

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM A STUDY ON THE SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION AND REACTIONS OF TEENAGERS IN THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

The objective of this study is to outline the specific way in which teenagers (aged between 15 and 19) have processed and experienced the current situation and their behaviour in the context of restrictive measures imposed as part of the COVID-19 lockdown. The tasks set involve answering questions relating to the way in which teenagers perceive the current situation, how they process it in emotional terms and what their behavioural responses are. They also involve identifying the preferred communication channels enabling them to look for and share information and look into the explanation of COVID-19 shared by teenagers and their expectations of the post-crisis period. This survey also investigates the frequency of occurrence and nature of positive and negative emotions related to teenagers' experiences and delves into the activities that teenagers missed the most during lockdown and the activities that they used to introduce calm into their lives and that are thus important to them in their continued adaptation and search for stability. Another task of the survey is to assess the levels of cyberbullying in the context of physical distancing and social isolation and dwell on the age-specific thesauri¹ and social norms characteristic of teenagers.

Thus study was conducted by means of a dedicated online survey form combining features of quantitative and qualitative design. As in all other studies conducted in the COVID-19 context, this one collected responses using the snowball sampling technique to offer a snapshot of the situation. Our aim has not been to ensure representativeness in the general sense of the word. Instead we have aimed to ensure a sufficiently representative outline of the way in which teenagers reacted in the course of adapting to their changed circumstances. The link to the form reached 4 446 users and 810 of these filled it out in full and submitted it between 16 and 26 April 2020, April being the month of lockdown. The sample is balanced across age groups and place of residence and displays a slight overrepresentation of girls over boys. 22% of respondents were male and 78% - female; 15-year-olds accounted for 25%, 16-year-olds - for 25%, 17-year-olds - for 23%, 18-year-olds - for 18% and 19-year-olds made up 9%; 9% of respondents lived in a village, 32% lived in a town, 22% lived in a city (other than Sofia) and 37% lived in the capital city. In the main part of the text devoted to each topic covered by this study, we have presented results based on the answers given to multiple choice questions and we have summarised responses to open-ended questions. This serves to outline a picture characterised by overlap and divergence that is indicative of the specific features of teenagers' reactions.

¹ The term comes from Greek (thēsauros - treasure) Meanings: 1. A systematic collection of knowledge used by society, a community or an individual at a given point in time. 2. A prescriptive dictionary setting out descriptors, keywords and the principle relationships that obtain between these in a given sphere.

THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND REACTIONS OF TEENAGERS DURING LOCKDOWN AND EXPLANATION OFFERED FOR COVID-19

Overall, teenagers (60%) are of the opinion that the virus does not pose a threat to them. They are inclined to agree that the situation is very dangerous (47%) but also that said situation boils down to lies and manipulation (43%). Their experience of the situation is mainly characterised by a sense of anger at the restrictions imposed (70%) and, to a lesser extent, fear (30%) and a degree of mockery (29%). In behavioural terms, results demonstrate that many teenagers followed the measures introduced: 64% of them did not go outside, 89% wore protective facemasks when they did and 79% complied with all the restrictions introduced. These results demonstrate a pattern of responsible behaviour in the relatively short time period studied, which correlates with teenagers processing and accepting the situation: danger does exist and a reasonable approach is necessary in view of the discontent and doubt brought about.

'My friends are interested in the situation but not overly so. They are not completely fixated on the topic and instead they merely accept the situation and follow the measures'.²

Teenagers who considered that the entire situation was a manipulation and a scam and who were of the opinion that the virus was not as dangerous as to merit stringent measures and restrictions reported greater levels of anger. The situation did not instil fear in them, which stands in contrast with the high levels of fear felt by teenagers who were of the opinion that the virus was very dangerous. The humorous take on the situation correlates with the belief that said situation was a manipulation and a scam, which bred anger. In this case, humour acted as a sort of buffer. It is important to note that the feelings of anger and complacency as ways of experiencing the situation and the perception of said situation as a manipulation and a scam both correlate with a failure to follow rules in behavioural terms. This fact merits noting due to the confirmed significant correlation between following one measure and following other measures.

As regards the explanation they gave for COVID-19, the greatest proportion of teenagers believed that it was a new bioweapon (70%) *'I believe that this virus was created artificially and unleashed upon the world for a reason. The question then is what that reason might be'*, specifically a controlled experiment to reduce the world population (70%) *'In my opinion, this virus was artificially created to eliminate weaker links in the population'*.

'I believe that this virus was created artificially and unleashed upon the world for a reason. The question then is what that reason might be'.

Half the participants in the study considered that the virus was a tool used to impose a new social and political order and that there existed a 'media bubble' to shift attention away from other topics of note.

'The Third World War between the USA and Russia, which started quickly and ended the same way: without us even knowing it'; 'To bring about an economic recession'; 'It is all lies and a matter of money'; 'We are being lied to, there is no virus! Tell me, where are the all the ill people?!'.

Interestingly, 84% of young people, which is the most prominent group identifiable based on answers, did not believe that there was a relation between COVID-19 and 5G technology. 69%

² The original spelling and the style of the teenagers who participated in the survey were preserved in the report.

of young people did not believe that the interests of pharmaceutical companies were related to COVID-19, 68% could not agree that it was the punishment for a soulless consumer society and 66% did not consider the virus a social experiment (Figure 1).

