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Women in the Covid-19 Pandemic: the Psychosocial State of Female Students in Poland.

Abstract. The global pandemic-induced crisis has caused the differences that exist between the sexes in many areas of life to become more extreme. Apart from its influence on mental health, the necessity to adjust to the obligation of social distancing has also influenced the possibilities of students' development as regards relationships. It has also limited their ability to earn money, which directly affects one's economic status and other related areas such as the availability of healthcare, etc.

This study, which aims to present the psychosocial state of women who have been studying in Poland during the pandemic, shows that it is women, more than men, who have experienced the changes caused by the pandemic, both in the context of how they function and their fears. Life satisfaction amongst female students depends largely on their economic and material independence, and any hardships experienced influence, more often than in the case of men, the emotions that are dominant in women.

The results of the study clearly show that in the long run establishing a network of psychological support for women will be necessary as a response to their psychosocial health, which has worsened during the pandemic. Additionally, educated people who, in these difficult times, have not had

the possibility to earn money or have had to accept jobs below their competencies (which may also significantly affect their life satisfaction), will be in need of support.

Keywords: women, students, Covid-19, psychosocial health, Poland.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered an enormous crisis, not only regarding health, but there has also been a global social and economic crisis. Changes in lifestyle related to the obligation to keep social distance, as well as switching to online learning and working, have increased the scope of the chores done in a household. Such a situation increases the risk of an increase in gender inequalities (Fisher & Ryan, 2021: 238). This crisis affects women on the levels of their social, economic and political life (OECD 2020; Madgavkar et al., 2020). It is worsened by deeply rooted inequalities at work, in household chores, and in education when it comes to the necessity to get involved in a child's learning when schools have closed.

Despite women's increasing participation at work, the traditional division of duties between the sexes is still deep-rooted (Pailhe & Solaz, 2008: 234). In Poland the majority of women do household duties and take care of their children on their own, despite earlier efforts to share those tasks with men (Budrowska, 2000: 43). This is confirmed by studies conducted by CBOS (2018), which point to a division of tasks into male and female tasks. The differences also become visible in the study of time budgets and, tellingly, are visible even amongst teenagers. The amount of time spent doing household chores over a period of 24 hours is 2 percentage points higher among girls than among boys, and 1.8 percent higher among women than among men. This happens due to women sacrificing their free time, of which boys and men have more (GUS 2013: 73). This phenomenon is not limited to just Poland, as a comparative analysis of International Survey Program data for 20 European countries also showed that in all the analysed countries women devote more time than men to household duties (Teas & Tai, 2016: 502), and having a job does not help them get out of doing the chores (Kotlarska & Michalska, 2001: 94-95).

The Covid-19 crisis has led to a situation in which women are at the centre of activities related to looking after and reacting to other people's needs. Being a healthcare employee, volunteer, or carer in one's own home, they are more at risk of becoming infected and losing their livelihood. Social distancing also increases the risk of domestic violence (Fisher & Ryan, 2021:

238)¹. A lack of integrated data related to the scale of job losses (including data on sex discrepancies in this context), as well as data on violence against women, does not allow for a full depiction of the situation of the women in Poland. Nevertheless, considering that the professional sectors in the job market most affected by pandemic-related limitations are dominated by women, one may assume that women are more at risk of losing their jobs than men. According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), in the third quarter of 2020 women constituted 44.8% of all employees in Poland². However, in the sectors that have been particularly affected by the lockdown and pandemic-related limitations, more women than men were employed³. With schools closed, mothers are additionally faced with a difficult choice between losing their jobs (and gaining limited benefits), and taking care of young children.

In theory, every individual has several structural or status-related roles (Turner, 1990: 87-88) and often experiences contradictory expectations connected with the position they have (Gross, McEachern & Mason, 1966: 287-288). This conflict of roles, which makes it impossible to realise one's expectations (Parsons, 2009: 213), is related to stress and various disorders, either in relation to the individual or to the system (Biddle, 1986: 82). One aspect in the conflict of roles is so-called *role overload*, i.e. a situation in which an individual comes up against too many expectations (Biddle, 1986: 83). And it is an overload such as this, the result of an asymmetrical division of duties between men and women, that women have to deal with during the pandemic. The traditional division of the roles, which is still present in Polish society, results in a greater burden on women, in particular when a woman has to reconcile the roles of being a student, an employee and a parent. The difficulties inherent in reconciling various roles translate into increasing tension between the public and private spheres (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek & Budrowska, 2004: 25).

¹ The scale of the problem can be seen in the fact that UN Women has launched an information campaign called "Shadow Pandemic" to help prevent violence against women, which has increased during the pandemic: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

² According to data provided by the Central Statistical Office of Poland, in the second quarter of 2020 there were 560,000 professionally active men between 15-24 years of age, and 404,000 women.

³ The participation of women in the total number of the employees in the following sectors of the job market is: education – 78% , gastronomy and accommodation – 65%, trade – 56%, healthcare and social services – 80%, and culture, recreation, and entertainment – 63%.

The current living conditions of women influence the way they live their lives on various levels, which can be reflected in their mental health and their level of life satisfaction. In the Mental Health Declaration it is assumed that “mental health and mental welfare have an essential importance for quality of life in that they enable people to experience life as meaningful and let them be creative and active citizens” (Kulmatycki, 2007: 391). Particular attention, especially in recent years, has been paid to positive mental health, i.e. well-being, positive emotions, a sense of happiness, and psychological resources thanks to which an individual can develop their skills, cope well with stress, work effectively and give something back to society (WHO, 2004). Meanwhile, in the model of mental health developed by Martin Seligman (2005) it is also seen as subjective well-being, authentic happiness that consists in achieving a sense of engagement, a sense of purpose, as well as positive emotions and relations with others. One could therefore measure someone’s life satisfaction during the pandemic and use it as an interesting indicator of mental health. The challenges, dangers and insecurity related both to the epidemic and its consequences can contribute to increased psychological stress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, something which has been confirmed by the initial results of studies conducted in Poland (Dragan, 2020) and around the world (e.g. Qiu et al., 2020, Rajkumar, 2020). We have reason to suspect that the level of life satisfaction will decrease in relation to that before the pandemic. It is also interesting to find out what socio-demographic factors relating to women will significantly affect their indicator of mental well-being.

