

Real and Virtual Space of Life Activities of Ukrainian Adolescents in War Conditions

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Abstract

A study conducted in April 2022 with the help of a survey of 519 Ukrainian adolescents has revealed changes in their activities and psycho-emotional state under the military aggression by the Russian Federation. At the time of the survey, 61.8% of surveyed adolescents were in Ukraine, and 38.2% were abroad. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire has shown that the leading condition for the effective implementation of educational activities of Ukrainian adolescents under martial law is their stay in safe conditions. It is established that internal and external displacement of adolescents as a result of full-scale Russian aggression provokes experiencing fatigue, feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, anxiety. At the same time, there has been an increase in the resilience of adolescents, which is manifested in the strengthening of professionally oriented and patriotic motives for learning, the fulfillment of the need for self-expression through social networks. Against the background of prolonged distress caused by the war, adolescents have an increased need for supportive interaction with peers. There is a tendency to increased activity of adolescents on social networks with a concomitant increase in risks to mental health and personal development.

Keywords:

adolescents, adolescent learning, learning motives, distance learning, resilience, adaptation, social networks, virtual security, virtual threats, parental control.

1. Introduction

There are life challenges that are so radical that they affect almost all areas of human being, both vital and mental ones. Such a powerful challenge was the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which threatened the lives and psychological well-being of all Ukrainians and was a test of their resilience. Adolescents, who are usually sensitive to adjustment disorders and disorders of psychophysiological functioning, are at risk, because external threats to life complemented the traditional signs of inconsistency and uneven formation of their personality. Accordingly, the task of identifying changes in the life of adolescents under martial law has become an important vector of our scientific research. Committing these changes will allow to develop preventive and corrective measures concerning adjustment disorders of adolescents in the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

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At the initial stage of this task, the hypothesis about the impact of martial law as a predictor of adjustment disorders of Ukrainian adolescents was formulated on the basis of empirical exploration (observation during communication with adolescents and providing them with targeted psychological assistance). A local study was conducted to test this hypothesis. In doing so, we considered adolescents from several perspectives: first, as subjects of educational activities, given their status as students, second, as potential subjects of crisis experiences provoked by the war, and third, as users of virtual reality, created and disseminated as a result of digitalization of the world community and Ukrainian society in particular.

Adolescence is considered difficult because of the contradictory interaction of adolescents with adults, a categorical attitude to reality, sharp changes in identity. Changes in this age group are rapid, they cover both the physical and mental spheres, and the impact of physiology on the psychology of adolescents is still being carefully studied by scientists [8]. The personality of modern adolescents is formed through the intensive development of two areas, namely intellectual area, which is fulfilled through learning, and social area, which is embodied in communication with others. One of the key tasks of development in adolescence is the formation of an integral personality [4]. The most attractive way to do this is the interaction of adolescents with peers. The change in the vital interests of an adolescent is reflected in the motivation for his/her studies. Learning motivation of adolescents becomes polydetermined, and social, cognitive and pragmatic motives are closely intertwined in it [5].

The problem of resilience, which currently remains in the focus of world psychological studies, has become especially relevant in connection with the challenges and threats of Ukraine's war with the Russian Federation. The concept of resilience is generally interpreted as the ability to withstand threats and / or recover quickly [1]. The process of growing up includes the formation of resilience of the individual, and therefore adolescence is both a basis and a "testing ground" for this quality. According to scientists, resilience is an advantageous component for maintaining the psychological well-being of adolescents, and also serves as a protective mechanism against unpredictable threats to well-being throughout life [11]. It is also important to consider the use of assets and resources by adolescents to overcome problems positively, which reflects the procedural characteristics of resilience [16].

One of such resources in the conditions of limited direct communication is communication of teenagers on social networks. It is obvious that the use of smartphones and digital communication platforms among adolescents has increased sharply. Studies conducted over the past decade have been focused on five aspects of the impact of digital media: the potential for promoting adolescent

development, the impact on mental health, the different impacts of active and passive social media use, cyberbullying and sexting [6]. Given the prevalence of digital resources and social networks among adolescents, it is appropriate to study all the opportunities and risks of this phenomenon for the formation of their personality.