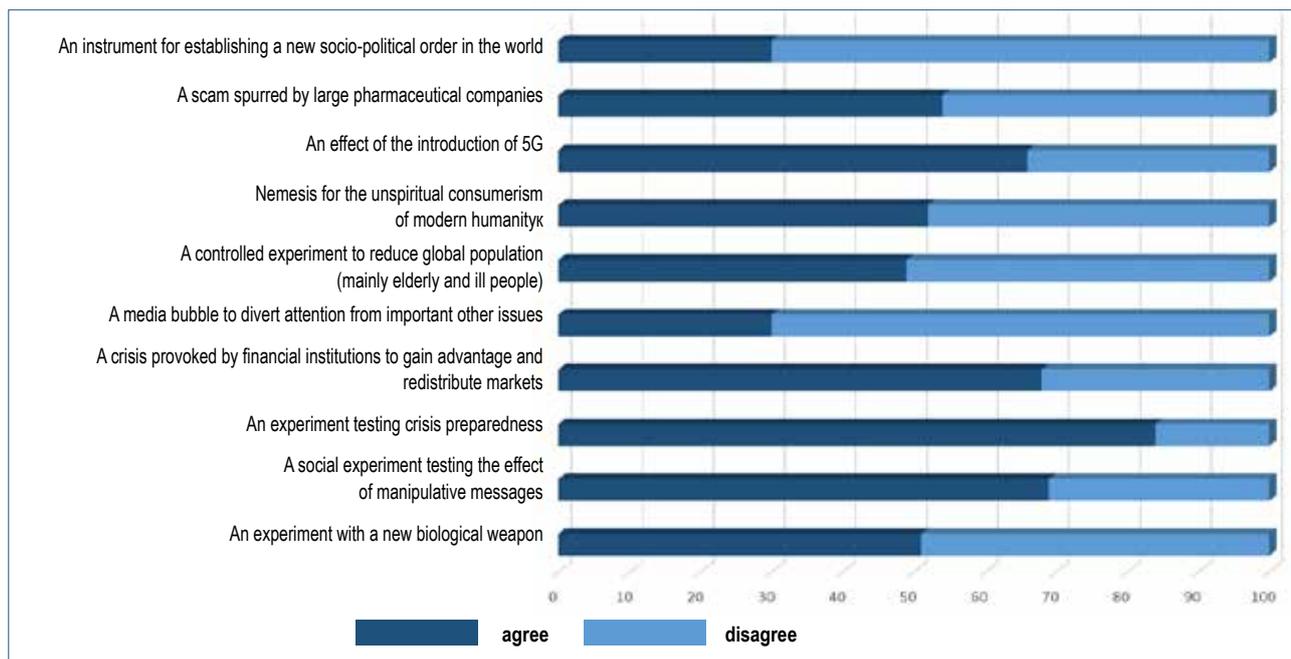


Figure 1. Explanations for the occurrence of COVID-19

Judging by teenagers' personal positions expressed in open-ended questions, they appeared to experience and perceive the situation somewhat differently. The vast majority of teenagers associated the coronavirus with [the idea of] a deadly disease that threatens the life of the public, especially that of their elderly relatives. This can account for why they did not underestimate its danger and were not willing to be complacent about it, which is evident in the quantitative section of this study.

'Something we have to approach seriously and because of which we have to follow the measures introduced in order for things to go back to the way things were, for the death toll to remain as low as manageable and for this to happen as quickly as possible'.

The second most prominent association was with a virus that leads to isolation and restrictions:

'I can associate it with quarantine, unhappiness, depression, absence of social life or life in general'; 'A disease that deprives us of our favourite activities and essentially places us under house arrest', 'many restrictions'; 'poor planning'.

The position that the situation was blown out of proportion and that there was a significant discrepancy between facts and the measures introduced was also prominent:

'I can associate it with instilling unnecessary panic and hurling false information at the public'; 'In my opinion, COVID-19 is not more dangerous than the flu but spreads more easily'; 'In my opinion, this is a virus that spreads very quickly and one that would not be as deadly or as dangerous if measures were taken in time'.

The category of responses demonstrating distrust towards politics, specifically with regard to the government and covert financial interests that are set to lead to a recession was also related to the phenomenon above:

'Panic, a money-making and market manipulation tool'; 'A method for controlling the public and inculcating it with panic', 'With the government trying to conceal an economic issue with a 'novel' virus'; 'yet another scam thought up by Bulgarian political leaders'; 'manipulating the public'; 'Those masks are there to keep you silent, not safe!'; 'Why are fiscal issues more adequately handled abroad than they are here?'

Positive associations relevant to teenagers' discoveries about themselves were not lacking:

'A period in which we are by ourselves and can consider a great many things that we did not used to have time for during our busy day-to-day life'.

The least prominent group consisted of young people who did not have any particular opinion on the virus '*I do not associate it with anything in particular*'; '*with holidays*'; or who associated the coronavirus with a response on the part of nature '*Earth has taken a much needed break*'; and disasters such as '*an apocalypse*', '*a Third World War*'. Associations with figures taken from immediate context, namely Gen. Mutafchiyski, China and eating bat meat, made up the last category of responses. Reactions informed by the point of view of young people included:

'I can associate this disease with panic and a sense of time standing still'; 'I believe that more people will die out of fear than will as a result of the coronavirus'.

The emotions teenagers associated with the lockdown impacted their overall assessment [of the situation] and served to explain the anger felt:

'The sense of nothing being under my control'; 'half-baked restrictions'; 'Anxiety about plans for the future'; 'I feel like an animal kept at a zoo'; 'Humiliation, rights being infringed and the opinions of others being shoved in our faces'.

