




## COVID-19-CAUSED CHANGES IN PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A DISRUPTION AND OPPORTUNITY

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**Abstract.** *The COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous changes, both on a global level and in the lives of every individual, particularly affecting university students. This paper examines how students perceived the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives. Fifty-one university students participated in the research. Data were collected via an online questionnaire and analyzed using thematic analysis. Two primary themes with subthemes emerged from the analysis: theme Positive Changes (including subthemes Increased Awareness of Family Values; Idling without Remorse; Restarting Neglected Activities; Practical and Mental Self-Improvement) and theme Negative Changes (including subthemes Restricted Movement and Freedom; Diminished Opportunities for In-Person Social Engagement; Online Class-Related Boredom; Declining Interest in Studying; Empty Days). The obtained data indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as significantly disrupting students' routines and social interactions while also providing room for personal development as an opportunity to function more optimally in different life domains. Based on these findings, the paper offers recommendations for supporting students in overcoming difficulties possibly caused by pandemics or events necessitating the transition to remote learning.*

**Key words:** *COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, everyday life, students*

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## 1. COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CHANGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE OF STUDENTS

Since the first COVID-19 case was reported in China in 2019, the world has faced an outbreak of global proportions. In response, the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup> declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and issued guidelines promoting healthy lifestyles and preventive measures such as isolation, hand hygiene, and mask usage. Along with adhering to WHO recommendations, individual countries developed their own prevention and protection plans.

The Republic of Serbia confirmed its first COVID-19 case on March 6, 2020. The government instituted preventive measures such as mandatory mask-wearing, enhanced hand hygiene, at least 1-meter physical distancing, and appealing to citizens to reduce social interactions<sup>2</sup>. As the number of infected surged, the Serbian government declared a state of emergency on March 15<sup>3</sup>. Following this, the government imposed stricter prevention measures, such as limiting citizens' movement, reducing operating hours for many businesses, and strongly encouraging remote work. Effective March 16, all educational institutions, including preschools, schools, and universities, were shut down. To ensure continued learning, primary school curricula were broadcast by the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia<sup>4</sup>. Higher education institutions, however, lacked a unified approach to online learning, as they were granted autonomy in implementing their strategies.

These drastic measures were crucial to curb the pandemic and prevent the healthcare system from being overwhelmed. However, they profoundly affected people's quality of life (Brooks et al., 2020) and led to substantial changes in daily routines. During the COVID-19 crisis, millions of families were forced to adapt to a new normal. Confined to their homes, people experienced altered family dynamics, restricted travel, and reduced leisure activities and social interactions (Rodriguez-Rey et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted daily life, qualifying as a life-altering event. Such events often necessitate adaptive or coping behaviors and require significant changes in the ongoing life pattern of the individual (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

While younger individuals may be considered less susceptible to severe COVID-19 symptoms or hospitalization (Bhopal et al., 2021; Ludvigsson, 2022), adolescents have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group during the pandemic (Imran et al., 2020; Octavius et al., 2020). Research suggests that, in terms of mental health, older disaster victims often exhibit lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms compared to younger individuals. This trend may be attributed to factors such as greater life experience, previous exposure to crises, or fewer life responsibilities (Ngo, 2001).

While adolescence is typically defined as the period from age 10 to the early 20s (Smetana et al., 2006), Arnett (2007, 2013) proposes that late adolescence (ages 18-29) constitutes a separate developmental period he labels as emerging adulthood. He bases this claim on the specific characteristics of this period, including intense identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a sense of being in-between (in transition, neither adolescent nor adult), possibilities/optimism, when hopes flourish and people have unparalleled opportunities to transform their lives (Arnett, 2007, 2013). Restricting the freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

<sup>2</sup> <https://covid19.rs/>

<sup>3</sup> Decision Declaring a State of Emergency ("RS Official Gazette", No. 29/2020)

<sup>4</sup> [https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr-ec/Ванредно\\_стање\\_у\\_Србији\\_због\\_пандемије\\_ковида\\_19](https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr-ec/Ванредно_стање_у_Србији_због_пандемије_ковида_19)

movement and decision-making during this critical period can hinder young people's developmental potential and negatively impact their mental health. Many emerging adults are university students who were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The switch to online learning, isolation, fear of infection, and financial difficulties have contributed to adverse mental health outcomes (Aslan et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020).

