning with household chores and difficulties in reconciling learning with family commitments ($\rho = 0.700$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, average correlations are observed between difficulties in reconciling learning with household duties and reconciling learning with work responsibilities ($\rho = 0.482$, $p < 0.01$) and between difficulties in reconciling learning with family commitments and reconciling learning with professional responsibilities ($\rho = 0.428$, $p < 0.01$).

Difficulties in reconciling learning with household duties are linked to difficulties learning during the pandemic (measured by index). There were weak correlations between difficulties encountered when reconciling learning with household duties

($\rho = -0.273$, $p < 0.01$) and family commitments ($\rho = -0.246$, $p < 0.01$) and difficulties with just learning, while in the case of reconciling learning with professional responsibilities an average correlation was observed ($\rho = -0.372$, $p < 0.01$).

Among those areas of life included in the study, the ones that deteriorated the most during the pandemic were “face to face” social contacts with 69% of respondents noting a significant change. In second place were hobby activities – 29% of respondents said there had been a significant deterioration in this type of activity, and 26% reported a slight deterioration. Remote social contacts, on the other hand, intensified (37% of respondents observed significant increases and 24% noted minor rises). Respondents' answers regarding professional and learning commitments do not reveal any dominant trend.

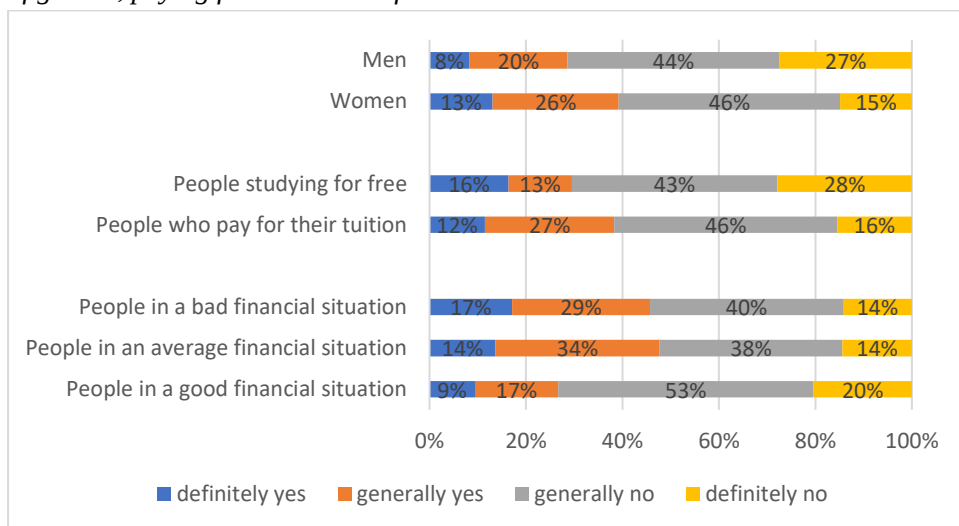
Reconciling learning with other aspects of life in the pandemic

The difficulties linked to reconciling educational activities with household and family responsibilities are typically stable, as most of the responses indicated a lack of change in this area. However, in respect of reconciling learning with professional duties, the majority of respondents pointed to an increase in difficulties during the pandemic (40.3% – Increase in difficulties; 37.6% – unchanged).

The analysis revealed significant differences in difficulties related to reconciling learning with family commitments in terms of gender ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 8.210$, $p < 0.05$), tuition fees ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 9.663$, $p < 0.05$), and financial situation ($\chi^2_{(6)} = 18.314$, $p < 0.05$) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