Teenagers stated that they also experienced high levels of boredom, loneliness and anxiety:

'I share even less often than I used to'; 'I feel completely lost in my own thoughts and lonely. I am not productive and I am very lonely'; 'Anxiety about my parents, my grandmother and my grandfather'; 'How can we cope with this? How can we take care of our most vulnerable?'

An interesting and noteworthy point concerns the ambivalence of the range of emotions and states experienced. These are indeed an entire palette and they are shared across respondents:

'My feelings tend to fluctuate.'; 'One moment, I may feel incredibly happy and the next I may be terribly sad or depressed'; 'A sense of calm and enough time for me to be productive: finally, I have time to enjoy my hobby more thoroughly. However, I feel an overwhelming sense of tension and uncertainty'.

PREFERRED INFORMATION CHANNELS USED TO LOOK FOR AND SHARE INFORMATION AND FIGURES OF AUTHORITY RECOGNISED BY TEENAGERS IN THE CONTEXT OF LOCKDOWN

Teenagers highlighted that they preferred to make up their own minds: *'I have an opinion of my own'*; *'My opinion as regards the virus is founded on facts and verified information'*. This is important because, when coupled with figures of authority, it highlights the significance of the information used by young people to form an opinion, which may build trust or breed distrust.

'Masks are a preposterous idea! First the news tell us they are no good and then they are hailed as very useful. If you ask a scientist, they will tell you what happens when you wear a mask.'

In the context of crisis, teenagers preferred to seek the opinions of their parents and experts and expressly stated that they did not trust influencers or other people or groups they followed on social media. They displayed a preference for Bulgarian sources of information. A relatively large proportion of teenagers (one-third) followed TV and radio stations and 68% of respondents followed data officially made public and considered these a reliable source of information. Teenagers who did not look for any information accounted for 16% of respondents. A sustained trend shows that statements made by the Operational Staff and on social media were the preferred source of information of one-fifth of teenagers.

The greater proportion of teenagers were neither complacent nor ironic when approaching information from official sources and 75% both trusted it and followed it attentively. An even greater proportion (85%) behaved in a responsible and disciplined manner. Yet, the information presented and the measures recommended were a source of hesitation and uncertainty among almost half the teenagers who participated in the survey. This was due to the lack of consistency and the one-sided nature of the information offered, which was solely negative and insufficiently substantiated. The general position was that the situation had been blown out of proportion and panic in the media had been created artificially.

'Due to the low mortality and infection rates, declaring a lockdown is not necessary. Indeed, it boggles the mind why COVID-19 should be said to afflict people with 'a rage hitherto unwitnessed'. Has the world not already been through the plague, or the Ebola virus... and many other diseases with an outrageously higher death toll?'

Ensuring that content covered by the media remains visible and trusted and making information public are very important because they correlate with a behaviour characterised by responsibility and individual discipline. In contrast, a decrease in trust causes an increase in scepticism, confusion, irony and complacency, anger, annoyance and ignoring or failing to follow the measures in place. Specifically, distrust was driven by inconsistency, general impressions of specific public figures and politically-driven decision-making:

'Arguments are important but who issues these arguments is also important'; 'Our politicians have no idea what they are doing'; 'There is no such thing as a coronavirus, this is the new world order!'

As regards how often COVID-19 was featured on social media, results indicate that it was detected by 80% of respondents but in half of these cases it evoked an ironic or complacent response. The main position expressed boils down to the following: *'This topic is everywhere and that is annoying!'*

As regards fake news and their spread, the majority of teenagers stated that they looked for reliable information and did not trust any content shared automatically. Most demonstrated an interest and actively looked for information on measures to curb the spread of the virus, with 61% sharing protective measures that they had found with their friends. According to teenagers, they are capable of recognising fake news. This position is typical of their age group but may be dangerous in certain cases, given that 35% of teenagers reported sharing information on 'who was behind the coronavirus' with their friends. This confirms the existence of a risk relevant to sharing information that teenagers mistakenly believe to be reliable, especially in view of their self-professed search for opportunities to make up their own minds. Still, it is encouraging that 57% of teenagers stated that they were more active when it came to warning friends in case they detected fake news.

MAIN TOPICS OF CONCERN TO TEENAGERS DURING LOCKDOWN AND THEIR EXPECTATIONS AS REGARDS THE PERIOD AFTER THE CRISIS

The topics about which teenagers cared the most included finishing their school year (45%), the health of their friends and family (45%), activities they may pursue during isolation (42%), their plans for the future (40%), their own health (28%) and the financial impact [of the situation] on their families (25%).

The answers teenagers looked for mainly concerned the future (both in the short term and in the long term). Topics were problematised in the following terms: '*Will there be graduation galas?*', '*When do we get to go outside?*' and '*How do we cope after this?*'. Anxiety concerning the financial repercussions [of the crisis] was also expressed.

'I do not know why but there are people who believe that we could not care less whether our parents, or indeed our friends' parents, will stay in employment and continue to receive an income'.

The vast majority of teenagers (85%) anticipated that after the state of emergency is lifted a grave financial recession would set in but that this recession would be set against the background of greater public focus on healthy lifestyle (72%) and a change in human values towards greater humanity (71%). On the whole, teenagers had positive expectations of the post-pandemic world and did not expect a global disaster.

Responses to open-ended questions concerning expectations of life after lockdown highlighted specific positive expectations:

'After all, everyone will have learned at least to some extent that the most important time is that of the here and now'; 'In my opinion, after this crisis people will come to understand that they cannot survive without their friends and acquaintances and thus they will see one another more often and think more about their relatives and friends than they do about themselves'.