The psychological vulnerability of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed, in part, to the lack of social support resulting from school and university closures, which limited access to coping resources such as mental health services and peer support (McKinlay et al., 2022). Late adolescence, or emerging adulthood, is a particularly sensitive period marked by major life transitions, including marriage, family formation, education completion, and employment. Disruptions to these transitions can lead to uncertainty and anxiety, as documented in young adults experiencing job insecurity resulting from the pandemic (Ganson et al., 2021) or students facing cancellation of their studies (Lee, 2020).

While numerous studies have highlighted the unique psychosocial risks faced by young people and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Imran et al., 2020; Octavius et al., 2020), and others have quantified the impact of the pandemic on their mental health (Kerekes et al., 2021; Wyszomirska et al., 2023), there is a dearth of research exploring young people's individual perceptions of pandemic-induced changes. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the following research question: What were the consequences of changes in the everyday life of students during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences of individuals affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting from a realist epistemological position (Willig, 2013), the authors assumed that participants could provide valuable insights necessary to understand their pandemic-related experiences. An open-ended questionnaire was employed to gather data, and the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis.

### 2.2. Procedures

The study, approved by the Serbian Psychologists' Society Ethics Committee, was conducted in January 2021, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were invited to participate in a survey exploring their pandemic experiences. After providing informed consent, they accessed the questionnaire link. Despite certain limitations of the questionnaire (e.g., its format limits real-time interaction between researchers and participants), this data collection mode is recognized as useful and indispensable in conditions of necessary social distancing (Braun et al., 2021).

The questionnaire consisted of several open-ended questions. For the purposes of this research, the answers to the following questions were analyzed: Can you tell me something about your life during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has changed compared to pre-pandemic life? The survey was distributed for one month. After data collection, responses were reviewed for content and quality. Responses that were insufficient or incomprehensible without additional interpretation by the participants were excluded from further analysis. The original Serbian

responses were analyzed, and the statements and conclusions were translated into English during the article writing. Translation adequacy was verified by two proofreaders. Subsequently, researchers compared the two versions, discussed some minor issues, and adjusted the translations as needed so as not to lose any nuances in the translation process.

### **2.3. Participants**

The study was participated by 51 students (aged 18-29) from Faculty of Philosophy in Niš (of whom six were male and 45 were female). During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Faculty of Philosophy transitioned entirely to online learning, meaning participants did not attend in-person classes during the study period.

### **2.4. Data analysis**

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), with attention to contextual sensitivity and researcher reflexivity. The dataset consisted of 51 written responses to two open-ended questions included in a broader online questionnaire. These responses were treated as qualitative textual units and analyzed in their original language (Serbian). The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data without being shaped by predefined theoretical frameworks. The researchers began by familiarizing themselves with the responses, reading all material multiple times and noting initial impressions and interpretative associations. Next, two researchers independently conducted line-by-line coding on all responses. Coding was done manually, without the use of qualitative data analysis software, due to the dataset's manageable size and the interpretative nature of the analysis. Codes were assigned to meaningful textual units based on relevance to the research questions. After coding approximately one-third of the responses, the researchers met to compare their coding and discuss emerging patterns. Although we did not use statistical measures of interrater reliability (e.g., Cohen's kappa), coding reliability was ensured through iterative discussions, critical comparison of coded segments, and negotiated agreement on the interpretation of ambiguous or complex responses, as recommended in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). During this process, a shared thematic framework was developed and subsequently used to code the remaining material, which was also jointly reviewed and refined. Data saturation was considered achieved when no new codes or themes emerged in the final phase of analysis, and when the thematic framework was deemed to adequately capture the variation within the data. Saturation was assessed based on theoretical sufficiency rather than numeric completeness, in line with qualitative research standards (Saunders et al., 2018). After analyzing approximately two-thirds of the responses, data saturation was achieved, and the remaining responses were examined in order to identify the most illustrative quotes.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, we employed several strategies recommended by Anney (2014) and Stahl and King (2020). Initially, each researcher independently coded the data, after which we reached consensus on the final themes and subthemes. These themes were then revisited and checked against the entire dataset to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness. We also jointly reviewed the naming of themes, the selection of illustrative quotations, and the nature of interpretative commentary, ensuring they accurately reflected the data. Throughout the analysis, we applied constant comparative analysis and negative case analysis, aiming to capture the full range of participant responses relevant to the research question within the developed thematic structure.

Additionally, the results are illustrated with selected participant quotes. Quotes were selected based on their clarity, their ability to convey the core meaning of each theme, and their representation of diverse participant perspectives. Efforts were made to include voices that reflected both common and divergent experiences, in order to reduce selection bias.