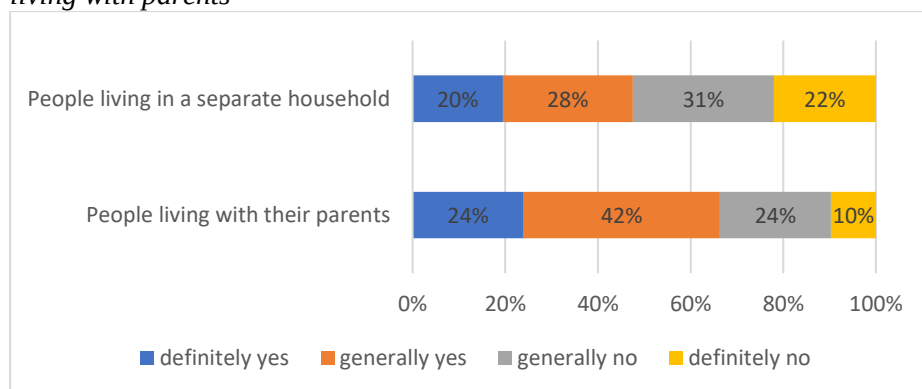
Differentiation of difficulties in reconciling learning with family commitments in terms of gender, paying for studies and financial situation



In the case of reconciling education with professional commitments, there was variation due to living with parents (Figure 3). Significant differences have occurred only between people living with their parents and living in a separate household when it comes to changes in the difficulties in reconciling learning with professional commitments ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 8.358$, $p < 0.05$). People living with their parents were more likely than others to experience increased difficulties in this area.

Figure 3

Difficulties in reconciling learning with professional responsibilities in terms of living with parents



Among those living with their parents, the majority of subjects admitted to having experienced an increase in difficulty (48.5%) or a lack of change – 28%. By contrast, among those living alone, the highest proportion of respondents reported a lack of change (50%), and 30% said there had been increased difficulties (Figure 3).

Students' difficulties and leisure time

The analysis showed that respondents who feel strongly that they have more free time than before the pandemic experience fewer learning-related difficulties ($\rho = -0.143$, $p < 0.01$). Learning-related difficulties were determined with the aid of an index. The index has reached a satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha level and its distribution does not vary from the normal distribution. On the other hand, the more clearly the subjects experience problems with leisure time management, the more difficult it is for them to learn ($\rho = -0.135$, $p < 0.01$). The results indicate that excess free time translates into efficiency only for those who have developed the ability to manage their leisure time. An important correlation also was seen with regard to the necessity of giving up one's favourite leisure activities; the more distinctly respondents felt the necessity, the greater their difficulties learning ($\rho = -0.200$, $p < 0.01$). Among those who have more free time during the pandemic, there is also a correlation between learning-related difficulties and

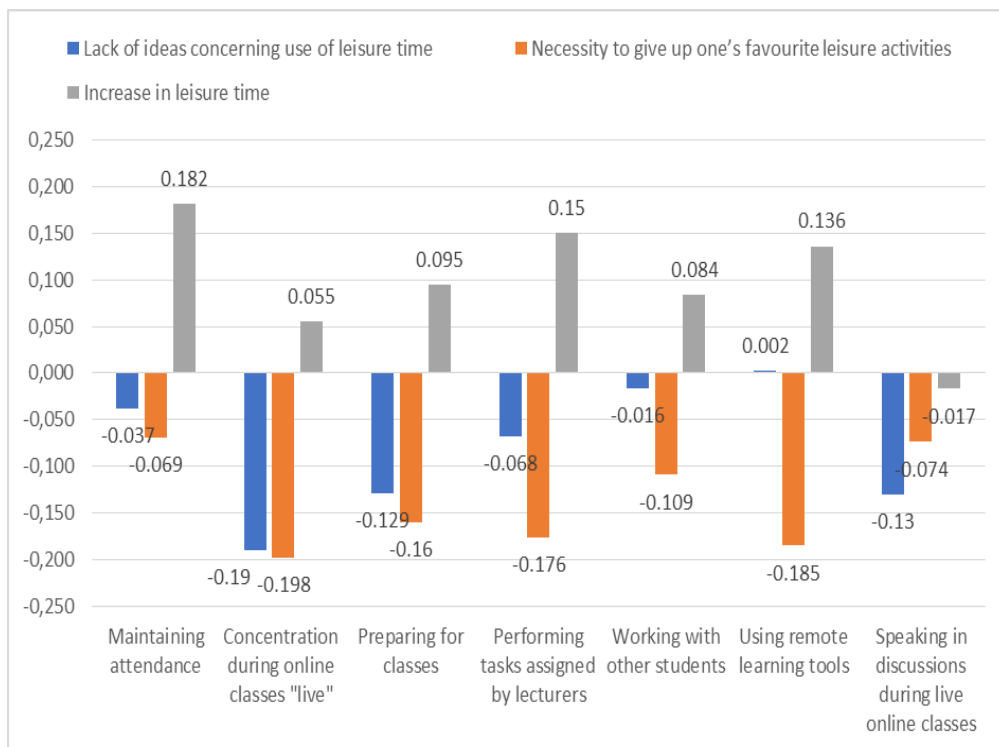
difficulties in managing free time ($\rho = -0.238$, $p < 0.001$) as well as the need to give up favourite leisure activities ($\rho = -0.130$, $p < 0.005$).