Nevertheless, there were expectations to the effect that the public would not emerge wiser out of this experience: '*People in the 21st century prefer to forget bad experiences, believing that not thinking about them would be as if they never happened in the first place and not taking responsibility for the ensuing consequences*'; financial concerns '*A multitude of unemployed persons who do not know how they will manage to get through the day*' and anxieties related to teenagers' individual situations.

'I am terrified that once the isolation period is over I will have to go through a long and difficult period of re-adaptation'.

ESTIMATING THE FREQUENCY AND NATURE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS RELATED TO TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCE OF THE SITUATION

The emotions experienced by teenagers will be considered both in terms of their overall frequency and in the context prior to and after the lockdown was imposed (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of occurrence and trends relevant to the emotions of teenagers

Compared with the situation before the lockdown, how often do you find yourself:	rarely, like before	more rarely than before	more often than before	as often as before
FEELING AFRAID	46%	15%	32% ↑	7%
FEELING ANXIOUS	32%	18%	40% ↑↑	10%
FEELING BORED	12%	10%	62% ↑↑↑	17%
FEELING ANGRY	36%	14%	36%	14%
BEING IRONIC	34%	17%	27%	22%
LAUGHING AT YOURSELF	36%	18%	21%	25%
FEELING IRRITATED	20%	12%	50%	18%
FEELING PANIC	55%	17%	22%	7%
FEELING SAD AND OUTRAGED	30%	14%	42%	14%
FEELING INSPIRED FOR CHANGE	20%	18%	40%	21%
FEELING CALM	18%	36%	22%	24%
FEELING NOSTALGIC	22%	13%	50%	16%
SHOWING A SENSE OF HUMOUR	15%	21%	20%	45%
FEELING A DESIRE TO HELP OTHERS	18%	11%	34%	37%
FEELING LONELY	27%	10%	46%	17%
FEELING FRUSTRATED	34%	17%	37%	13%
FEELING PESSIMISTIC	42%	17%	29%	12%
FEELING COMPLACENT	53%	29%	10%	8%
FEELING SURPRISED	46%	30%	17%	8%
FEELING GUILTY	61%	23%	9%	7%
FEELING GRATEFUL	26%	18%	33%	22%
FEELING ENERGETIC	19%	40%	20%	21%
FEELING JOY	20%	41%	15%	24%
FEELING USELESS	35%	19%	33%	13%
FEELING HELPLESS	39%	19%	31%	11%
FEELING OPTIMISTIC	21%	30%	20%	29%

'Untypical emotions' included fear, anxiety, anger, irony and self-deprecation, which are not generally typical of teenagers under normal circumstances. Teenagers stated that they did not usually have feelings of anger or resort to irony or self-deprecation. Over half reported experiencing panic rarely and not experiencing guilt, complacency or pessimism. One-third felt disappointment only rarely. The 46% of teenagers stating that they rarely felt surprised under normal circumstances present an interesting question. Emotions often experienced by young people both under normal circumstances and in the current setting included approaching issues with a sense of humour, the wish to help others and optimism. During lockdown, boredom increased by 600%, with loneliness growing by 400% and anxiety, anger, annoyance, sadness, outrage, nostalgia and disappointment increasing by 300%; fear, the sense of uselessness and helplessness and the use of irony as a means of self-preservation marked a twofold increase. The levels of joy decreased threefold and energy - twofold. A positive trend that emerged during the crisis was the twofold increase in the desire to help others, the sense of gratitude and the inspiration for change felt.

Open-ended questions revealed boredom, loneliness and ambivalent emotions as the most prominent categories

'Anger, sadness and happiness all at once. It is almost like having a manic episode. One moment, I may feel incredibly happy and the next I may be terribly sad or depressed. It all depends on the specific circumstances and people and on my emotions'.

IDENTIFYING THE ACTIVITIES MOST MISSED BY TEENAGERS DURING LOCKDOWN AND THE OCCUPATIONS WHICH MAKE THEM FEEL AT EASE AND ARE IMPORTANT TO THEM IN THE PROCESS OF ADAPTING AND LOOKING FOR STABILITY (COPING STRATEGIES)

Teenagers mostly missed being with friends, going out and travelling, the chance to engage in communication face to face and accumulate new experiences. *'It is not at all the same over the phone because sometimes you just need a hug from a friend'*. Over one-fifth of youths shared that they missed school, cafés, get-togethers, parties and theatres a great deal, one-third of teenagers shared the same sentiment as regards gyms and sports facilities and **over 60% missed the opportunity to stroll about outside and travel**. Over half the young people surveyed did not miss places of worship. One-third did not miss get-togethers and parties, malls, cinemas, volunteering and theatres.

Responses to open-ended questions centred around one main occupation missed, namely *'going out'*, which has to do with a range of emotions, communication and variety in one's day-to-day life.

'Having the right to choose whether to go outside or not and meeting with friends'; 'I miss conversations and emotions. I went to the nearby shop once and a person I know greeted me. This simple greeting had me happy for two hours because it had become special in our context'; 'The run-of-the-mill hints of freedom typical of everyday life'.

School was another category where opinions on social interaction converged. Teenagers also shared that they missed school. The words teenagers used to express the things they missed the most included: *nature, freedom, social interaction, friends and relatives, cafés, travel, physical contact and hugs; boyfriend/girlfriend and grandparents*. Few youths shared that they did not miss anything *'I feel great in isolation'; 'Thanks to the Internet, I have remained in contact with all my friends. I do not feel the need to go outside'*. Food proved an important category which brought teenagers comfort. They used the following wording: *'The happiness food brings'*. 76 participants in the study felt that the situation had a catastrophic effect on them personally, stating *'There is nothing I have not cut down on. I have never felt sadder in my life'*.