2. Materials and methods

Our study, conducted in April 2022 using Google Forms, involved 519 Ukrainian adolescents, of whom 64.7% were female and 35.3% were male. At the time of the survey, 61.8% of our surveyed adolescents were in Ukraine, and 38.2% were abroad. The age of the respondents ranges from 10 to 16 years (the average age is 13 years).

The distribution of adolescents by age is shown in the diagram in Figure 1. It should be noted that 2% of respondents did not indicate their age.

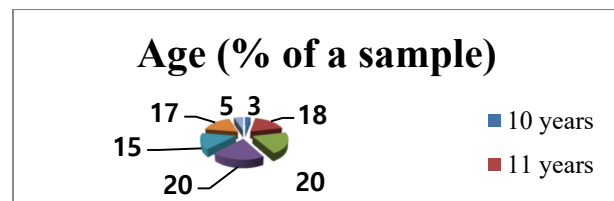


Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents by age

The study used a semi-open questionnaire with suggested answer options and the ability to provide respondents' own answers. All respondents and their parents were informed about the purpose of the survey, the anonymity of the answers and voluntarily agreed to participate in it. Mathematical data processing of the questionnaire was implemented using the Software Package SPSS (version 26.0) by calculating the average and percentage values of diagnostic data. The ranking method was also used to analyze the results.

3. Results

Although learning loses its primary importance for the mental development of adolescents, giving way to trusting communication with peers, it still remains a major factor in the development of their intelligence and a platform for the implementation of communicative function. The survey procedure provided for clarifying the main motives for learning, valid for respondents during the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The analysis of the results (Table 1) shows the predominance of professionally oriented motives (first and second positions of the ranking), as well as the importance of learning for personal development (third position). A significant number of adolescents traditionally consider learning as a "testing ground" for communication with peers within the framework of main activities (fourth position in the ranking). Pragmatic motives, such as the ambitious desire

to earn high marks, as well as habits to study, are also quite popular.

Table 1: Distribution of adolescent learning motives

Learning motives	Choice of respondents* (%)	Ranking position
Habit to learn	24,5	7
Interest in subjects	27,4	8
Desire to be smart and cultured	49,5	3
Enjoying of earning high marks	35,5	5
Coercion of parents	20,6	10
Unwillingness to be worse than classmates	22,7	9
Expecting a reward from parents	7,9	12
Path to mastering a career of choice	58	1
Means of admission to the university in the future	55,7	2
Enjoying of the praise of teachers	13,7	11
Learning is a contribution to Ukraine's victory	26	6
Interest in communicating with peers	39,6	4

* the question allowed choosing one or multiple options from a list of possible answers

The patriotic motive of perceiving learning as one's own educational front took the sixth position in the ranking. External stimuli from adults were found to be less effective (tenth, eleventh and twelfth positions in the ranking). In the response options about the reasons for learning formulated by adolescents themselves, there were expressions showing a conscious attitude to learning, which is internal motivation ("School is a social tool that teaches to be human", "It is my duty, so it has to be done"), as well as encouraging by external motivation ("Not to be scolded by parents", "To be praised by parents", etc.).

In the next question, we found out the respondents' views on changes in their attitude toward education in connection with the full-scale Russian military aggression. Almost half of the respondents, mostly those who were in Ukraine, admitted that it became more difficult for them to study (Fig. 2).

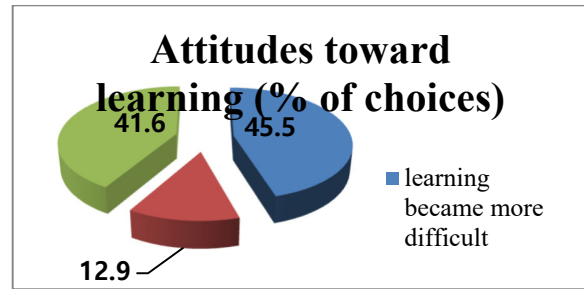


Fig. 2. Changes in attitudes toward learning after the war

About 13% of adolescents did not experience a change in their attitudes toward learning. The sample of respondents who indicated an increase in the desire to learn is quite large, covering 41.6% of primary school students.