The analysis also includes various activities associated with remote learning. The increase in leisure time coexists with less difficulty in keeping up attendance ($\rho = 0.182$, $p < 0.01$), performing tasks assigned by lecturers ($\rho = 0.150$, $p < 0.01$), and using remote learning tools ($\rho = 0.136$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, a lack of ideas concerning use of leisure time is associated with difficulties in concentrating on real-time classes ($\rho = -0.190$, $p < 0.01$), preparing for classes ($\rho = -0.129$, $p < 0.01$), and speaking in class discussions ($\rho = -0.130$, $p < 0.01$) (Figure 4). In the case of people who have more free time during the pandemic, there was also a correlation between difficulties in managing free time and performing tasks assigned by lecturers ($\rho = -0.131$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, as in the sample as a whole, there were correlations with difficulties in maintaining concentration in class ($\rho = -0.246$, $p < 0.01$), preparation for classes ($\rho = -0.160$, $p = 0.01$) and speaking in discussions ($\rho = -0.220$, $p < 0.01$).

Furthermore, the necessity to give up one's favourite leisure activities translates into increased difficulties in some areas related to remote learning such as: concentration in class ($\rho = -0.198$, $p < 0.01$), preparation for classes ($\rho = -0.160$, $p < 0.01$), performance of tasks assigned by lecturers ($\rho = -0.176$, $p < 0.01$), working with other students ($\rho = -0.109$, $p < 0.01$), and using remote learning tools ($\rho = -0.185$, $p < 0.01$) (Figure 4). By contrast, among those who have more free time during the pandemic, there were correlations between having to give up one's favourite activities and difficulties in concentrating during class ($\rho = -0.174$, $p < 0.01$) and using remote learning tools ($\rho = -0.148$, $p = 0.01$).

Figure 4

Correlation between difficulties in remote learning and changes concerning leisure time during amid the COVID-19 pandemic



*statistically significant correlation

Respondents who have more free time have fewer difficulties in reconciling learning with family ($\rho = -0.318$, $p < 0.01$), professional ($\rho = -0.300$, $p < 0.01$) and domestic commitments ($\rho = -0.325$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, people who have had to give up their favourite leisure activities have more difficulties in reconciling learning with household ($\rho = 0.244$, $p < 0.01$), family ($\rho = 0.249$, $p < 0.01$) and professional commitments ($\rho = -0.196$, $p < 0.01$).

The increase in problems with concentration in class coexists with a decrease in hobby activities, ($\tau b = -0.150$, $p < 0.01$) and a decrease in "face to face" social contacts ($\tau b = -0.129$, $p < 0.01$). The latter issue – the decrease in the frequency of direct social contacts – is associated with an increased difficulties in working with other students ($\tau b = -0.105$, $p < 0.05$), keeping up attendance ($\tau b = -0.106$, $p < 0.05$) and speaking in class ($\tau b = -0.106$, $p < 0.05$). In the case of changes in learning commitments, there was only a correlation with difficulties in speaking up in class discussions ($\tau b = -0.107$, $p < 0.01$).