What teenagers shared they could not do without in spite of the restrictions in place included being with friends, going out and communicating.

Some positions voicing discontent with adults and assessing the behaviour of said adults as unfair and reckless are noteworthy:

'I stepped away from all manner of activities that made me happy just to see people that form part of the highest-risk group casually stroll in the streets (some not even wearing a facemask in spite of the new regulations and the sanctions provided for). 'Teenagers are reckless and think of themselves only. Really?' 'The most elderly turned out to be the most selfish, too!'

The principal behavioural coping strategy involved spending time on social media. 80% of teenagers stated that after lockdown was introduced, they started spending more time on social media. The most prominent strategy involved watching videos, which was the option of choice for 82% of teenagers. In behavioural terms, organising and introducing order in their home brought calm to 73% of youths, who stated that they had begun to assist in house chores. Another significant aspect was communication with friends and relatives, to whom teenagers turned for support and understanding and to whom they were all the more willing to provide these themselves.

Only 24% of youths stated that nothing had changed about their way of life. Those that stated the opposite, listed the following spheres of change: personal hygiene, caring for hygiene at home, following the measures in place. One-third of young people used techniques aiming at a balanced and spiritual life. A strategy enabling one quarter of teenagers to adapt to and cope with stress was a new-found interest in philosophy/religion. Looking for volunteering opportunities was a strategy that another quarter of the teenagers who participated in this study opted for. There was a balance between preference and lack thereof as regards the remaining four categories: care for one's own health through taking immunostimulants and food supplements, intensive physical exercise to boost one's health, acquiring new skills and knowledge, reading books and entertainment via more computer games (Table/Figure 2).

After learning about the growing infection rates in Bulgaria (and elsewhere), I changed my behaviour in that:	fully agree		agree		disagree		totally disagree	
I started washing my hands with water and soap more frequently	401	50%	294	36%	82	10%	33	4%
I started taking more care of hygiene at home (airing the rooms, disinfecting)	320	40%	317	39%	133	16%	40	5%
I started using protection (masks, gloves, hand sanitiser)	460	57%	275	34%	55	7%	20	2%
I started taking immunostimulants, food supplements and vitamins	186	23%	213	26%	228	28%	183	23%
I started exercising more intensively to boost my health	212	26%	256	32%	229	28%	113	14%
I stopped seeing friends and limited my contacts to my family only	341	42%	270	33%	136	17%	63	8%
I started sticking to well-organised daily routines	158	20%	227	28%	267	33%	158	20%
I started helping more with chores at home	250	31%	337	42%	162	20%	61	8%
I started learning a new language or skill	145	18%	192	24%	298	37%	175	22%
I started actively looking for ways I can help others (online, through volunteering, etc.)	78	10%	121	15%	398	49%	213	26%
I started reading more books	193	24%	229	28%	262	32%	126	16%
I started watching more videos	364	45%	302	37%	101	12%	43	5%
I started playing more computer games etc.	205	25%	157	19%	227	28%	221	27%
I started practising techniques for a harmonious and conscious spiritual life (mindfulness, meditation, yoga, etc.)	96	12%	124	15%	284	35%	306	38%

After learning about the growing infection rates in Bulgaria (and elsewhere), I changed my behaviour in that:	fully agree		agree		disagree		totally disagree	
I started spending more time on social media	373	46%	276	34%	116	14%	45	6%
I started going out alone	101	12%	230	28%	279	34%	200	25%
I started visiting/inviting friends more often	64	8%	78	10%	237	29%	431	53%
I started going through my photos and memories from the past	262	32%	249	31%	169	21%	130	16%
I became more interested in philosophy/religion	71	9%	108	13%	257	32%	374	46%
nothing changed in my habits or daily behaviour	77	10%	117	14%	242	30%	374	46%

In the context of lockdown, teenagers were very highly appreciative of their connection with friends and relatives, even if this was remote. Three quarters preferred not to confide in adults who were not part of their family, which serves as proof that they felt sufficiently understood. **A greater proportion of teenagers stated that they expected to receive support from their parents but they added that they tried to relieve the anxiety of their parents themselves.** Almost all respondents stated that they tried to support their family and friends. Over half stated that they felt a desire to help people in need in general. 74% shared that they enjoyed more active communication with their family members. As regards emotional support, this was mainly provided by friends but parents followed close behind along this parameter. **All this said, it is notable that over half the respondents stated that they needed time alone with their thoughts.** Classmates and teachers remained outside teenagers' trusted circle of people in whom they confided. One-third waited passively for the isolation measures to be lifted (Table/Figure 3).