Spacial isolation caused by the pandemic also influences the way knowledge is consumed. Education significantly influences an individual’s life opportunities as regards not only his/her success in the job market, but also their development of a sense of democratic citizenship and general development as a person. During the pandemic, the vast majority of higher education institutions in Poland have been teaching online, which can additionally deepen the aforementioned gender inequalities and intensify problems associated with combining various social roles, in particular as regards women. In the context of those changes, it is important to refer to current students, whose potential over the next few years may either be realised or lost. Therefore it seems justified to widen any research on young people (students), in particular as regards the influence of socio-demographic variables and the current situation of “life during the pandemic” by the evaluating their mental health and the level of life satisfaction they experience, while including the phenomenon of gender inequality.

Aim of the study

The main aim of the study is to show the psycho-social state of women who have been studying at university in Poland during the pandemic, with a particular focus on an evaluation of any pandemic-induced changes, the fears experienced, and the women's life satisfaction⁴. The purpose of including men in the research sample is to conduct a comparative analysis of the how male and female students have been affected during the pandemic. The aim of the analysis is also to check whether socio-demographic factors influence the experiences of the surveyed women.

Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

1. Have any changes in the way the students function on various levels of life, or on the level of experiencing fears about one's private and professional sphere, taken place during the pandemic?
 - Do men and women perceive the changes and their level of anxiety differently?
 - Do socio-demographic aspects affect the way women perceive the changes and their level of anxiety?
1. Do socio-demographic factors influence the level of life satisfaction among the investigated women?
2. Is there a link (and if so, what is it?) between the way the students have been living during the pandemic and the changes in their level of anxiety regarding the students' private and professional spheres and their level of life satisfaction?
 - Are men and women different in this regard?
 - Do women's varying socio-demographic characteristics affect the relationship between the changes in how they have been living during the pandemic and their level of anxiety as well as their life satisfaction?

Sample choice

The participants were selected non-randomly (Łobocki, 2010; Babbie, 2007). The participants were recruited at higher education establishments by being asked to fill in a questionnaire (prepared in MS Forms), which was made available via an internet link, as well as in snowball form (Jabłońska & Sobieraj, 2013). The choice of respondents from among the students was

⁴ The study also included men, however the main focus was on women owing to the assumption that it is they in particular who have suffered the consequences of the pandemic the most.

dictated by the assumption that because students often have to combine learning, professional work and family duties, they are particularly susceptible to experiencing changes, fears and, consequently, a decrease in life satisfaction. The authors of the present text aimed to pay particular attention to the phenomenon of gender inequality among students during the pandemic. Taking part in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The study was approved by the Committee of Scientific Research Ethics at the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw⁵.

Methods and measures

The survey was conducted by means of two questionnaires:

- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by E. Diener et al. (1985) and adapted for Polish use by Zygfryd Juczyński (2001)⁶. Life satisfaction as measured on this scale ranges from 5 to 35 points. The higher the score, the higher the level of life satisfaction.

⁵ The survey was conducted online in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving humans. The participants were informed of the aim, scope and manner in which the study would be carried out, and were asked to give voluntary and informed consent to taking part in the study and to having their data processed solely for the purposes of the study. The participants were explicitly informed about the voluntary nature of the study and the possibility of withdrawing from it at any time during the project, and that the collected data should be used solely for research purposes. The study maintained the highest levels of anonymity and did not involve processing personal data. As the study concerned adults, no prior signature on the informed consent form was necessary. The study was conducted using modern encryption technology while observing all necessary technical and organisational precautions. The data has been duly protected from falsification, manipulation and modification by unauthorised persons by employing a complicated password. Throughout the study, as the data was collected its quality was monitored and evaluated by the manager of the project. The results were critically evaluated in order to determine their correctness, usefulness and to verify the extent to which the set aims have been achieved.

⁶ The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) created by Diener et al. (1985) is a subjective evaluation of life satisfaction, and this subjective well-being is made up of three main elements: the level of life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions, and a lack of negative emotions. The level of one's life satisfaction is the result of comparing one's own situation to the standards set by oneself. If the result of this comparison is positive, it results in a feeling of satisfaction, (here satisfaction refers to momentary or more lasting thoughts and feelings which relate not so much to a particular sphere of life (e.g. satisfaction with one's job or family) but rather to more general constructs (e.g. being satisfied with life in and of itself) (Diener et al., 2004).

- A sten score⁷ of 1 to 4 sten is treated as a low score, from 5 to 6 as an average score, and from 7 to 10 as a high score.
- A self-designed questionnaire.

In order to establish the degree of changes which took place in the way the respondents lived, the following areas were singled out: social relations, duties related to one's private and professional life, and those related to studying. Changes in the intensification of these activities, the level of anxiety surrounding those areas, and the difficulty in combining studying with other roles have been included. *Change in the intensification of activities*: respondents described a subjective feeling of any changes in intensification by referring to nine variables related to social contacts (with friends, family), as well as job-, home-, caring-, study- or hobby-related duties.

Changes in anxiety: respondents were asked to determine their level of anxiety related to particular spheres of life on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 for 'no fears', 5 for 'intense anxiety'). The question related both to the time before the pandemic and the current situation, and its scope involved the nine variables related to such spheres as relationships, jobs, education, material situation, and health. During the analysis, an index of change was developed by deducting the values related to the time before the pandemic from the values relating to the current situation. In this respect, positive values meant an increase in fears, and negative ones a decrease in fears, and zero t no change. *Changes in the difficulty of reconciling roles*: respondents were asked to determine the level of difficulties they had in combining studying with other duties, i.e. those related to family, job, home, and caring. The respondents answered this question about difficulties both during and before the pandemic: 1 meant significant difficulties, and 4 meant no difficulties. During the analysis, an index of change was created by deducting the value related to the situation before the pandemic from the value related to the situation during the pandemic. In this way, an index was obtained in which a number from 4 to 1 meant an increase in anxiety, 0 meant no change, and a number from -1 to -4 meant a decrease in fears. Furthermore, the questionnaire included questions about the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, family- and job-related situation, education, place of abode, level of economic independence, material situation, and tuition payments.