Given the significant percentage of adolescents who experienced learning difficulties, it was appropriate to identify the emotions accompanying this process. The processing of adolescents' responses showed that the most common condition is fatigue, which is obviously conditioned by a complex of factors: threat to the vital activities, prolonged uncertainty, forced change of the place of residence and adaptation processes, the end of the academic year, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2: Typical emotions accompanying adolescent learning

Emotions	Choice of respondents* (%)	Ranking position
Joy	21,2	7
Interest	58,6	2
Delight	36,6	5
Indifference	41,6	4
Sadness	20	8
Anger	17,9	9
Anxiety	22,5	6
Guilt	6,7	10
Fatigue	61,1	1
Boredom	51,3	3

* the question allowed choosing one or multiple options from a list of possible answers

However, we see the situation of interest (second position) competing with boredom (third position), delight (fourth position) competing with indifference (fifth position), anxiety (sixth position) competing with joy (seventh position). This trend clearly confirms the preservation or even intensification of emotional fluctuations in relation to the self and the surrounding reality, which are traditional for adolescents, under the martial law. It should be noted that adolescents who have

emigrated abroad also often experience fatigue, but they feel less anxiety, anger and guilt about learning. It was the representative of this part of the sample who mentioned that she was experiencing "...joyful excitement, I don't know how to describe it, but I feel very happy and inspired to realize that today I know a little more than yesterday and will be able to use it in the long run".

The beginning of the second semester in most Ukrainian schools was full-time. The resumption of the educational process in schools during the war took place in the distance format. Accordingly, the change of the format, provoked by the crisis, has affected the effectiveness of adolescent learning. However, according to our questionnaire, their subjective perception of the transition to distance learning was variable (Fig. 3). Thus, a quarter of adolescents (potential risk group for adjustment disorders) found it harder to study at home, while as many respondents were very satisfied with studying at home.

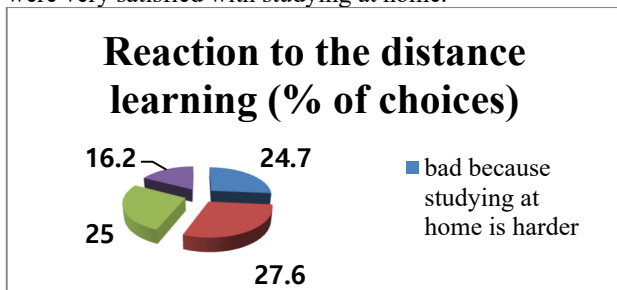


Fig. 3. Adolescents' reaction to the beginning of distance learning

The largest part of the sample consisted of adolescents, for whom schooling is a platform for the implementation of the communication with peers as the main activity of these period. Therefore, these respondents emphasize that it is boring for them to study remotely because they do not see their classmates. Quite a lot of respondents (more than 16%) testified to the developed adaptive capabilities or defensive reaction, choosing the answer "Generally, I do not care".

Determining the benefits of distance learning, teenagers mentioned the availability of more time for their own affairs (hobbies, self-education, communication), more comfortable learning conditions, less anxiety. Among the shortcomings of the transition to distance learning, the lack of direct contact with teachers and classmates, difficulties with self-organization, increased parental control, oversaturation of information flow were mentioned.

The second block of the questionnaire revealed the awareness of the interviewed adolescents of changes in their resilience in the context of the extension of full-scale Russian aggression. Processing the answers to the questions on adaptation to the changes related to the war in Ukraine revealed a favorable trend of successful adaptation of the majority of adolescents (55.7%), as shown in Fig. 4. It

should be noted that this group includes almost all respondents who were abroad at the time of the survey. Also, the part of such adolescents, which accounts for 1.5%, stressed the absence of need for adaptation precisely because of living outside Ukraine.