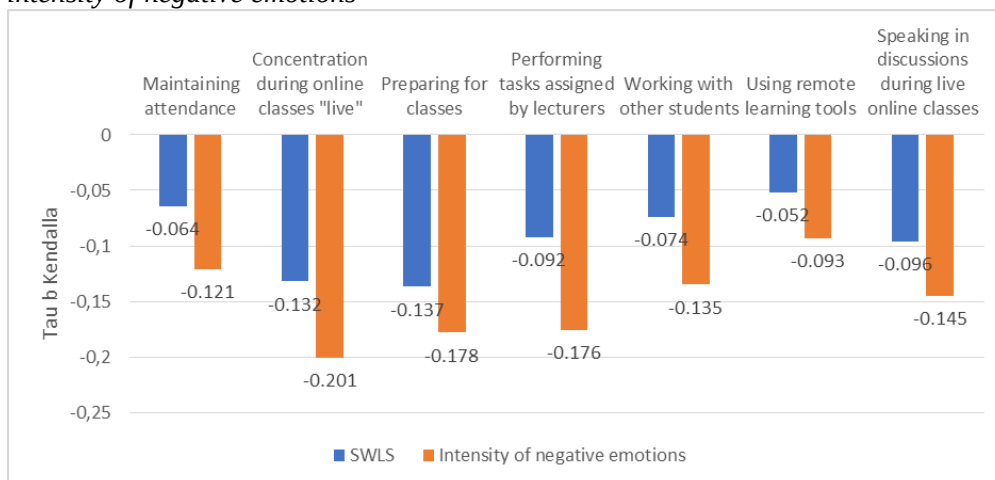
Students' difficulties and life satisfaction

In the study group, 133 subjects (32%) ended up with low scores on the life satisfaction scale, while 164 people (40%) had average scores and 117 respondents had high scores (28%).

There was a significant correlation between difficulties in remote learning (included in the index ranging from 7 to 35) and the level of life satisfaction measured on the SWLS scale ($\tau_b = -0.136$, $p < 0.01$). As learning-related difficulties increase, the level of overall life satisfaction decreases. An analysis of the various aspects related to remote learning showed an important correlation between the level of life satisfaction and difficulty with concentrating in on-line classes ($\tau_b = -0.132$, $p < 0.01$) as well as life satisfaction and preparation for classes ($\tau_b = -0.137$, $p < 0.01$). The increase in difficulties in these activities was accompanied by a decrease in the level of life satisfaction (Figure 5). Regarding the performance of tasks assigned by lecturers ($\tau_b = -0.092$, $p < 0.05$), working with other students ($\tau_b = -0.074$, $p < 0.05$) and speaking in discussions ($\tau_b = -0.096$, $p < 0.01$) there was a weak correlation.

Figure 5

Correlation between difficulties in remote learning and level of life satisfaction and intensity of negative emotions



*statistically significant correlation

Learning-related difficulties are also associated with the intensity of negative emotions ($\tau_b = -0.216$, $p < 0.01$). The higher the degree of difficulty in studying remotely, as measured by the index, the more often negative emotions were seen among the subjects. A detailed analysis showed a significant correlation between the intensity of negative emotions and a difficulty in keeping up attendance ($\tau_b = -0.121$, $p < 0.01$), concentration in class ($\tau_b = -0.201$, $p < 0.01$), preparation for classes ($\tau_b = -0.178$, $p < 0.01$), performance of tasks

assigned by lecturers ($\tau_b = -0.176$, $p < 0.01$), working with other students ($\tau_b = -0.135$, $p < 0.01$), and speaking in class discussions ($\tau_b = -0.145$, $p < 0.01$) (Figure 5).