To what extent do you agree with the statements below about yourself in the current physical isolation:	fully agree		agree		disagree		totally disagree	
I find it good to be connected to friends and loved ones, even if remotely	259	32%	362	45%	115	14%	74	9%
I have been sharing a higher number of important things with adults outside my family	55	7%	146	18%	389	48%	220	27%
I have higher expectations of support from my parents	181	22%	355	44%	201	25%	73	9%
I have been trying to help my family	332	41%	404	50%	51	6%	23	3%
I have been trying to help friends	284	35%	441	54%	64	8%	21	3%
I have been trying to help people in need	147	18%	347	43%	253	31%	63	8%
I have been trying to put my parents at ease	255	31%	350	43%	156	19%	49	6%
I have been communicating with family members more intensively	276	34%	323	40%	159	20%	52	6%
I have been sharing news with friends more often	140	17%	314	39%	270	33%	86	11%

To what extent do you agree with the statements below about yourself in the current physical isolation:	fully agree		agree		disagree		totally disagree	
I feel my friends are a source of emotional support when I need it	321	40%	325	40%	106	13%	58	7%
I feel my family is a source of emotional support when I need it	290	36%	291	36%	135	17%	94	12%
I started exercising/exercising more	193	24%	238	29%	232	29%	147	18%
I prefer to be left alone with my thoughts	232	29%	294	36%	197	24%	87	11%
I have been discussing a larger variety of topics with my classmates	108	13%	276	34%	293	36%	133	16%
I have been finding out a lot of new things about my teachers	96	12%	219	27%	305	38%	190	23%
I have been doing nothing, just waiting for the lockdown to be over	151	19%	158	20%	199	25%	302	37%

CYBERBULLYING DURING LOCKDOWN

Teenagers did not believe that online communication had grown more aggressive or riddled with more personal insults, ridicule and rudeness. Indeed, the majority (62%) stated that they could not notice any change, with almost half of them registering an uptick in the desire to help declared in the new context. There was an overall improvement not merely in the amount of social media interaction but also in its quality. *'We miss one another more and we tend to write to one another more often.'* Responses registering a negative trend were significantly fewer, stating that *'boredom made us all start hating one another'*.

The drop in the cases of cyberbullying registered ran parallel to an increase in tolerance towards these and even denial of their existence (i.e. tension between the manifestations of the phenomenon on the one hand and the social norm that tolerates these on the other). The prevalent position was that there was no cyberbullying and that if there were cases of insults or rudeness, no one paid attention to these and these were considered normal or mocked by young people

'There is no such thing as cyberbullying. No one would take offence if they were told that everybody hated them and that they had no friends'; 'Any insults I have witnessed have been made jokingly'

If such cases did exist, they were discussed in general but were not expressly related to the current context

'I have been brutally lied to but that used to happen even before the epidemic set in'; 'I believe these are things that occur in general. Teenagers are rude. They seek attention and popularity. They consider aggression a solution to their problems'

As regards its recognisable forms, results concerning the spread of cyberbullying were optimistic: the majority of teenagers stated that they had not received disturbing messages, indecent images or threats, had not been sexted, targeted by ridicule, removed/blocked out of social media and material

had not been published by persons pretending to be them. **Hateful messages were received more often (1 or 2 times) by 12% of respondents over the past month, and 5% received more than 3 such messages over the past month. 14% received 1 or 2 messages featuring sexual content, while 9% received more than 3 such messages. Indecent photos and a request to send nude photos were received 1 or 2 times by 10% of the young people surveyed, and 6% received such more than 3 times over the past month.** Up to 5% received a request for cam sex, were targeted by ridicule and threats online or forced to watch videos and received hateful comments and threats. 18% received files containing a deliberately planted computer virus 1 or 2 times over the past month, making this a more frequent occurrence. **These results are only indicative because we do not have information on the sources and whether the information reported does not tie in with behavioural patterns pre-dating the current situation.** This is supported by the majority of comments stating that nothing had changed and that any violence existed prior to the current situation and by teenagers' position to the effect that they knew how to keep safe.

The most prevalent position expressed in additional comments was that teenagers had not witnessed cyberbullying. To this, they added that if the phenomenon did exist it was 'perfectly normal' and no one paid attention to it and that the lockdown did not increase levels of bullying because people were scared.

'Generally, there are always these people who will say things like that without even knowing a person they insult but I do not believe that this only started once the lockdown set in'.

This is also supported by the position expressed concerning bullying and lack of understanding.

'To be frank, I do not want the lockdown to be lifted. It is not because of school itself but because of my classmates'; 'Bullying only takes place at school but not on social media because my classmates would pick on virtually anything'.

The responses submitted by teenagers in the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire displayed a few additional characteristics that completed the overall picture. One of these concerned the willingness to act responsibly, which correlated with the expectation that the lockdown would be temporary.

'Let us all follow the restrictions in place. This will allow us all to overcome the situation faster and then we will not be obliged to abide by certain restrictions'..

A great many responses conveyed moderation and called for a calm approach.

'Stay calm and avoid fake news'; 'Please do not panic. This will pass. Act reasonably and not out of fear. Do not forget that no one is entitled to tell you how to feel: do not force yourselves to feel positive or gloomy. I also wish to call on my teachers and fellow students: we are all human and we are all worried; let us communicate more openly and not force our authority on others or play the victim because this only causes us harm'.

The calls sent include a call for critical thinking.

'Do not act like a flock of sheep, do not go and obey blindly. Doubt any piece of news or decision by the government!'

A position summarising the sense of anxiety is as follows:

'[...] We do not know how we are supposed to finish this academic year, or when we will go back to our school building. A lot of people will not be going on holidays this summer and others will lose people they love. These are troubled times, especially for young people. We are indeed worried but that does not mean that we have to put our intellectual growth on hold or stop being curious. This crisis will end at some point. I am more afraid of what will happen after it does...'

Opinions diverged wildly as regards school and education. School was mostly missed because it invited communication, while distance learning was considered a source of fatigue and anger and left teenagers with a sense of missing out on knowledge.