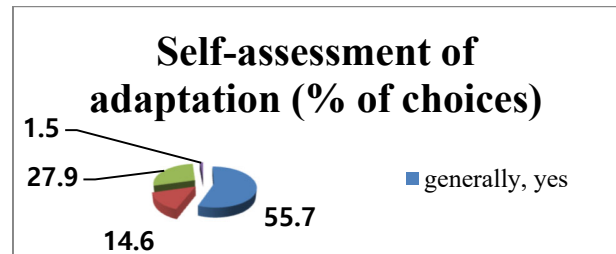


Fig. 4. Self-assessment of adolescents' adaptation to changes related to the war in Ukraine

Almost a third of respondents indicated that they were in the process of adaptation. It is noteworthy that a significant number of teenagers recorded their inability to adapt to Ukraine's war with Russia. These adolescents are at risk for adjustment disorders and need targeted psychological diagnosis.

The next step in the survey was to identify possible intellectual stress-related disorders. It is important that a quarter of respondents (mostly teenagers in Ukraine) admitted frequent manifestations of such disorders (Fig. 5).

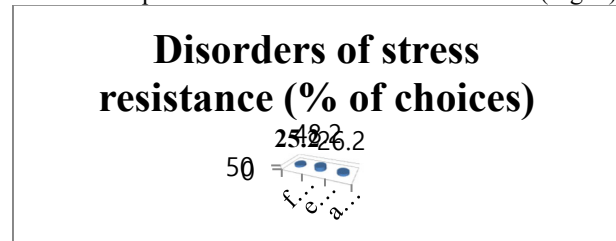


Fig. 5. Commitment of disorders of stress resistance by adolescents

Almost half of the sample recorded episodic manifestations of loss of ability to concentrate and think clearly because of the war. A little more than 26% of respondents, mostly those who migrated abroad, stressed the absence of stress-related disorders at the intellectual level.

Taking into account the processes of self-awareness developed in adolescence, we formulated a target question for respondents to understand the changes in their own resilience under the martial law in Ukraine. More than 40% of respondents, reflecting the prevailing trend (Fig. 6), chose the answer "sometimes strength of the spirit is manifested, but there is also anxiety, fear". At the same time, 35.5% of adolescents (mostly those who were in Ukraine at the time of the survey) showed an increase in their own resilience, believing that the need to cope with stress made

them stronger. Obviously, respondents who often experience powerlessness need targeted psychological support. The war shook the resilience of these adolescents, numbering 16.7% in our study.

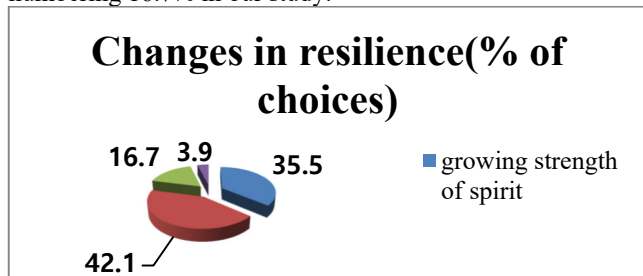


Fig. 6. Adolescents’ commitment of changes in their own resilience

At the same time, about 4% of respondents who were abroad at the time of the survey emphasized the lack of stress and, as a result, the preservation of the previous level of resilience. We should pay tribute and thank the hospitality of the people of friendly countries who sheltered our compatriots and created conditions that ensure the preservation of the psychological well-being of the adolescents we interviewed. Even forced migration and changes in living conditions did not reduce the resilience of these respondents.

It should be noted that some adolescents’ reactions of psychological defense intensified. This is evidenced by the following answers: “I try never to show emotions, so I will not be stronger or weaker”. Some respondents cynically stated that “...I do not care, there is no stress, because I am not in Ukraine”.