There were significant correlations between the level of life satisfaction and the amount of difficulties in reconciling studies with household ($\rho = 0.102$, $p < 0.05$) and family commitments ($\rho = 0.113$, $p < 0.05$). Greater difficulties in these areas were associated with lower levels of life satisfaction. There was a correlation between a lack of ideas for leisure time management and a lower level of life satisfaction ($\rho = 0.239$, $p < 0.01$) and a higher intensity of negative emotions ($\rho = 0.242$, $p < 0.01$). Significant correlations also were observed among people who had more free time during the pandemic ($\rho = 0.264$, $p < 0.01$, $\rho = 0.267$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Also, giving up one's favourite leisure activities is associated with a lower level of life satisfaction ($\rho = 0.191$, $p < 0.01$) and more intense negative emotions ($\rho = 0.152$, $p < 0.01$). This relationship also occurred in the group that experienced an increase in free time during the pandemic ($\rho = 0.130$, $p < 0.05$, $\rho = 0.136$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Our research has shown that the greatest difficulties associated with learning during the pandemic concern concentration in class, as well as the interactive aspects of speaking in discussions and collaborating with other students. These results correspond to the findings of a study conducted in the first decade of the 21st century among students attending online courses. Direct communication enhances the learning process, gives more opportunities to share knowledge and ask for help; it is "easier" and more interactive (Miliszewska, 2007).

The importance of interactive aspects is also indicated by the fact that, among the changes in the lives of students, the greatest number of correlations with learning-related difficulties occurred when the intensification of direct social contacts decreased. It can be assumed that the absence of a reference group affects the interactive aspects of studying and attention span. Online learning requires students to have independent work skills (Rashid & Jadav, 2020) as well as the special ability of self-regulation. Artino & Stephens (2009) define self-regulation (in the context of online learning) as the engagement of participants who can effectively control their own learning experiences. This is due to the more autonomous nature of online teaching when compared to in-person courses, where the teacher can compensate for the shortcomings of students' self-regulation.

With regards to the reconciling of learning with other commitments, the pandemic has had its greatest impact on the relationship between learning and work. In addition, respondents living with their parents were more likely than others to point to difficulties in reconciling work and study, which highlights the specific nature of the "emerging adulthood" period, as it is a stage related to separation from the family, the development

of autonomy and making one's own decisions outside the family and others' supervision (Duncan et al., 2017).

As our research has shown, difficulties learning are associated with changes in leisure time – one's amount of free time and how it is spent. People who have more free time than before the pandemic have fewer difficulties learning, but problems managing this time and the necessity to give up much-loved activities carried out in one's free time are associated with greater difficulties in studying.

Confronted with the pandemic reality, emerging adults find themselves in a situation of significant restriction of these opportunities for diverse explorations and attempts at new roles and relationships. Pandemic-induced restrictions may have contributed to limiting the development of transformational learning of "emerging adults" in certain areas in particular. One of the areas of transformational learning mentioned by Mezirow is communicative learning¹ (Mezirow, 2000, 10), where, in the process of interaction, communication partners learn and agree on the meanings they assign to each other. This process requires attentive interpersonal interactions, which, due to taking place during the pandemic via online platforms, have become much shallower, often lacking even the ability to see a fellow interlocutor. Mezirow emphasizes that communicative learning is often more important than instrumental learning (mainly related to testing the truth of hypotheses) for the development of transformational learning. This is because meanings are created in the process of social communication, in the world of social interaction. Learning undertaken in higher education is an excellent opportunity to develop critical judgment in the process of interpersonal encounters with alternative viewpoints and perspectives of lecturers, staff and other students (Mezirow, 2003). Such encounters can challenge existing ideas, values and judgments, and through this process result in transformative learning. Meanwhile, the students surveyed during the first wave of the pandemic in Poland, drastically cut off from the possibility of unrestricted communication with other students, did not have the opportunity to fully form transformational learning in themselves. This may have manifested itself in the difficulties reported by students particularly in the interactional area, as unnatural, incomplete interpersonal contacts according to Mezirow's theory hindered effective and satisfying learning that included critical self-reflection. Remaining mainly in the domain of earlier developmental formative learning (learning