⁷ The results obtained using the SWLS scale were transformed and presented as a sten score in accordance with how the results should be interpreted as suggested by the author of the test. Next, subgroups were identified depending on a general increase in life satisfaction (low, average, high results).

A statistical analysis of the results was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (for Windows 6.0). The analysis involved non-parametric tests.

Characteristics of the sample

The study was performed with the participation of 501 people who had the status of students, among whom 75% were female, 24.5% were men, and 0.5% of whom ticked “other” as their gender.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

	women	men
	n(%)	n(%)
	375 (75.3%)	123 (24.7%)
average age	23.14 (18-58)	26.59 (18-53)
family situation		
is in a relationship	184 (49.1%)	61 (49.6%)
is not in a relationship	191 (50.9%)	62 (50.4%)
has children	28 (7.5%)	26 (21.1%)
does not have children	347 (92.5%)	97 (78.9%)
living situation		
lives with parents	241 (64.3%)	64 (52%)
does not live with parents	134 (35.7%)	59 (48%)
has his/her own room	201 (83.4%)	53 (82.8%)
does not have own room	40 (16.6%)	11 (17.2%)
job/education		
has a job	181 (48.3%)	79 (64.2%)
does not have a job	194 (51.7%)	44 (35.8%)
paid studies	313 (83.5%)	90 (73.2%)
non-paid studies	62 (16.5%)	33 (26.8%)
secondary education	192 (51.2%)	88 (71.5%)
higher education	183 (48.8%)	35 (28.5%)
financial situation		
very good (is able to set aside money)	163 (47.5%)	52 (44.4%)
average (enough for basic needs)	147 (42.9%)	51 (43.6%)
bad (finds it difficult to pay for basic needs)	33 (9.6%)	14 (12%)

degree of financial independence		
Is financially fully dependent on family	163 (43.5%)	39 (31.7%)
Is financially partly dependent on family	158 (42.1%)	49 (39.8%)
Is financially independent	54 (14.4%)	35 (28.5%)
place of abode		
village	98 (26.1%)	25 (20.3%)
town up to 50 000 inhabitants	84 (22.4%)	13 (10.6%)
town with 50 000 to 100 000 inhabitants	43 (11.5%)	19 (15.4%)
city with 100 000 to 500 000 inhabitants	20 (5.3%)	11 (8.9%)
city with more than 500 000 inhabitants	130 (34.7%)	55 (44.7%)

Results

Analysis of the collected material has made it possible to identify areas of change in the way students live various aspects of their lives. Particular attention has been paid to changes in activeness, difficulties in reconciling learning with other duties, as well as fears that accompany those changes, including the way women and men perceive those changes. The level of life satisfaction has been compared with its link to gender and changes in how people function and the intensity of their fears.

Changes in activeness

The analysis of the change in the way students lived during the pandemic in various aspects of life showed modifications when it came to the intensification of activities related to the following areas: social and family contacts, professional duties, studying, duties at home, and leisure.

The answers of the respondents show changes have taken place in the area of social contacts. Direct social contacts and family contacts in particular have weakened, whereas mediated contacts have intensified (Tab. 2). Another activity that has been limited is hobbies.

As regards duties of various kinds, the respondents most often pointed to an increase in duties related to educating and taking care of children. Half of the respondents admit that the scope of their household duties has not changed, but at the same time 41% think that their duties have increased. Regarding education and professional duties, no dominant tendency has been noted.

Table 2. Changes related to being active during the pandemic

Changes in selected activities	have weakened		remained the same		have increased		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Face-to-face social contacts	464	93.4	24	4.8	9	1.8	497	100
Remote social contacts	50	10.1	150	30.2	296	59.7	496	100
Contacts with family	244	49.2	181	36.5	71	14.3	496	100
Duties related to education course and studying	193	39.6	110	22.6	184	37.8	487	100
Leisure activities	269	55.2	134	27.6	84	17.2	487	100
Taking care of household issues	41	8.3	252	50.9	202	40.8	495	100
Duties at work	81	32.7	91	36.7	76	30.6	248	100
Taking care of children	2	3.8	17	32.7	33	63.5	52	100
Duties related to teaching children	11	23.4	11	23.4	25	53.2	47	100

To sum up, among the activities that have intensified in the area of duties, there are activities traditionally associated with women, i.e. taking care of one's household and children, and duties related to children's education.

It can be seen that there are significant differences between the genders ($U=18966$; $p<0.05$) when it comes to changes in the intensity of the activities related to household duties. More often than the men, women point to an increase in duties related to taking care of their household: this answer given by 44% of women and 31% of men. Men are more likely to report no change in this area (58% of men and 48% of women). In the case of other activities, no gender-related differences have been noted ($p>0.05$).

In the case of women, their perception of the changes in the intensity of various social activities varies according to the socio-demographic traits that determine the level of economic independence of the respondents, their education and tuition payments (Table 3). Women who live with their parents noticed an intensification of family contacts more often than those who live in a separate household, but the former more rarely point to any intensification of work duties with the difference between the two groups standing at 10%. Financial independence is more often related to a weakening of family contacts. An increase in work duties is more often noticed by women who live on their own, attend no-fee courses, and have a higher education. The

remaining socio-demographic traits, such as place of abode, family status, whether they have children, and material situation, do affect the changes in activeness during the pandemic ($p>0.05$).

Table 3. Differences in the way changes in activeness are perceived among various groups of women/differentiation according to socio-demographic traits when it comes to the way changes in activeness are perceived by women.