When we found out the effective ways to maintain a good mood, the ranking was led by communication with peers, which reflects the traditional for adolescents attractiveness and importance of main activities (Table 3). The second position of the ranking was occupied by various hobbies, their attractiveness only strengthened under martial law. Also, the development and relaxation function for the intelligence and emotional sphere of adolescents is played by their browsing of Internet resources (third position in the ranking). Against the background of the traditional teenage reactions of emancipation and opposition to adults, it seems natural to ignore some communication with relatives; this way is in the fourth position of the ranking. It is noteworthy that education is not considered by the surveyed adolescents as a platform for improving mood (last position in the ranking). These data directly correlate with the previously considered question of the questionnaire on the emotional background of adolescent learning, among which joy took only the seventh position in the ranking.

Table 3: Effective ways to maintain a good mood

Emotions	Choice of respondents* (%)	Ranking position
Communication with relatives	43,5	4
Communicating with friends	58,7	1
Interaction on social networks	39,7	6
Browsing internet resources (movies, videos)	48,2	3
Education	11,1	7
Playing on a computer or smartphone	38,9	5
Hobbies	53,1	2

* the question allowed choosing one or multiple options from a list of possible answers

Some teenagers mentioned faith and conversation with God when answering this question, some boys were inspired by good news from Ukrainian soldiers, one girl did cleaning up to improve her mood, because “...when I have everything in order, it seems like some order is in my head”.

The study identified the impact of adolescents’ use of the Internet on their learning. Forty percent of respondents marked this impact as facilitating due to the ability to find relevant and useful information on the Internet (Fig. 7).

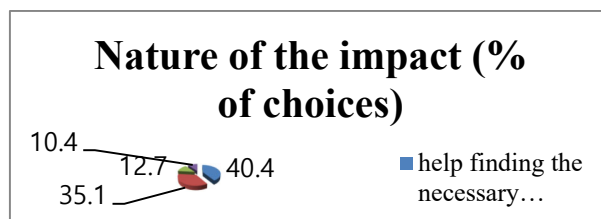


Fig. 7. The impact of the Internet on adolescent learning

More than a third of respondents admitted that the Internet hinders their learning due to distractions from the educational process. Another ten percent of respondents would prefer to replace learning with virtual communication altogether, which indicates a weakening of their learning motivation. And only about 13% of adolescents surveyed believe that they do not mix learning and using the Internet.

Viber and Telegram are the most popular in finding out social networks and messengers in which teenagers are registered. They are used by 90.8% and 88.3% of respondents, respectively. Then there is Instagram, which is liked by 84% of respondents, and Tik-Tok with 77.9% of users. The Facebook network is less popular among the surveyed teenagers, only 40.9% of the surveyed teenagers

are registered there. It became clear from the analysis of the answers that most of the interviewed teenagers use several networks and messengers. This indicates the significant amount of time that adolescents spend in virtual interaction.

Finding out the daily length of stay of teenagers on social networks, we found that 6.2% of respondents spend less than an hour there, 13.5% of respondents communicate from 1 to 2 hours. The range of stay from 2 to 3 hours was recognized by 16% of respondents, from 3 to 4 hours – by 20.4% of adolescents. 13.3% of respondents spend 4 to 5 hours on social networks. It was also found that 9.5% of respondents spend 5 to 6 hours on the social network, and 13.9% of teenagers spend more than 6 hours there. Another 7.2% of respondents said they do not record the time of their stay on social networks. Thus, most teenagers spend a lot of time on social media every day, and this trend has intensified during the war.

Against this background, it was appropriate to find out the reasons for the attractiveness of social networks for teenagers. The survey found that the most common is the opportunity to relax, distract from the anxiety because of the war, when adolescents are on social networks. It is this function that took the first position in the ranking (Table 4).

Table 4: Functions of social networks for adolescents

Benefits	Choice of respondents* (%)	Ranking position
Many friends and fans	41,3	3
Lots of interesting information	63,2	2
Self-presentation and self-expression	21,8	5
Opportunity to relax, distract from anxiety due to war	74,6	1
Opportunity to change oneself, to build the desired image	24,1	4

* the question allowed choosing one or multiple options from a list of possible answers

The information function, which was mentioned by 63.2% of respondents, is also important for them. The third place in the ranking was taken by the communication function, it was chosen by more than 40% of respondents. Modification of the virtual image of “self” attracts almost a quarter of respondents. Opportunities for self-presentation and self-expression through interaction on social networks are actively used by 21.8% of adolescents who took part in the survey.