## 2.5. Reflexivity

As female researchers and lecturers employed at Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, we occupied a dual role that shaped both our access to student experiences and the interpretative lens through which we approached the data. Prior to the pandemic, we were actively involved in teaching and interacting with students in traditional classroom settings. The sudden transition to online teaching posed significant challenges for both students and staff, including ourselves. This experience prompted critical reflection on the broader pedagogical and psychological implications of remote education. While our proximity to the context offered valuable insider insights, we recognize that this positioning also carries the potential for interpretative bias. To mitigate this, we engaged in collaborative discussions during the analytical process and sought to maintain reflexive awareness of how our experiences and expectations may have influenced interpretation. We did not include our own experiences as data per se, nor did we adopt a formal autoethnographic approach. Rather, we applied a reflexive stance consistent with qualitative traditions that acknowledge researcher subjectivity as a resource for, rather than a threat to, interpretation (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). For instance, the emergence of the theme “Idling without Remorse” prompted us to question our initial assumptions about student disengagement. In the process of coding and analysis, we engaged in peer debriefing and repeatedly returned to the data to ensure that our interpretations were grounded in student narratives. Although the theme label carries interpretive weight, it was derived through an inductive coding process and is supported by illustrative quotes from participants, which we elaborate in the Findings section. This interpretive naming reflects our shared understanding that what might have initially appeared as apathy could be recontextualized as an adaptive strategy for coping with pandemic-related stress and uncertainty.

## 3. RESULTS

Data analysis revealed two themes - Positive and Negative Changes in students' lives caused by the pandemic. Within these themes, several sub-themes were distinguished.

**Table 1** Overview of the core themes and sub-themes

Positive Changes
Increased Awareness of Family Values
Idling without Remorse
Restarting Neglected Activities
Practical and Mental Self-Improvement
Negative Changes
Restricted Movement and Freedom
Diminished Opportunities for In-Person Social Engagement
Online Class-Related Boredom
Declining Interest in Studying
Empty Days

The theme "Positive Changes" focuses on the adaptive (successful) psychosocial adjustments to the new normal made by students during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and comprises several subthemes.

**Increased Awareness of Family Values.** This subtheme highlights a positive shift in participants' perceptions of their families. Extended periods at home provided opportunities for increased family interaction and deeper connections. This increased focus on family reminded participants of the value of the family and familial support during challenging times. Sara's statement, *"I've got to know my family members better and begun to appreciate what I have."* suggests that prior to the pandemic, she had limited familiarity with her household members. The "enforced" family time created opportunities for positive interactions, leading to a deeper appreciation of family bonds. These findings suggest that the pandemic, in some cases, may have strengthened family relationships.

**Idling without Remorse.** The imposed movement restrictions and reduced academic workload created opportunities for "enforced rest" for students. Jovana described this new situation and its advantages in this way: *"I don't mean to sound insensitive, but I like this 'slowing down' of the whole planet, particularly in the beginning. I can focus on myself and my relationship. I have an 'excuse' for why I am not as active as before the virus appeared, why I leave the house less often, why I don't go to work or take exams, and why I am watching series and movies all day long. I like the constant guilt-free resting, lounging, and laziness; I blame it all on the virus."* Jovana talked about enjoying passivity and neglecting obligations without a guilty conscience. The pandemic created an unusual situation, providing a valid excuse for not working. By staying home, she was fulfilling her civic duty while enjoying leisure activities like watching TV and sleeping. Rather than feeling guilty about her lack of productivity, Jovana attributed her passivity to the pandemic. She viewed herself as a responsible citizen, and the pandemic provided a justification for her leisure activities. The circumstances limited her options, absolving her of any personal responsibility.

**Restarting Neglected Activities.** In contrast to the previous subtheme, which highlighted opportunities for passive activities (idling), this subtheme focuses on the resurgence of neglected hobbies and interests due to new living conditions. The pandemic provided a conducive environment for individuals to rediscover and pursue activities that had previously been overlooked. Lela stated, *"I have maintained my productivity and even resumed painting and daily exercise."* The pandemic provided students with additional free time, which they could allocate to various activities. In Lela's case, it enabled her to rediscover hobbies she neglected before the pandemic due to a lack of free time. This suggests that students occupied their excess free time with activities they personally enjoyed and that the pandemic indirectly created opportunities for this new contentment.