Type of activity / socio-demographic characteristics	increase	no change	decrease	total	statistical significance
contacts with family	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
those living with parents	42 (17.5%)	92 (38.3%)	106 (44.2%)	240 (100%)	U=12829.5, p<0.01
living in a separate household	10 (7.5%)	42 (31.6%)	81 (60.9%)	133 (100%)	
full financial dependence	29 (17.8%)	61 (37.4%)	73 (44.8%)	163 (100%)	H(4)=6.180, p<0.05
partial financial dependence on family	20 (12.7%)	55 (34.8%)	83 (52.5%)	158 (100%)	
financial independence from family	3 (5.8%)	18 (34.6%)	31 (59.6%)	52 (100%)	
paid studies	46 (14.8%)	115 (37%)	150 (48.2%)	311 (100%)	U=8131, p<0.05
unpaid studies	6 (9.7%)	19 (30.6%)	37 (59.7%)	62 (100%)	
Duties at work					
those living with parents	24 (27.9%)	24 (27.9%)	38 (44.2%)	86 (100%)	U=2850, p<0.01
living in a separate household	33 (37.5%)	36 (40.9%)	19 (21.6%)	88 (100%)	
tuition fee studies	40 (31.5%)	36 (28.3%)	51 (40.2%)	127 (100%)	U=2245, p=0.01
non-paid studies	17 (36.2%)	24 (51.1%)	6 (12.8%)	47 (100%)	
higher education	43 (36.4%)	41 (36.7%)	34 (28.8%)	118 (100%)	U=2682, p<0.05
secondary education	14 (25%)	19 (33.9%)	23 (41.1%)	56 (100%)	
Duties related to studying					
higher education	60 (32.3%)	41 (22%)	85 (45.7%)	186 (100%)	U=13594, p<0.01
secondary education	81 (45.3%)	41 (22.9%)	57 (31.8%)	179 (100%)	

When it comes to age, because the formal conditions for carrying out ANOVA were not fulfilled, a Kruskal–Wallis H test was used and it showed significant differentiation as regards changes in the increase in household duties ($H_{(4)} = 20.058$; $p<0.01$). The younger female respondents reported more often changes in the way they were engaged in their professional duties. The

average age of those who noticed a decrease in work duties is 22.8 years old (SD=4.05), and the average age of those who noticed an increase is 24.3 years old (SD=5.1). Nevertheless, the highest average age is in the group of the women who reported no changes (M=27.2, SD=5.1). In the case of other activities, no differentiation as regards the age of the respondents was identified ($p>0.05$).

Changes regarding difficulties in reconciling studying with other duties

An analysis of responses about changes in the difficulty experienced when reconciling studying with other duties shows that respondents more often admitted that the pandemic exacerbated difficulties rather than alleviated them (Tab. 4). As far as any increase in difficulty is concerned, the highest percentage of the responses was related to taking care of one's children (56%) and work duties (41%). An increase in difficulty related to family and household duties was reported by 37% of respondents. At the same time, those are the areas which are characterised by the highest invariability, as a lack of change in the difficulty encountered when trying to reconcile studying with family and household duties was noted by 51% and 48% correspondingly.

Table 4. Difficulties encountered reconciling studying with other duties

Changes in difficulty related to reconciling studying with other duties	Increased difficulty		No change		Decreased difficulty		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Reconciling studying with family duties	172	36.7	238	50.7	59	12.6	469	100
Reconciling studying with household duties	180	36.8	235	48.1	74	15.1	489	100
Reconciling studying with duties at work	126	41.2	127	41.5	53	17.3	306	100
Reconciling with taking care of children	26	56.5	18	39.1	2	4.4	46	100

Women were more likely than men to point to increased difficulties in taking care of their children ($U= 179$; $p<0.05$). 70% of female respondents had experienced greater difficulties, whereas 26% of women reported no changes in this respect. As for men, 43% encountered more difficulties, whereas 52% did not report any change.

As regards difficulties in reconciling studying with other duties, as experienced by the women, the analysis shows a differentiation related to having

children. For women who have children, 58% had experienced increased difficulties in reconciling studying with family duties ($U= 2830$; $p<0.01$), and 54% with household duties ($U= 3093$; $p<0.01$). Among childless female respondents, the percentage was 34% for both types of duties.

Types of fears

The analysis shows that during the pandemic respondents’ fears related to most areas of life have grown. Civil partnerships/marriages and family relationships are marked by the highest stability: the percentage of responses suggesting a lack of change was 61% and 54% respectively (Table 5). The biggest rise in fears was reported in the case of material situation (a 50% rise in fears, with 39% seeing no change), graduating on time (a 48% increase in fears, with 43% reporting no increase), social relations (a 49% increase in fears, while 37% identified no change), health (a 51% increase in fears, with 36% seeing no change) and finally the well-being of loved ones (a 54% increase in fears compared to 37% experiencing no change).

As regards fears related to work, answers suggesting a stable situation prevail: 47% of respondents do not feel any change in anxiety about keeping their jobs, and 47% do not report any change in fears for their future professional career. Nevertheless, 41% and 42% have experienced an increase in anxiety.

Table 5. Changes in anxiety as experienced by respondents

	decreased fears		no change		increased fears		total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
keeping one’s job	27	11.9	107	47.1	93	41	227	100
future professional career	58	12.4	214	45.6	197	42	469	100
material situation	55	11.4	187	38.9	239	49.7	481	100
graduating on time	44	9.1	207	42.8	233	48.1	484	100
family relations	88	17.9	264	53.6	140	28.5	492	100
relations with spouse/ partner	42	12.8	198	60.6	87	26.6	327	100
social relations	64	13	186	37.7	243	49.3	493	100
health	61	12.4	179	36.3	253	51.3	493	100
well-being of loved ones	44	8.9	182	37	266	54.1	492	100

The analysis shows differences ($p<0.05$) between men and women as regards changes in the intensification of fears about keeping one’s job,

future professional career, social relations, material situation, health and graduating on time.

Table 6. Differences between men and women in fears experienced

n		decreased fears		no change		increased fears		total		statistical significance
		%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
keeping one's job	women	14	8.9	70	44.6	73	46.5	157	100	U=4046, p=0.01
	men	13	18.9	37	53.6	19	27.5	69	100	
future professional career	women	40	11.4	157	44.6	155	44	352	100	U=17602, p<0.05
	men	18	15.8	55	48.2	41	36	114	100	
material situation	women	34	9.5	141	39.3	184	51.2	359	100	U=18898, p<0.05
	men	21	17.7	45	37.8	53	44.5	119	100	
graduating on time	women	26	7.1	152	41.8	186	51.1	364	100	U=17838, p<0.01
	men	18	15.4	53	45.3	46	39.3	117	100	
social relations	women	44	11.9	135	36.6	190	51.5	369	100	U=19780, p=0.05
	men	20	16.5	49	40.5	52	43	121	100	
health	women	40	10.8	125	33.8	205	55.4	370	100	U=17636, p<0.01
	men	21	17.5	52	43.3	47	39.2	120	100	

In all areas, more women than men pointed to an increase in anxiety (Tab. 6)⁸. The biggest differences were to be seen in relation to keeping one's job, health, and graduating on time. Men more often than women reported

⁸ The table shows accumulated results.

a lack of change except for fears about their material situation. Among men, the percentage of answers showing an increase in fears varied from 27% to 44%, whereas among women it ranged between 44% and 55%. More than half of women during the pandemic have experienced an increase in anxiety in relation to their material situation (51%), graduating on time (51%), social relations (51%), and health (55%). Men, on the other hand, were more likely to experience an increase in anxiety about their material situation (44%) and social relations (43%).