¹ Communicative learning is related to the world of social communication. The essence of communication learning is to learn to convey one's own thoughts to others and to understand messages, in whatever form, formulated by other people. This makes it necessary to assess the meanings of other people's statements and thus to critically evaluate one's own assumptions and those of the communication partner. It is necessary, for example, to assess the hidden subtext of the utterance, literalness or metaphoricality in the treatment of the message, the partner's credibility, his/her view of the world, the purpose of communication, etc. (Mezirow, 2000, 10).

that takes place without changing the frame of reference, Mezirow, 2000, 19) and/or a possible attempt to suddenly change the interpretative frame of the pandemic situation under conditions of specific social isolation (the research was carried out in the first wave of the pandemic thus in the period of shock caused by the new situation), may have contributed to noticeable difficulties and negative emotions related to learning and functioning in an unnatural academic environment.

A majority of the students in "emerging adulthood," who we studied during the pandemic, noted an average level of life satisfaction. This corresponds to the results of studies of the Polish population (Juczyński, 2001, 130) showing that students are generally moderately satisfied with their lives. At the same time, it can be seen that the difficulties they experienced in remote learning, especially increasing difficulties in concentrating and preparing for classes, led to a decrease in life satisfaction. Similarly, a decrease in life satisfaction was associated with increasing difficulties in reconciling learning with family and household commitments. Repeated measurements of the same group of adult Poles in March, April, May and June 2020 (Hamer et al., 2021) also show a decrease in life satisfaction amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mezirow (1991, XIII) the ability to make transformative learning determines actions taken, hopes, but also satisfaction with life. Recent research (Sherman, 2020) shows that the metacognitive awareness (that is connected with transformative education) supports well-being in higher education – brings with it equanimity, well-being, and even happiness. Thus, students who are deprived of the opportunity of transformative learning, which occurs naturally for them in numerous interactions, may experience a deterioration in their psychological well-being and sense of satisfaction with their educational endeavours.

The issue of life satisfaction seems to be more resistant to changes driven by various external (the outbreak of pandemics) or internal factors (capabilities, interests of subjects), compared to the issue of the emotions experienced by the subjects. Similarly, studies among Turkish students (Aslan et al., 2020) seem to confirm fairly high stability when it comes to the issue of the generalised cognitive assessment of subjective well-being.

Our original research has shown a link between giving up one's favourite leisure activities and lower levels of life satisfaction. Other studies have shown a positive correlation between levels of physical activity and quality of life, and a weak negative link between physical activity levels, depression and anxiety (Ozdemir et al., 2020). In addition, physical activity has encouraged positive emotions during the pandemic, although it does not inhibit the occurrence of negative emotions (Maher et al., 2021).

It should be noted that the research broadens the knowledge of emerging adults, the way they perceive difficulties and learning crises. The reality of the pandemic significantly altered the entire living environment of EAs thus affecting the transition process. The results of the study provide a basis for further exploration and identification of the challenges faced by EAs in their studies and a qualitative analysis of the impact of the pandemic on their life trajectory.

Conclusion

E-learning in higher education is nothing new (Scherer et al., 2020), but as a result of the complete shift to online teaching in Poland, it has turned out that the level of digital competence of some academic teachers and students is insufficient (Włoch & Śledziwska, 2019, 26). Moreover, the transition to online classrooms took place without prior preparation both in terms of infrastructure, digital competencies of students and teachers, and teaching methods.

The deteriorating socio-economic situation faced by students (resulting from the pandemic), implies the emergence of certain difficulties related to the crisis in the labour market, which particularly affects students as they are just starting out in their careers. In this case, financial difficulties can cause some to return to the family home, can slow down the process of gaining economic independence from one's family, and can make it difficult to reconcile learning with other areas of life.

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