'I would like to appeal to the Ministry of Education and Science to reduce the workload in distance learning and make the process less stressful and time-consuming. Indeed, some teachers have overdone it on the task end'; '[...] we have to spend an average of eight ours in front of screens and this has a really negative effect on everyone. You cannot go to sleep as soon as you have gone to bed, you get a headache, your eyes sting and a ton of other problems crop up [...]'; 'Let us not cause students more stress by having them do additional exams (grades 4 and 10) because the situation is tense enough as it is'.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a general pattern is that teenagers acted responsibly in spite of the anger they felt. They tried to approach the situation in a rational manner and looked for arguments allowing them to adopt positions of their own, something they highlighted as being important to them. This process required young people to begin to look for facts and they underscored that they were not swayed by the opinions of influencers and relied on expert assessments instead. This balanced position is based on two trends concerning the causes of the situation (looking up facts) and the dangers it may pose (coming to an understanding based on expert forecasts) respectively. The first trend is age-specific and entails a pursuit of autonomy, experiencing ambivalent emotions all at once and emphasising the here and now. This explains the significantly greater sensitivity on the part of teenagers to everyday events and to what they observe in the world around them in general. These serve as the basis on which they draw conclusions. This leads to a prevalent assessment they give of the lockdown, stating that the virus does exist and that protective measures have to be taken but **highlighting that the situation is not as dangerous as presented and that the media have indeed blown it out of proportion. This general attitude is at the root of the emotions experienced, the coping strategies adopted, the dissemination of conspiracy theories and the belief of teenagers that they can recognise fake news and not share them.** The emotion overwhelmingly experienced was anger, which tied in with isolation and the restrictions to be followed but also with teenagers' position that they found the information [provided] and measures [adopted] incompatible with the actual danger (indeed, they considered these one-sided and inconsistent). All of this ultimately led to discontent with politics and the government. This is important in view of the fact that half of teenagers did not consider that they were in immediate danger. **Since the lockdown period lasted a month, clearly this was not sufficient to change their responsible behaviour. Nevertheless, young people's growing anger resulting from the sense of their trust having been betrayed will certainly lead to a behavioural change in the long term.** This is exacerbated by the disappointment in teachers, the educational system and the behaviour of adults in general. Anger serves as a driver for the further dissemination of conspiracy theories, which in itself stems from

discontent and doubt. Doubt, for its part, results from actual discrepancies between the information officially made public and the inconsistent or disproportionate nature of the measures imposed. **Mistrust and anger reduce the willingness to act responsibly and follow the measures.** This fact merits noting due to the confirmed correlation between following one measure and following other measures. Hence, it is important to highlight that reliability and clear and consistent messages are of fundamental importance when communicating with this age group. These can be considered along the following specific lines:

1. **Activities that introduced balance in the lives of teenagers** included online communication, interaction with friends and relatives and other activities that make their everyday life meaningful: discovering new entertainment to counter the pervasiveness of boredom and monotony. The fact that they overwhelmingly resorted to videos reflecting their reality (immediate satisfaction, short duration, readily processed) is indicative of that. Teenagers adapted to the situation by satisfying their need for new experiences and greater togetherness. On the one hand, **teenagers are privileged** because their age group generally lays greater emphasis on the here and now. This allows them to stand at a remove from more common worries and anxieties related to planning their future. This allows them the opportunity to enjoy positive emotions and activities that occupy their attention and correlates with the oscillation between positive and negative emotions experienced. On the other hand, **teenagers have 'lost' more** due to physical distancing and the sense that missing out limits their opportunities. It is important to keep in mind certain teenager-specific needs which have been particularly prominent: the need for novelty, brief messages and a sense of togetherness. Activities and messages based on these could reach teenagers.
2. An important conclusion as regards **school and education** emerged. School was mostly missed because it invited communication, while distance learning was considered a source of fatigue, anger and left teenagers with a sense of missing out on knowledge. An increase in discontent among teenagers brought about by the lack of adapted online content in their most familiar media was observable. This did not take into account the situation in which teachers were placed, namely one in which resources and preparation time were lacking but teachers were expected to meet all needs and attract students' interest. Teenagers felt 'betrayed' by their teachers, believing that the latter were only formally working and requiring them to perform whereas they themselves did not, which was perceived as leading to learning gaps and an even greater distance between teachers and young people. This highlights the need for teachers and educational content to adapt to the digital setting.
3. As regards sharing **conspiracy theories**, a very interesting development is observable. Teenagers were prone to share these where they resembled their positions but displayed reservations towards theories not complying with their perspectives (like the one relating the coronavirus with 5G networks). What is more, the rate at which conspiracy theories were shared may be discussed in the context of factors contributing to this. **Young people experienced a dissonance between accepting that the virus does exist and the fact that it is blown out of proportion** (and they sought an explanation for the latter). This led to a decrease in trust in official information sources, which are generally the preferred option in crisis situations. Coupled with the strive to discover facts and explanations, this prerequisite spurred teenagers to share the theory that COVID-19 was a bioweapon or a direct means of controlling the public, which was the most immediate model allowing them to account for the mismatch between facts and measures and the constant fear-mongering observed. **This is also particularly important with a view to trust in the media and messages sent to teenagers in general.** Blowing an issue out of proportion generally translates into an avoidance of media content. This steps up the risk of false information being disseminated since teenagers are prone to stand by the personal opinion that they arrive at. Indeed, 35% of teenagers reported sharing information on 'who was behind the coronavirus' with their friends. The issue of the dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories is especially important when it comes to teenagers given their personal convictions in the correctness of their opinion, which puts them at a greater risk. It is important

to avoid information and actions that breed doubt and are inconsistent. These tend to serve as the basis for seeking alternative explanations.