These changes in the level of anxiety about one's work, social relations, education, and health occur uniformly in the group of surveyed female students and do not exhibit any differentiation as regards their place of abode, family situation, material situation, education, or covering studying expenses ($p>0.05$). Only living with one's parents or in a separate household affects any change in fears about one's future professional career, the well-being of loved ones, graduating on time, health, and relations in one's marriage/partnership. People who live with their parents point to an increase in fears about the above-mentioned areas more often than people who live in a separate household: the differences are between 11 and 16%. (Table 7). Moreover, an increase in anxiety about one's health is more likely to be voiced by people who are professionally active rather than those who are not.

Table 7. Differences in the level of anxiety depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of women.

Fears/socio-demographic traits	Level of fears			total	statistical significance
	increase	no change	decrease		
fears about future professional career	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
those living with parents	107 (48%)	94 (42.2%)	22 (9.9%)	223 (100%)	U=12537, p<0.05
living in a separate household	48 (37.2%)	63 (48.8%)	18 (14%)	129 (100%)	
fears about keeping one's job					
people with children	3 (18.8%)	11 (68.8%)	2 (12.5%)	16 (100%)	U=798.5, p<0.05
childless people	70 (49.6%)	59 (41.8%)	12 (8.5%)	141 (100%)	
fears about the well-being of loved ones					
those living with parents	141 (59%)	82 (34.3%)	16 (6.7%)	239 (100%)	U=12945.5, p<0.01
living in a separate household	62 (47.7%)	57 (43.8%)	11 (8.5%)	130 (100%)	
fears about graduating on time					
those living with parents	133 (56.8%)	85 (36.3%)	16 (6.8%)	234 (100%)	U=12942, p<0.05
living in a separate household	53 (40.8%)	67 (51.5%)	10 (7.7%)	130 (100%)	
fears about health					
those living with parents	143 (60.3%)	71 (30%)	23 (9.7%)	237 (100%)	U=13046, p<0.01
living in a separate household	62 (46.6%)	54 (40.6%)	17 (12.8%)	133 (100%)	
professionally active	106 (60.2%)	58 (33%)	12 (6.8%)	176 (100%)	U=14999, p<0.05
jobless	99 (51%)	67 (34.5%)	28 (14.4%)	194 (100%)	
fears about the relationship with spouse/partner					
those living with parents	45 (32.8%)	81 (59.1%)	11 (8%)	137 (100%)	U=6293, p<0.05
living in a separate household	24 (22.2%)	68 (63%)	16 (14.8%)	108 (100%)	

The analysis shows significant differences as regards the age of female respondents as for fears about one's health ($H_{(2)}=7.334$; $p<0.05$) and graduating on time ($H_{(2)}=7.246$; $p<0.05$)⁹. In the case of fears about one's health, the average age in the group stating no change was seen was higher (24.3, $SD=6.79$) than in the groups voicing a decrease ($M=22.7$, $SD=4.69$) or an

⁹ As the formal conditions of ANOVA had not been fulfilled, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted.

increase in fears ($M=22.4$, $SD=4.83$)¹⁰. Additionally, when it comes to fears about graduating on time the analysis shows that older female respondents more often point to a lack of change ($M=24.2$, $SD=6.75$). On the other hand, amongst women who felt lower fear the average age was 22.2 ($SD=3.25$), and among students who experienced increased fear about graduating on time the average age was 22.3 ($SD=4.57$)¹¹.

Level of Life Satisfaction

32% of respondents reported a low score on the Satisfaction with Life Scale. A middling score was achieved by 40%, and a high score by 28%. There were no significant differences between women and men ($p>0.05$).

In the group of women, the SWLS results are highly varied when it comes to work. High SWLS scores were achieved by a greater percentage of women who are professionally active (34%) than by those who are jobless (26%). Women who do not have to pay for their education have higher scores on the SWLS (44% have a high score) than those who have to pay tuition fees (27%). Additionally, education affects the level of the SWLS (Table 8). Female students who have already graduated from another faculty are more likely to obtain high results on the scale than female students who only graduated from secondary school. Moreover, there are significant differences in the level of life satisfaction between women who are in a relationship (in a marriage or in a partnership) and women who are not in a relationship. High results are reported by 37% of female respondents who have a partner, while 23% of women who don't have a partner claimed to be very satisfied. However, one's place of abode or having children does not influence the level of the SWLS in women ($p>0.05$).

¹⁰ Additional Mann-Whitney U tests were performed which revealed significant differences between the groups suggesting a lack of changes and higher anxiety ($U=10610.5$, $p<0.01$). No significant differences were seen between the groups which showed lower anxiety and no changes, or between the groups which felt increased and decreased anxiety ($p>0.05$).

¹¹ Additional Mann-Whitney tests showed significant differences between the groups, which suggested no changes and higher anxiety ($U=12418.5$, $p<0.01$). No significant differences were visible between the groups which felt lower anxiety and no changes, or between the groups which felt increased and decreased anxiety ($p>0.05$).