Taking into account the well-known risks of social networks for their users who have not yet reached adulthood, we found out what dangerous manifestations of social networks teenagers had to face. Processing of the survey

results showed that almost all respondents had dealt with fake information (Table 5). In their comments, the teenagers noted that this false or dubious information often concerned the details of Ukraine’s war with the Russian Federation.

Table 5: Experience of threats from being on social networks

Manifestations	Choice of respondents* (%)	Ranking position
Fake information	78,4	1
Trolling, hate	25,2	2
Call for extreme selfie	1,9	6
Challenge to participate in dangerous games or actions	3,1	5
Hacking	11,4	4
Cyberbullying	11,8	3
Grooming	0,2	7

* the question allowed choosing one or multiple options from a list of possible answers

About a quarter of respondents pointed to cases of trolling and hate. Manifestations of virtual harassment, namely cyberbullying, were even greater – they were experienced by 11, 2% of respondents. A limited number of adolescents we interviewed were able to identify threats of grooming. It is noteworthy that 15.4% of adolescents surveyed said they had not encountered any threats. This shows their self-confidence, levity or credulity as users of social networks.

It was important to find out how the parents of the respondents feel about the use of social networks by their minor children. It was found that more than a third of parents are interested and control this issue without limiting the activity of adolescents in social networks (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Impact of parents on the use of social networks by adolescents

More than 20% of respondents mention that parents control and restrict the use of social networks by adolescents. However, almost a third of respondents insist that parents do not interfere in their activities on social networks. This fact can pose a threat to the preservation of the virtual safety of adolescents against the background of

their underestimation of the risks and threats of social networks.

4. Discussion

Of course, our study is based on the dominance of questionnaire as the subjective method of collecting empirical data, given the limited opportunities for full-fledged psychological diagnosis of adolescents in war. The composition of the sample, which covered mostly those adolescents who were in safe conditions at the time of the study, also claims to be extended. Gender differences were also not taken into account when analyzing the results of the survey. The use of objective methods of diagnosing the psychological characteristics of adolescents, as well as content analysis of individual psychological consultations could deepen and expand the results of our study. However, the significant sample size and the representation of adolescents in Ukraine and abroad provided valuable empirical data, the processing of which became the basis for identifying plausible trends and drawing important conclusions.

As a result of the analysis of the survey results, it can be concluded that the leading condition for the effective implementation of educational activities of Ukrainian adolescents under martial law is their stay in safe conditions. The importance of adolescent learning as a platform for future professional self-fulfillment, as well as communication with peers was confirmed. These results resonate with studies that have shown the importance of social motives [5], in particular, academic success is seen by adolescents as a means of obtaining high status among classmates [3]. Our research revealed the emergence of a new motive for adolescent learning, namely the perception of learning as their own educational front, and a patriotic attitude to contribute to the victory over the Russian occupiers. This motive is more typical for those respondents who are in Ukraine.

The dominance of fatigue as a polydeterministic phenomenon that accompanies the learning of most adolescents has been traced. This condition, combined with the strong stress reactions of primary school students, explains the tendency of subjective experiencing difficult learning and may be the basis for adjustment disorders. It was established that the internal and external movements of adolescents due to full-scale Russian aggression do not correlate with negative emotions accompanying learning or the feeling of its complication. It was found that the majority of respondents have a somewhat negative perception of the transition to distance learning during the war due to limited communication, information overload. At the same time, adolescents see their advantages in this format of the educational process under martial law, which indicates their mental and behavioral flexibility.