4. **Social norms** are conspicuous in teenagers' responses concerning **cyberbullying**. On the one hand, teenagers reported a positive trend, i.e. that the emergency situation saw not only a halt in the increase in online aggression but an actual decrease, thus enabling more effective communication and fostering the desire to help. Yet, this positive development as regards the recognisable forms of bullying ran parallel to another position, the latter demonstrating that teenagers have a very high tolerance threshold when it comes to aggression during communication and even deny the existence of cyberbullying (in other words, they did not consider it a form of violence). They referred to it as something only adults considered scary, a thing young people themselves found a normal part of their everyday life that they may disregard or laugh off. They shared the position that bullying generally happened in a real life (i.e. in face-to-face interaction). **It is recommended that these questions receive further investigation and become the subject of targeted awareness campaigns on distinguishing forms of cyberbullying and responding to these. It is also recommended to work more actively on preventing forms of bullying that take place during face-to-face interaction, which teenagers did recognised existed.**
5. Lockdown saw teenagers experience a significantly greater variety of negative **emotions** than they generally do in their typical day-to-day life: boredom, irritability, loneliness, fear and anxiety, anger, disappointment, pessimism and irony, uselessness and helplessness. These came at the expense of joy and optimism. In this context, teenagers sought refuge in their sense of humour. Half of teenagers shared that they generally relied on it often and it was clear that it served as the main means of mitigating stress (coping strategy) across age groups. Other factors included the desire to help others, the sense of gratitude and the inspiration for change felt. On the one hand, all this reveals the nature of the interaction between the environment and age-specific characteristics. On the other, it goes to demonstrate the main emotions experienced and impacted by the situation. **Coupled with teenagers' sense of humour, commitment to the desire to help and gratitude constitute the ways in which young people adapt positively** by focusing on making use of opportunities in spite of restrictions. This brings them satisfaction and inspires them. **Prosocial attitudes and satisfaction with the feedback received are key and they need to be part of planning alternative activities that have the potential to become attractive to young people.**
6. The main things teenagers **missed** during lockdown included **being with friends and going out.** Both of these have to do with communication and experiencing the world. An important point concerns the significance of relatives and relations in the family. The latter were expected to go both ways, i.e. both giving and receiving support were expected and the same went for physical signs of affection. Ambivalent feelings and the sense of each day being different depending on how it went and what circumstances accompanied it may explain the position of a part of young people who believed they had not cut down on any of their activities. This position was due to the lack of change compared to their individual situations but also to their proactive planning, i.e. they had succeeded in making their everyday life meaningful. **Effective communication and satisfaction compensated for the negative emotions and stress experienced. The better part of teenagers felt understood. Trends generally indicated more frequent and effective communication.** Said communication was characterised by togetherness and support. The significance attached to the latter, which is high in this age-group, grew even higher because communication was a purposeful process, not a mere necessity. At the same time, teenagers displayed a specific need to be by themselves and assess their own choices, too. **The ambivalent world of teenagers is characterised by wildly diverging emotions that fluctuate greatly and a significant need to communicate coupled with a need to be alone with one's thoughts. This is the way in which they learn and adapt as a group and it may serve as an explanatory framework in the prevention of any pathologies.**

7. The overall trend demonstrates that, when in a crisis situation, teenagers prefer to use official Bulgarian **sources of information** and follow data officially made public. This places a great burden of responsibility on institutions and requires that the information these present in times of crisis is accurate, clear and consistent. Teenagers prefer to seek the opinions of their parents and experts and expressly state that they do not trust influencers or social media. **In sum, we may say that teenagers vet their sources depending on how serious their topic of interest is, they have skills to distinguish [between reliable and less than reliable sources]** and they do not merely follow figures otherwise popular among them blindly. This takeaway is important because it lays emphasis on the fact that mistrust and scepticism towards the information coming from official sources and the measures recommended by the government have settled into a sustained attitude among one-third of respondents (hence serving as prerequisites for specific behavioural patterns). **The information presented and the measures recommended bred hesitation and uncertainty among almost half of the teenagers who participated in the survey. This was due to the lack of consistency and the one-sided nature of the information offered, which was solely negative and insufficiently substantiated.** It is important that this fact is taken into consideration when messages targeting teenagers are prepared so that their trust is not lost. Teenagers' trust in the facts presented by figures whose expert status they recognise is at the core of ensuring their responsible behaviour. This also provides an answer as to the channels and figures that may serve to deliver messages on serious topics.

The prolonged period in which communication took place in a different way will very probably lead to a specific process of re-adaptation on return to school buildings or, alternatively, on starting the next school year online. Either way, this will constitute a change in the situation. The return to school buildings is expected to be accompanied by positive attempts at re-establishing communication and joy in interaction. This would also be an apt time to plan activities aiming to ensure sustainability because it is a period characterised by openness towards activities aiming to ensure togetherness. It is important that such activities are planned at the very outset in view of the face-to-face communication between teenagers over the summer. This may have served to satisfy their need for interaction and thus it might be that initial enthusiasm does not accompany return to the school buildings. This may be when forms of violence that teenagers recognised as existing at school rear their head. In the event that online communication continues, effort should be invested in organising activities related to cyberbullying and the need to recognise it and providing counselling services should another round of isolation be necessary and lead to negative experiences and a sense of loneliness. Either way, planning may be based on the needs of teenagers outlined in this text. It is also important to continue to research the emotions, perceptions, behavioural patterns, beliefs and coping strategies of teenagers with a view to arriving at trends that may inform effective communication and activities targeting the group of young people.