**Practical and Mental Self-Improvement.** Due to the pandemic, students, like the rest of the world, were forced to adapt to new living conditions. The pandemic presented an opportunity for participants to acquire new practical skills. Zorica stated, *"I've discovered new ways to communicate with friends, like using TeamViewer, and we've been in touch more frequently. Additionally, I've started disinfecting my hands and clothes more often, which I consider a positive change (it's more convenient than wet wipes)."* Therefore, the changed living conditions led to the adoption of new skills that should enable people to function smoothly. In Zorica's case, this meant discovering new ways of communication and hygiene practices. Also, the participants frequently reported improving their information technology skills, which enabled them to acquire new skills, such as online shopping instead of visiting stores. Beyond practical skills, the pandemic also sparked new

perspectives and attitudes that helped us adapt to the changed circumstances. As Milica shared, *"On the one hand, this has taught us to slow down, recognizing that our lives were too fast-paced. In our rush, we often overlooked the simple joys."* Milica's words reveal a search for meaning within the pandemic. Her reflections led to valuable insights, allowing her to view the crisis through a positive lens. The pandemic served as a wake-up call, reminding us of life's true values and urging us to look around and see what we had been missing in life while focusing on some other goals. These findings, along with others (such as the importance of slowing down, prioritizing pleasure, embracing spontaneity, and seizing the moment because everything is uncertain), represent positive shifts in thinking. These new insights empowered participants to make sense of and navigate the uncertain and unpredictable circumstances they faced.

In addition to these positive changes, participants also reported numerous negative consequences of the pandemic. The theme "Negative Changes" encompasses several subthemes.

**Restricted Movement and Freedom** emerged as a common theme across participant statements. Participants reported that due to preventive measures designed to limit social contact, the world seemed to grind to a halt – time for outings was limited, travel was impossible, and cultural events were canceled. These measures particularly impacted young people, who were in a phase of life characterized by intense exploration of themselves and the world around them. As Zoran expressed, *"The restriction of freedom is deeply depressing. I constantly feel like I'm under house arrest or in a concentration camp."* This stark comparison highlights the participants' profound sense of lost freedom during the pandemic. Additionally, some participants described the abrupt nature of the new circumstances. Jela stated, *"Suddenly, everything stopped, and we are confined to our homes."* The perception of the pandemic as a sudden, unexpected event that led to isolation underscores the power that some research participants attributed to it, and the associated stress.

**Diminished Opportunities for In-Person Social Engagement.** Restricted movement also resulted in decreased social interaction. Participants reported reduced contact with friends, romantic partners, and relatives, contributing to feelings of isolation. Marina stated, *"Socializing has changed significantly. I see people less frequently than before the pandemic, as many have vulnerable family members at home."* Marina's statement highlights how the fear of contagion led to reduced social interaction. This socially responsible behavior of hers and of people in her environment reflects a desire to protect vulnerable family members. Beyond reduced contact with familiar individuals, the pandemic also limited opportunities to meet new people. As Sanja explained, *"Since we're not attending university, I leave the house less often and have fewer chances to meet new people."* For these reasons, the pandemic's impact on participants' social lives can be considered substantial. It disrupted existing social connections and hindered the formation of new ones. Considering that research participants were in a developmental phase marked by the establishment of romantic relationships, the inability to form such connections adds an extra layer of stress to this vulnerable group.

**Online Class-Related Boredom.** One of the most significant changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic for students was the shift to online learning. Most universities transitioned to online instruction, with some adopting a hybrid approach. Faculty of Philosophy in Niš opted for fully online learning. Consequently, a core aspect of students' lives—attending university—was disrupted. While few students identified advantages such as organizational ease and the comfort of home-based learning, the majority reported negative experiences with online education. Students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment due to being forced to study this way. A significant drawback was that "voices from the laptop" failed to maintain students'

concentration and attention compared to traditional classroom settings. Dušan stated, "*Studies have become boring and tiring, lacking the excitement and challenge they once held. This is largely due to the fact that 90% of students attend lectures and tutorials from bed.*" A key element missing from online lectures is direct interaction with the lecturer, which can infuse the learning experience with vitality and dynamism. It can be concluded that the lack of a dynamic flow in the teaching process led to difficulties in maintaining attention and a perception of lectures as dull. Dušan's description of online lectures also highlights the passive role of students in the learning process, both mentally and physically, as lectures can be attended in a lying position (even by not getting out of bed).