The analysis of the respondents' answers has clearly shown the powerful challenge of a full-scale Russian invasion for the psychological well-being of all Ukrainians, including adolescents. It is obvious that the risk group for adjustment disorders are those adolescents who were / are in the zone of hostilities or occupation. However, those respondents who are in relatively safe conditions in Ukraine still show significant stress reactions, their resilience balances within the limits of suppression-increase. The majority of respondents confirmed frequent or episodic cases of low resilience, some adolescents experience feelings of helplessness against the background of chronic fatigue. At the same time, a favorable trend of successful adaptation of the majority of surveyed adolescents to difficult living conditions has been established. There is a strengthening of the resilience of Ukrainian adolescents, which is manifested in the strengthening of professionally oriented and patriotic motives for learning, the realization of the need for self-expression through social networks. This is in line with psychological research, which shows that, despite inhumane conditions, children and adolescents have a huge potential for vitality, which allows them to grow and become full-fledged individuals despite the psychological trauma. Researchers have identified several defense mechanisms, the most important of which are effective coping strategies, a positive belief system, healthy family relationships and friendships [9]. The teenagers we interviewed also successfully use communication with friends, family, hobbies and learning to maintain their own resilience.

The information and communication functions of social networks for Ukrainian adolescents have increased due to the significant limitation of opportunities for direct communication with peers. However, this trend is consistent with the entire world community. "...The digital information environment and virtual communities where communication is formed with technical means may substitute the reality in the future" [12]. Today's teenagers and young people are fully involved in the use of Internet resources and activities on social networks. At the same time, a number of studies point to serious risks and problems as a consequence of digital activity of the younger generation [10, 15, 18].

Our study has found that most adolescents consider social media as a source of information and communication, a platform for self-expression and self-presentation. Due to the war, Ukrainian teenagers use social media activity as a way to relax and distract themselves from anxiety. This has significantly increased the time spent by respondents on social networks, which creates a risk of over-involvement and addiction. Previous research has shown that social media and the Internet create opportunities for development and are a source of risk to adolescent mental health. The problem of violence and over-involvement is recognized as the most important negative social factor [10].

Other risks of increasing use of social networks by Ukrainian adolescents, which have been revealed in previous research, also deserve attention. Increased activity of adolescents against the background of elevated level of anxiety and stressful experiences may provoke a decrease in self-esteem [14]. Researchers have shown the relation between the online activity of adolescents and their well-being. German researchers have found that the use of social networks in itself is not a strong indicator of life satisfaction among adolescents [2]. British scientists have found a small but still negative link between the use of digital technology and the well-being of adolescents [13].

Our study fully correlates with A. Hudimova's [7] conclusions, because for the interviewed adolescents, the main advantage of communication on social networks in wartime is often to maintain contact with friends and relatives at a distance. At the same time, the downside of social networks for teenagers is that they are becoming a large-scale platform for fakes, threats, cyberbullying and more. With the increase in the use of the Internet and social networks, adolescents face problems including cyberbullying, sexting and problematic use of the Internet, which lead to various diseases [17]. The increase in virtual risks for adolescents is due to the increasing frequency of use and time of adolescents in the social network, the lack of learning on the safe and effective use of social networks, low digital competence of parents. During the war, Ukrainian teenagers are experiencing a strong stressor, so the issue of their virtual security and digital hygiene, which should involve adults, is especially important.

5. Conclusions

Applied research on the mental state and life of Ukrainian adolescents is an important condition for maintaining their resilience. The war provoked a strong stressful reaction of adolescents, which intensified against the background of forced relocation, transition to distance learning, restrictions on direct communication with peers.

Interviewed adolescents who are on the territory of Ukraine often experience fatigue, feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, anxiety. Overcoming these conditions through communication, hobbies, domestic work increases the stress resistance of adolescents. At the same time, there is an increase in the resilience of adolescents, which is manifested through the strengthening of professionally oriented and patriotic motives for learning, the fulfillment of the need for self-expression through social networks. Against the background of prolonged distress caused by the war, adolescents have an increased need for supportive interaction with peers. The analysis of the results of the survey of adolescents has clearly shown a growing trend of their activity on social networks with a concomitant increase in risks to mental health and personal development.

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