Table 8. Differences in the level of SWLS as regards the socio-demographic characteristics of women

swls	low outcome	average outcome	high outcome	total	statistical significance
	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)	
women who live with their parents and have their own room	56 (29%)	78 (40.4%)	59 (30.6%)	193 (100%)	U=2890.5, p<0.05
women who live with their parents and don't have their own room	17 (47.2%)	12 (33.3%)	7 (19.5%)	36 (100%)	
women who combine work with studying	48 (27.1%)	68 (38.4%)	61 (34.5%)	177 (100%)	U=15193.5, p<0.05
women who do not work	60 (33.1%)	74 (40.9%)	47 (26%)	181 (100%)	
women who pay tuition fees	92 (31.1%)	123 (41.6%)	81 (27.4%)	296 (100%)	U=7815, p<0.05
women who study for free	16 (25.8%)	19 (30.6%)	27 (43.6%)	62 (100%)	
women with secondary education	73 (39%)	65 (34.8%)	49 (26.2%)	187 (100%)	U=15124, p<0.05
women with higher education	35 (20.5%)	77 (45%)	59 (34.5%)	171 (100%)	
women in a relationship	40 (20.2%)	73 (40.6%)	67 (37.2%)	180 (100%)	U=13408, p<0.01
women not in a relationship	68 (38.2%)	69 (38.8%)	41 (23%)	178 (100%)	
women with a good material situation	36 (22.9%)	60 (38.2%)	61 (38.9%)	157 (100%)	H(2)=11.925, p<0.05
women with an average material situation	52 (37.7%)	54 (39.1%)	32 (23.2%)	138 (100%)	
women with a bad material situation	12 (38.7%)	11 (35.5%)	8 (25.8%)	31 (100%)	

The level of life satisfaction varies according to the age of the female respondents ($H_{(2)}=9.173$; $p=0.01$)¹². The average age of female respondents who scored high on the SWLS was higher than in other groups. In the group of women with high scores, the average age was 24 (SD=6.65). Among female respondents with middling scores the average age was 23.3 years old (SD=5.46), and among female respondents with low SWLS scores the average age was 21.7 (SD=3.27).

¹² As the formal conditions of ANOVA had not been met, a Kruskal-Wallis test was performed.

The changes that took place during the pandemic – as regards the majority of activities, fears and difficulties included in the study – do not correlate with the level of life satisfaction reported by respondents as measured on the SWLS. Analysis shows a weakly significant correlation between the level of life satisfaction and hobbies ($\tau_b=0.102$; $p<0.05$)¹³, a negligible correlation between the level of life satisfaction and taking care of one's household ($\tau_b=0.077$; $p<0.05$), and also a negligible correlation between reconciling studying with family duties and one's score on the SWLS ($\tau_b=0.072$; $p<0.05$)¹⁴.

Gender variation regarding life satisfaction level

No significant correlations between the level of life satisfaction and a change in the intensity of face-to-face or remote social contacts, contacts with family, duties related to studying, one's job, taking care of one's children and those related to one's children's education ($p>0.05$) has been seen in either men or women. Only in the case of hobbies and the level of life satisfaction was a significant but small correlation to be seen (women $\tau_b=0.086$; $p<0.05$, men $\tau_b=0.0148$; $p<0.05$). What is more, in the female group there was a small but significant correlation between household duties and the level of life satisfaction ($\tau_b=0.086$; $p<0.05$).

In the case of the relationship between the difficulty in reconciling studying with one's household, family, job duties and taking care of children, and the level of life satisfaction, in the male group there are no significant correlations. Additionally, none occurred in the case of changes in fears about one's present and future work or material situation, social or family relationships, one's relationship with a partner or spouse, one's health, the well-being of loved ones, or graduating on time ($p>0.05$) either.

However, in the group of just women, the analysis shows a significant but weak correlation between the level of life satisfaction and difficulties in reconciling studying and taking care of children ($\tau_b=0.266$; $p<0.05$). Women who experienced a decrease in difficulty in this respect scored higher on the SWLS¹⁵. A significant but small correlation between the level of life

¹³ The interpretation of the correlation index, as presented in this chapter, is in accordance with the instructions given by Jarosław Górniak and Janusz Wachnicki (2004: 202) and Grażyna Wieczorkowska and Jerzy Wierziński (2007: 278).

¹⁴ The analysis shows a high correlation between all the areas included in the study which might clash with studying. This means that respondents who find it difficult to reconcile studying with other areas of life experience those difficulties in all areas.

¹⁵ The index of change in the difficulty with reconciling studying with other duties ranges from -3 to 3, where 3 means the highest decrease in difficulty, and -3 the highest

satisfaction and the level of fear for one's future professional career ($\tau_b = -0.076$; $p < 0.05$) also occurred.

The analysis shows that the socio-demographic characteristics of women affect the relationship between changes in life during the pandemic and the level of anxiety, and life satisfaction (Table 9). There is a significant correlation between hobbies and the level of life satisfaction in the case of women with a secondary school education ($\tau_b = 0.153$; $p < 0.05$), those who combined studying with work ($\tau_b = 0.129$; $p < 0.05$), paid tuition fees ($\tau_b = 0.108$; $p < 0.05$), those who were financially entirely dependent on their families ($\tau_b = 0.149$; $p < 0.05$)¹⁶, and those who did not have children ($\tau_b = 0.09$; $p < 0.05$). In these female groups, intensified leisure activities correlated with higher scores on the SWLS, though these are weak correlations.

On the other hand, in the group of women who do not work, there is a weak correlation between the intensified household duties and the level of life satisfaction ($\tau_b = 0.116$; $p < 0.05$): an increase in household duties correlates with a higher level of life satisfaction. A correlation like this also occurred in the group of women with a higher education ($\tau_b = 0.131$; $p < 0.05$) and those who pay tuition fees ($\tau_b = 0.114$; $p < 0.05$). What is more, an increase in work duties significantly correlates with the level of life satisfaction in the case of women who do not have a steady partner ($\tau_b = 0.132$; $p < 0.05$).

increase in difficulty.

¹⁶ In the group of women who could reconcile their degrees with their jobs, 25% of respondents were financially fully dependent on their families (i.e. they received regular financial and material support), 50% were financially partly dependent on their families (i.e. they received financial and/or material support sporadically), and 25% were fully independent of their families (they did not receive any form of support).