**Declining Interest in Studying.** It could be argued that studying, taking exams, and graduating are the primary goals of those who have dedicated themselves to studying at universities. However, due to pandemic-related disruptions, the participants reported a decline in their commitment to learning and completing assignments. While most students initially maintained their pre-pandemic productivity, they gradually felt less obligated and responsible for their studies and exams over time. Dušica stated, "*Previously, I never missed a lecture, always arrived early, and completed assignments ahead of time. I aimed for maximum grades and early passing of exams. Now, I don't care as much, whether it's due to the circumstances, not seeing a point in it, as I don't feel one is evaluated for their knowledge, but for how fast they will adapt technologically.*" Dušica's statement highlights a significant shift in her dedication to learning. She contrasted her past commitment to excellence with her current indifference. Furthermore, Dušica sought to explain or justify this change, citing the shift to online exams as a potential reason. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, her faculty implemented online exams, significantly reducing examination supervision. She believed this system prioritized technical adaptability and resourcefulness over knowledge, effectively encouraging cheating. In such an assessment context, the value of learning diminishes. In addition, participants cited other reasons for their decreased motivation. Zoka stated, "*I don't feel like I'm actually studying. I lack the sense of obligation and need for organization.*" It can be concluded that the shift to online learning and assessment had a negative impact on most participants' professional development, leading to decreased interest, attention, and perception of the meaninglessness of learning. Such changes cannot be overlooked, as professional development was a crucial developmental task in their life at that time.

**Empty Days.** Everyday life before the pandemic was filled with numerous taken-for-granted activities, such as socializing, walking, and traveling. The pandemic highlighted the significance of these seemingly ordinary aspects of life in contributing to overall well-being. Zoran stated, "*I miss my old routine - I think that disturbed me the most. My days were more fulfilling. I knew my schedule and expected unexpected events that added to the day's richness.*" Zoran expressed a longing for the structure and spontaneity of his previous routine. The change in daily life necessitated additional adaptation and may have altered his perception of the world, leading him to "*view the world around him as boring and monotonous.*"

#### 4. DISCUSSION

During the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of families were forced to drastically change their daily lives and routines. This paper aimed to investigate the changes students perceived in their lives since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our



findings indicate that students experienced various shifts in their psychosocial functioning, which we categorized into two primary themes: Positive Changes and Negative Changes. Each of these themes encompasses several subthemes.

One prominent subtheme within the domain of positive changes is the Increased Awareness of Family Values. Due to movement restrictions, family members spent more time together, leading many participants to appreciate the value of family more deeply. This finding does not necessarily imply a prior lack of appreciation for the family; rather, the pandemic reminded them of the importance of family bonds and mutual support during stressful times. Other research studies also support the finding that family relationships improved during the pandemic. Thus, Günther-Bel et al. (2020) found that parents reported more relational improvement than deterioration during the lockdown period. Also, Lee and Ward (2020) found that parents reported spending more time in activities with their children, as well as experiencing higher feelings of closeness and warmth compared to the pre-lockdown period. These findings suggest that positive outcomes for the family system can emerge even in stressful circumstances. Canzi et al. (2021) reported a greater relational regenerative capacity of the family in the face of the COVID-19 lockdown. Also, Walsh (2003) argued that family resilience, that is, the ability of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity and to strengthen ties between family members and increase their competence to face future challenges, plays a key role in facing highly stressful situations.

Disrupted routine, restricted movement, not visiting the faculty, canceled events and uncertainty in planning led to a significant increase in free time for participants. This presented them with the challenge of deciding how to utilize this additional time. For some participants, it was an opportunity to "give themselves a break," neglect their obligations, and indulge in leisure activities like watching movies or simply resting. In essence, these participants opted for less physically active pursuits. Similarly, other studies have found that quarantine negatively impacted physical activity levels among students (Ammar et al., 2020; López-Valenciano et al., 2021) and increased sedentary behavior (Ammar et al., 2020; Romero-Blanco et al., 2020). Another significant point raised by some participants is that the pandemic allowed them to engage in these (non)activities without guilt. This raises the question of why neglecting tasks is often associated with guilt. It is possible that fulfilling academic duties is associated with a sense of responsibility, positioning students as responsible individuals during exams, college attendance, and study time. Failing to meet these responsibilities under normal circumstances (non-pandemic) would likely induce feelings of guilt and a guilty conscience. As an external and uncontrollable factor, the pandemic allowed some participants to temporarily relieve themselves of the burden of assignment-related responsibilities, enabling them to enjoy idleness without guilt or remorse. In a sense, the pandemic provided a temporary reprieve, as circumstances made it impossible to fulfill certain obligations, alleviating personal guilt. From a psychological perspective, the absence of guilt may reflect elements of self-compassion (Neff, 2003), wherein students were more forgiving of their reduced productivity during crisis. The capacity to rest without guilt might signal adaptive self-regulation under extreme and uncertain circumstances. Although the theme of Idling without Remorse may initially appear counterproductive from an academic standpoint, it arguably reflects a positive psychological adaptation—a recalibration of personal expectations in a context where normal functioning was impaired. This interpretation is consistent with studies that show how rest, leisure, and non-performance-based activities contributed to mental health

preservation during lockdowns (Rodriguez-Rey et al., 2020; McKinlay et al., 2022). While some participants found enjoyment in physically passive activities such as sleeping, lounging, reading, and watching movies, others used their free time to engage in more physically active pursuits like sports, exercise, painting, and other hobbies. These are encompassed by the Restarting Neglected Activities theme. Regardless of the specific activities chosen, they can all be considered adaptive strategies. The importance of various activities for mental health during the pandemic is supported by other research, which indicates that engaging in physical activity, watching films or shows, reading, and pursuing arts and crafts during the pandemic was associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Rodriguez-Rey et al., 2020).

The Practical and Mental Self-Improvement theme highlights our capacity to adapt to new circumstances. While the pandemic significantly disrupted our patterns of psychosocial functioning, it also presented opportunities for acquiring new skills and knowledge. This speaks volumes of our inherent power to adapt to changing conditions and ultimately survive. The pandemic created a need for participants to develop new skills to communicate with friends, socialize, and learn how to use online space for activities that previously required in-person interaction. This pandemic period can be viewed as a time of learning and growth. The skills acquired during this time can be categorized as life skills. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2003), life skills are "abilities for adaptive and positive behavior, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." Therefore, we can conclude that participants who successfully developed new positive behaviors were better equipped to adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic. In addition to fostering practical development, the pandemic also led to personal growth and increased self-awareness. Some participants reported that the pandemic prompted reflection on life's meaning and a re-evaluation of personal choices. From this perspective, the pandemic can be seen as a teacher ("taught us" "reminded us what was important in life") who, in a way, helped us remember true, forgotten values. These reflections may lead to new insights and knowledge that could inspire future changes in the participants' lifestyles, even after the pandemic has subsided.

In addition to the positive changes, participants also identified several negative consequences of living through the pandemic.

The theme of Restricted Movement and Freedom highlights the significant impact of the pandemic on participants' sense of freedom. This loss of freedom was a fundamental change that underpinned other negative changes that followed. Young people, full of aspirations and eager to explore the world, had their wings clipped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging adulthood should be a time of identity exploration, exploring possibilities, traveling, establishing autonomy, trying new things (Arnett, 2007, 2013), which might all be thwarted during the pandemic. Additionally, Vuletić et al. (2021) suggested that increased anxiety and low mood during the pandemic were primarily connected with the inability to go anywhere. The severity of these restrictions is underscored by participants' comparisons of the pandemic to house arrest or even a concentration camp. It is this comparison that reveals the power some research participants attributed to the pandemic - it had the power to turn us into prisoners. Considering the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>5</sup>, we can conclude that the pandemic threatened fundamental human rights, including freedom of movement, choice, and action.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

The restriction of movement and freedom led to *diminished opportunities for in-person social engagement*. This theme refers to the changes that followed in the social life of the participants. Protective measures of physical distancing, designed to curb the spread of the virus, unintentionally fostered social distancing and alienation. Participants reported significant changes in their social interactions. Maintaining existing friendships outside the home and forming new ones became challenging. Romantic relationships also faced similar difficulties. Other studies have reported similar findings (e.g., Scott et al., 2021). The decline in social interactions can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, as evidenced by other research (Buecker & Horstmann, 2021; Hwang et al., 2020). This is understandable, considering the crucial role of a school setting for adolescents' mental health. It fosters a sense of belonging, commitment, and affection among adolescents (Mathew et al., 2020) and became unavailable during the pandemic.