Table 9. Correlations between changes in life and the level of SWLS in women, including their socio-demographic characteristics

increase in hobbies – higher swls	working women	0.024	0.129
	women who are financially fully dependent on their families	0.015	1.149
	women who pay tuition fees	0.013	0.108
	women with secondary education	0.007	0.153
	women who live in cities with over 500,000 inhabitants	0.014	0.168
	women who can afford basic expenses	0.005	0.125
increase in hobbies – lower swls	women with a difficult material situation	0.041	-0.289
Increase in household duties – higher swls	women who do not work	0.04	0.116
	women who pay tuition fees	0.01	0.114
	women who live with their parents	0.01	0.129
	women who can afford basic expenses	0.03	0.131
	women with higher education	0.025	0.131
	women with an average material situation	0.005	0.181
increase in work duties – higher swls	women who are not in a relationship	0.04	0.132
increase in contacts with family – higher swls	women with secondary education	0.026	0.123
increase in remote social contacts – higher swls	women with a very good material situation	0.014	0.15
increase in duties related to educating children – lower swls	women with a very good material situation	0.02	-0.651

In the female group, no variation in the link between combining studying with professional, household and family duties, and the level of life satisfaction as regards socio-demographic traits ($p > 0.05$) was observed. Only in the case of difficulties in reconciling studies with taking care of children, did a significant average correlation among women who live with their parents ($\tau_b = 0.309$; $p < 0.05$) or pay tuition fees ($\tau_b = 0.317$; $p < 0.05$) occur. A high correlation took place in the case of professionally active women ($\tau_b = 0.503$; $p < 0.05$). These groups showed lower life satisfaction was related to an increase in difficulties with reconciling studying and taking care of children. Moreover, there is a correlation between an increase in difficulties with reconciling studying with family duties and a lower level of life satisfaction

among women who were in an average material situation, which only allows them to cover basic expenses ($\tau_b=0.131$; $p<0.05$).

In the group of women who live with their parents, increased anxiety about one's future professional career correlates with a lower life satisfaction ($\tau_b= -0.1$; $p<0.05$). Such a correlation can also be seen in the group of women who are financially partly dependent on their families ($\tau_b= -0.135$; $p<0.05$), pay tuition fees ($\tau_b= -0.101$; $p<0.05$) and those who do not have a partner ($\tau_b= -0.142$; $p<0.05$) and finished secondary school ($\tau_b= -0.147$; $p<0.05$). A significant correlation also occurred in the case of the youngest respondents (up to 22 years old) ($\tau_b= -0.116$; $p<0.05$). Thus, in women who still make use of the support of their families (they live together), fears about their future professional career correlate with a lower life satisfaction. This therefore is a group of women who may perceive the pandemic as a threat to their plans to become independent (Table 10).

Table 10. Correlations between a change in the level of fears and the level of life satisfaction on SWLS in women including socio-demographic characteristics

increase in hobbies – higher swls	women who work	0.024	0.129
	women who are financially fully dependent on their families	0.015	1.149
	women who pay tuition fees	0.013	0.108
	women with secondary education	0.007	0.153
	women who live in cities with over 500,000 citizens	0.014	0.168
	women who can afford the basic expenses	0.005	0.125
increase in hobbies – lower swls	women with a difficult material situation	0.041	-0.289
increase in household duties – higher swls	women who do not work	0.04	0.116
	women who pay tuition fees	0.01	0.114
	women who live with their parents	0.01	0.129
	women who can afford basic expenses	0.03	0.131
	women with higher education	0.025	0.131
	women with an average material situation	0.005	0.181
increase in work duties – higher swls	women who are not in a relationship	0.04	0.132

increase in contacts with family – higher swls	women with secondary education	0.026	0.123
increase in remote social contacts – higher swls	women with a very good material situation	0.014	0.15
increase in duties related to educating children – lower swls	women with a very good material situation	0.02	-0.651

An increase in fears about the well-being of one’s close relatives correlates with a lower level of life satisfaction in women who are financially dependent on the support of their families, i.e. in those who live with their parents ($\tau_b = -0.112$; $p < 0.05$), do not work ($\tau_b = -0.131$; $p < 0.05$), or depend financially on others ($\tau_b = -0.351$; $p < 0.05$). This correlation also occurs in the group of women with a secondary school education ($\tau_b = -0.149$; $p < 0.05$). One could assume that these are people who have not made themselves independent of their families yet, and their close relatives are a “safety buffer” for them.

Conclusions

The present study has analysed changes in the way Polish students lead their lives as regards the activities they do, their difficulties (including accompanying symptoms) in reconciling studying with other duties, their level of life satisfaction, and the influence of demographic variables that affects those changes, with a particular focus on the gender of the respondents.

The study has shown that during the pandemic most people experienced changes in their social relations and hobbies. However, as regards duties, the activities that women are traditionally burdened with – i.e. taking care of one’s household, looking after one’s children and helping with their education – have increased. An analysis of the differences between the genders shows that women more often than men point to an increase in duties related to taking care of their households. One could therefore assume that it is women more often than men who have borne the brunt of the pandemic. This does not only refer to household duties, but also to their emotional state. These results correspond with results obtained in a study of women in Canada, which showed that despite a general improvement in the plight of women over the past ten years, fears reappeared that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated existing disparities, causing a return to traditional gender roles and adversely affecting the health of many women in Canada with potential long-lasting social, financial and psychological consequences (Chen & Bougie 2020). With many care services suspended, including caring for children, the elderly, help with household duties, or preparing meals,

additional household demands disproportionately fell on women. On the other hand, for women who managed to keep their jobs, additional stress arising from trying to reconcile their jobs with household duties, which may result in diminished efficiency at work, has been a problem. This can be seen in the decrease in the number of papers submitted to scientific journals by female authors as compared to their male counterparts (Fazackerley, 2020). In all the areas investigated in the present study, women more often than men pointed to an increase in anxiety. This is because women seem to have been disproportionately harmed when it comes to physical health and well-being, which again is confirmed in the Canadian reports: Since 4th June 2020, weekly updates by the Public Health Agency of Canada have revealed that 57% of COVID-19 infections and 54% of deaths have been women (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020), which may largely be the result of a larger percentage of women who work in services and healthcare professions, which are linked to a greater danger of contracting a COVID-19 infection. It has been proven that various financial, social and physical stressors, which women have had to deal with during the pandemic, lead to a significantly greater decrease in subjective mood experienced by women during the pandemic as compared to men. Although there used to be a difference between the genders as regards mental health before the pandemic, it worsened by 66% between late March and mid-April 2020 to the disadvantage of women (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020).