The themes of Online Class-Related Boredom and Declining Interest in Studying are associated with the negative impact of online learning on the academic progress of research participants. While a few respondents found the shift to online education beneficial, the majority reported feeling unmotivated by this mode of learning, citing online lectures as boring, tiring, and lacking in engagement. Other studies (e.g., Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Scott et al., 2021) have also found that students were dissatisfied with the quality of online learning. This theme is essential as it can help us understand the factors that impact motivation and attention during the learning process. Namely, these findings suggest that the context of learning, rather than just the content itself, significantly impacts the learning process. The traditional classroom setting, with its physical presence, direct interaction, and social dynamics, is just as important as the content being taught. Furthermore, we could assume that the online learning environment alters the roles of both students and teachers. Students can now passively consume lectures from any location (even from their beds). On the other hand, with only the upper body visible, teachers face challenges in presenting material in a dynamic and engaging manner. As communication is a two-way process, online learning can limit student engagement, which may impact the lecturer's enthusiasm and dynamism and, consequently, decrease student attention.

In addition to a lack of interest in online classes, participants reported a decline in overall interest in learning, as well as reduced aspirations and commitment to their studies, which were previously quite high. Several studies have reported a decline in student productivity during the pandemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Scott et al., 2020; Fila-Witecka et al., 2021; Vuletić et al., 2021). We may wonder: Why did the pandemic lead to a decline in motivation and progress among some students? While individual factors may play a role, the absence of a traditional school environment likely contributed to decreased motivation and attention and ultimately diminished will and desire to learn. In addition to the structured learning environment, traditional classrooms provide opportunities for real-time social interaction, knowledge sharing, and peer learning, which aspects are often missing in online learning environments (Britt, 2006; Kee, 2021). As Di Pietro et al. (2020) noted, "peer effects are realized in different channels, including peer teaching, peer motivation, competition, and general social influence in subject interest (p. 9)." With online and distance settings, students are deprived of these benefits and opportunities. Additionally, the reliance on online knowledge assessments may have prioritized resourcefulness in online test-taking over genuine knowledge acquisition, potentially undermining student motivation for learning. Also, to fully understand the decline in motivation and interest in learning, it is worth considering the life circumstances the students faced. The sudden onset

of COVID-19 drastically altered the lives of everyone, creating a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. When faced with a global health crisis that threatened the lives of loved ones and the future itself, it is understandable that dedicating oneself to academic pursuits might have seemed less important. The findings of Vuletić et al. (2021), which highlight students' concerns about their future, mostly concerning their studies and job opportunities, further support this interpretation.

The pandemic caused profound disruptions to participants' daily routines and lifestyles, as captured in the subtheme Empty Days. Participants particularly emphasized changes in secondary routines—those shaped by personal circumstances, motivations, and preferences—such as physical activity, leisure and social engagement, and practices related to work or study, including punctuality and goal-setting (Hou et al., 2020). Our findings align with those of Rodriguez-Rey et al. (2020), who reported that over 84% of respondents experienced disruptions to their work or study routines, more than 88% had to cancel major activities, and over 65% were forced to cancel or postpone travel plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These disruptions can be understood as depriving individuals of the ability to plan, shape their lives, set personal goals, and anticipate pleasurable or meaningful experiences. This sense of life being placed *on hold*, and the resulting monotony, appeared to contribute to dissatisfaction and a diminished sense of well-being. For example, Rodriguez-Rey et al. (2020) found that individuals who had to significantly modify or cancel important activities and plans reported poorer mental health. Similarly, Fila-Witecka et al. (2021) showed that maintaining daily routines was significantly associated with lower psychological distress, as routines offered a sense of normalcy, control, and predictability (Hou et al., 2020).

Arguably, daily routines—often taken for granted—serve as a psychological scaffold for temporal orientation, productivity, and emotional regulation (Wood et al., 2002). Their sudden removal left many participants feeling disoriented, unmotivated, and emotionally unanchored. The inability to anticipate future events also deprived them of the experience of anticipated joy, a crucial component of emotional well-being (Baumeister et al., 2013). From an existential perspective, Frankl (1985) argued that the absence of future-oriented goals and meaningful engagement may lead to an existential vacuum, experienced as boredom, apathy, or even despair. Participants' descriptions of their days as monotonous, flat, or empty closely mirror this framework and illustrate the psychological cost of living in a prolonged state of suspended agency. Taken together with prior research (Fila-Witecka et al., 2021; Hou et al., 2020), our findings underscore the essential role of daily routines in preserving mental health—not only through behavioral regulation, but also by sustaining a sense of meaning, continuity, and agency in everyday life.