When it comes to just women, it has been observed that living conditions affect both being burdened with duties and the level of anxiety. Women who live with their parents more often voiced an increase in fears about their relationship with their spouse/partner, their health, future career, graduation, and the well-being of close relatives. At the same time, this group of female respondents was less likely to point to being burdened by an increase in professional duties than women who lived in a separate household. Younger female respondents are more likely to have noticed a change in how engaged they feel in their work duties. One can assume that older female respondents' employment situations are more stable in comparison to those of younger women.

As regards the activities, fears and difficulties considered in the study, the changes that took place during the pandemic do not correlate with the level of life satisfaction of the respondents as measured on the SWLS. This seems to confirm in the findings of various other studies, namely that life satisfaction over a period of years is relatively constant, with people striving at the same time to gain it and maintain it at a relatively high level, to

a large extent regardless of external factors (Roysamb, 2006; Czapiński, 2004; Woynarowska, 2018). The comparison we carried out of the various populations shows that, on a scale from 0 to 10, people who often experience highly variable financial and cultural conditions evaluate their satisfaction level at 7 points, on average (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2008: 203). The normalisation of SWLS results, carried out by the author of its Polish adaptation, from a group of 555 respondents between the ages of 22-55 (who represented various education levels and various environments) did not show any significant differences between the genders and environments when it came to the level of life satisfaction (Juczyński, 2001: 130-131). The present study shows that only an intensification of one's hobbies correlates with a higher level of life satisfaction both in women (negligible correlation) and in men (weak correlation). On the other hand, a drop in the difficulty found in reconciling studying with taking care of one's children correlates with a higher level of life satisfaction. In the case of women, more correlations between the level of life satisfaction and a change in fears, in activities, and the difficulty in reconciling studying with other duties have been identified. One could therefore assume that life satisfaction in women is more "sensitive" to changes that take place in various areas than it is in the men.

The pandemic is altering the burdens that result from fulfilling varied roles. Women who combine studying with a job score higher on the SWLS than do female respondents who do not combine the role of a student with the role of an employee. Moreover, the study has shown a link between having a hobby and life satisfaction in students who are professionally active: enjoying one's hobby more correlates with a higher level of life satisfaction. It is reasonable to assume that, when combining roles related to functioning in the "external" sphere, a hobby, especially in women who are financially independent, is a factor that improve one's well-being. A stable financial situation therefore allows one to fulfil needs of a higher order, which eventually translates into achieving better psychological well-being. It is worth stressing that it is precisely mental health that has been acknowledged as one of the more important areas for promoting health in the EU (Moskalewicz, 2014), and there is no doubt that taking up hobby-related activities and initiatives which do not just give pleasure but often help us unwind, relieve tension, and take us into a state of relaxation (e.g. in the form of meditation). And all this significantly influences our ability to achieve better psychological well-being (Vijayaraghavan & Chandran, 2019). Recently conducted research has confirmed that physical leisure activity promotes positive emotions during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, though it does not stop negative emotions from

occurring (Maher et al., 2021). Meanwhile, according to the results of recent studies, as many as half of Polish citizens (43%; n=2381) have reduced their physical activity due to the pandemic (Górnicka et al., 2020). Moreover it has been shown that a lack of physical activity in adults strongly correlates with worse mental health, which can significantly reduce quality of life (Tamminen et al., 2020). The additional satisfaction obtained when taking part in leisure activities, along with a positive attitude to spending free time doing a hobby, influences mental well-being by reducing stress and loneliness while simultaneously increasing self-esteem (Kim et al., 2015). That is why encouraging people to taking up leisure activities as part of mental health prophylaxis is justified, particularly given the current pandemic.

A link between having a hobby and life satisfaction is present in professionally active women, whereas in women who do not work a link between increased household duties and a higher level of life satisfaction has been established. Such a correlation is also present in female students who live with their parents. However, in women who are not in a relationship, a higher level of life satisfaction is linked to an increase in work duties. Being engaged in one's job leads in this case to higher satisfaction. It can therefore be assumed that, in the case of women who mostly engage in household and professional duties on a day-to-day basis, increasing efforts in those areas controlled by oneself produces a greater chance of success and of translating into increased satisfaction.

The analysis has shown no significant correlation between life satisfaction and changes in activities, difficulties and fears in the case of women who are in a relationship. However, in the groups of women who are not in a relationship a higher level of life satisfaction is related to an increase in professional duties, and a decrease in fears surrounding graduating on time and about one's future career.

Summary

Young people faced with the complexity of contemporary society are learning to cope in a situation of constant change. These changes, especially the dynamic ones taking place during the present COVID-19 pandemic, require emotional strength that will allow one to cope with adversities and to develop flexibility in adjusting to a new reality. Research conducted in China in February 2020 showed that students feel a higher level of pandemic-related anxiety than the general population (Wang & Zhao 2020: 5). Among students, gender affects the level of anxiety experienced – women are more often prone to mental crises, depression and particularly need support (Wang & Zhao

2020: 6; Wang et al., 2020: 8; Elmer et al., 2020). Research has proven that, due to the pandemic, the risk of negative changes to the mental health of young people is increasing (Shovol et al., 2021). According to a report on the preconditions for symptoms of depression and generalised anxiety disorder in adult Poles during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is unambiguous proof that there exists a heightened risk of increased symptoms of depression in the 18-34 age group.¹⁷ As regards students, the authors of the report underline that a stressor exists in the form of having to cope with studying remotely, which requires specific digital competencies.

Great crises, including crises related to a global threat to health, are never gender-neutral. The authors of the present study have focused on describing the influence of the pandemic on selected areas of women's lives in Poland. There are undoubtedly many spheres of women's lives that require further investigation. The worse plight of women in many areas of life is confirmed by the Report on Gender Equality in the EU (2021).

The results of the present research and the data contained in the subject literature unambiguously show that, in the long run, building a network of mental support for women will be necessary as a response to their socio-psychological state, which has deteriorated during the pandemic. Additional support will be needed by people who, despite completing their education in these difficult times, will have no chance of earning money or will take up jobs below their competencies, something which may also have an influence on their life satisfaction.

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¹⁷ 16.2% of respondents before the pandemic and 36.6% during the pandemic were in the group at risk of an clinical increase in symptoms of depression in the 18-34 age group (Report, 2020).

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