While this research focuses on the impact on the lives of university students during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, its findings may have broader implications for designing support during periods of stress and uncertainty. First, based on the results of this research, it can be emphasized that unpleasant and stressful life circumstances can present opportunities for personal growth and development. According to students' experiences, the pandemic, despite its challenges, gave students increased free time they could use to engage in enjoyable activities. The reduced pressure to constantly meet deadlines and obligations led to a sense of relief. Additionally, the pandemic provided an opportunity to strengthen family bonds, acquire new practical skills, and reconsider life's meaning, values, and priorities more deeply. On the other hand, recognizing the challenges faced by students during the pandemic can inform the development of support systems, particularly in the areas of academic and social life, when activities in these domains need

to take place in the virtual space. To maintain student engagement in online learning, lecturers should be encouraged to adopt creative teaching methods that require active participation from students. In this regard, it is essential to provide teachers with professional development opportunities in e-learning and familiarize them with various information technologies that can be integrated into online instruction. To address the challenges in students' social interaction, creative solutions should be developed to foster student-student and student-teacher connections in online environments. These solutions might include joint online viewing of content related to students' interests followed by discussions, or virtual diploma award ceremonies which could be attended by students, families, and friends. Additionally, an online space could be provided for students to share ideas, thoughts, concerns, and questions. This space could be monitored and addressed in a timely manner. It could also offer teachers an opportunity to get to know students personally, which could help them tailor their teaching approach to individual needs. The results of this research also indicate that maintaining a daily routine is crucial during a pandemic to ensure a sense of a fulfilled day. Therefore, in situations of social crises and pandemics, students should be encouraged to maintain their usual habits and activities as much as possible, and even add new ones.

In addition to the advantages indicated, the research conducted also has certain limitations. First, the questionnaire method did not allow for follow-up questions by researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' answers. This limited the possibility of interpreting certain responses. The research was conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is possible that respondents' answers might differ if the research were conducted at a later stage of the pandemic. Additionally, the research presents the perception of changes solely from the perspective of students. However, a significant portion of the observed negative changes was related to the inability to attend classes in educational institutions, which involves various stakeholders. Based on these limitations, recommendations for future research can be made. Further studies should consider documenting the experiences of student affairs staff and faculty to identify strategies that can enhance student learning during periods of disrupted everyday life and online teaching. Furthermore, to understand the long-term consequences of the pandemic, longitudinal research guided by the principles of triangulation in data collection is necessary.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results of the conducted research showed that the changes in students' lives caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could be viewed not only as a disruption of their previous lifestyle but also as an opportunity for personal growth and development, as well as an opportunity to function more optimally in various life domains. Such knowledge is encouraging as it demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of humans to changing living conditions, which would ultimately be crucial for the survival of the human species. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the only, and certainly not the last, pandemic that humanity may face. It is important to remember that we continue to face threats from new COVID strains, as well as other viruses. Research like this can equip us with the skills and knowledge to respond more effectively to future challenges and changes in our lives.

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## PROMENE U PSIHOSOCIJALNOM FUNKCIONISANJU STUDENATA UNIVERZITETA IZAZVANE PANDEMIJOM COVID-19: PREPREKA I PRILIKA

*Pandemija COVID-19 izazvala je brojne promene, kako na globalnom nivou, tako i u životima svakog pojedinca, pri čemu su studenti univerziteta bili posebno pogođeni. Ovaj rad istražuje kako su studenti percipirali uticaj pandemije COVID-19 na svoje živote. U istraživanju je učestvovao 51 student univerziteta. Podaci su prikupljeni putem onlajn upitnika i analizirani tematskom analizom. Analizom podataka izdvojene su dve glavne teme sa podtemama: tema Pozitivne promene (podteme: Povećana svest o porodičnim vrednostima; Lenčarenje bez griže savesti; Vraćanje zapostavljenim aktivnostima; Praktično i mentalno samousavršavanje) i tema Negativne promene (podteme: Ograničenost kretanja i slobode; Smanjene mogućnosti za lične socijalne interakcije; Dosada povezana sa onlajn nastavom; Opadanje interesovanja za učenje; Prazni dani). Dobijeni podaci ukazuju na to da je pandemija COVID-19 značajno narušila rutine i društvene interakcije studenata, ali je istovremeno otvorila prostor za lični razvoj i priliku za optimalnije funkcionisanje u različitim životnim domenima. Na osnovu ovih nalaza, rad nudi preporuke za podršku studentima u prevazilaženju poteškoća koje mogu nastati usled pandemije ili događaja koji zahtevaju prelazak na učenje na daljinu.*

*Ključne reči: pandemija korona virusom, onlajn učenje, svakodnevni život, studenti*