

Youth, well-being and the media in times of COVID-19

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR FROM INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Heike vom Orde

The author gives an overview of what initial research findings indicate about the psychological impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on youth and about changes in their media behaviour.

In these uncertain and challenging times, we are all affected by major restrictions and changes in our everyday life. Besides the elderly and those with chronic illnesses, children and adolescents are among the groups that are especially vulnerable in this crisis. Researchers assume that the crisis-related social distancing, the closure of schools and children's day-care centres, the more frequent use of screen media, and stress factors within the family can have negative effects on young people's well-being and mental health (Lee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). A clearly structured daily routine can foster resilience, particularly in children, but often this is no longer a given, and the microcosm of the family faces a serious test of endurance. Furthermore, children are "keen observers": they are very aware of the fear, uncertainty and stress in the behaviour of those around them, and have to deal with this (Saxena & Saxena, 2020, p. 190).

Studies that were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic point to possible psychological effects on the mental health of young people which can occur during and after quarantine (Wang et al., 2020, p. 946). Some authors have already begun to talk of a "COVID-19 generation," which might continue to suffer from the consequences of this

crisis for many years. But such general attributions, based solely on an age cohort, should be evaluated with great caution (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020). The following overview will refer to a selection of the international research findings available so far on this subject area.

Lee, Joyce (2020). Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health, April, 14, 2020. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanchi/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanchi/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7.pdf) [19.5.20]

Wang, Guanghai et al. (2020). Mitigate the effects of home confinement on children during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Lancet, March 21, 2020, 395(10228), 945-947. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30547-X.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)30547-X.pdf) [19.5.20]

Saxena, Rakhi & Saxena, Shailendra (2020). Preparing children for pandemics. In Shailendra Saxena (Ed.), Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Epidemiology, Pathogenesis, Diagnosis, and Therapeutics (pp. 187-198). Singapore: Springer.

Rudolph, Cort & Zacher, Hannes (in press). "The COVID-19 Generation": A Cautionary Note. Work, Aging and Retirement, 2020, 1-7.

YOUTH, FAMILY AND WELL-BEING IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

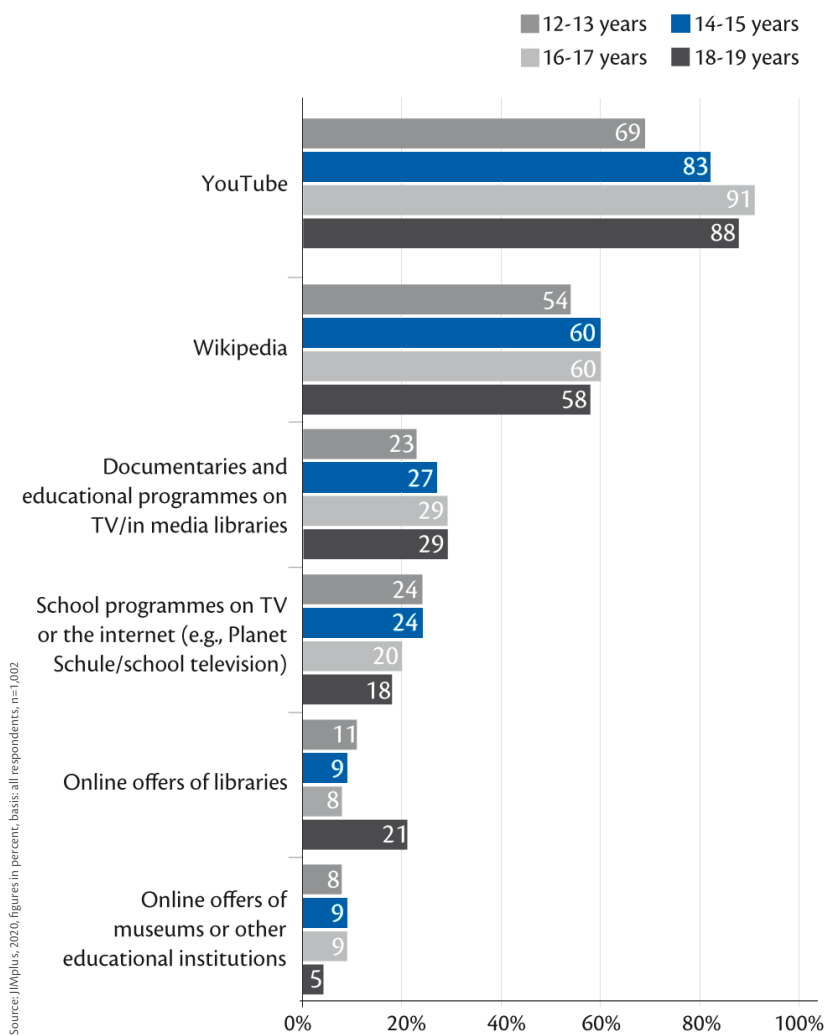
In early April in Germany, on behalf of the organization Save the Children, Forsa (2020) conducted an online survey of 500 parents of children and adolescents aged between 8 and 17, and 502 children, on their family life during the coronavirus crisis. The young people primarily say – and much more often than their parents – that they miss their friends (76%) and that they are bored (59%). The vast majority (92%) find it (very) easy to talk to their parents about the coronavirus, and the parents also have no trouble discussing the topic with their

offspring (ibid., p. 15). It is alarming, however, that 1 in 10 children feels alone and ill at ease, and that 1 in 5 children is worried about a possible increase in family conflict (ibid., p. 12). The fears of parents and children revealed by the survey are very similar (ibid., p. 12ff.): the biggest worry for parents is that a friend or family member could become ill (63%) or that unemployment will rise (59%). A third of parents fear that their child will fall behind at school; 29% are worried that they themselves could become ill. When it comes to the children, 71% also fear that someone they know could become ill. With a similar frequency to the parents, the children worry that they will fall behind at school (33%) or that they themselves could become ill (32%).

Another international study (USA, Germany, Finland, Spain and the UK) by Save the Children (2020) finds considerably higher levels of anxiety among the young people surveyed there (n=6,000): 1 child in 4 has feelings of anxiety about the virus. In the German sample (Forsa, 2020, p. 3) this applies to only 7% of the young people surveyed.

According to a German study (Universität Erfurt et al., 2020), parents of preschool children feel stressed because of the lack of childcare outside the home. Around half of the mothers surveyed say that they find the situation stressful, with the level remaining the same from the end of March to the end of April. In mid-May, the feeling of stress dropped from 44.9%

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III. 1: German adolescents prefer to use YouTube and Wikipedia as learning tools during the school closures

to 38.0% among families with older children, while it rose from 55.3% to 58.3% for mothers and fathers with younger children. An Italian study in early April 2020 examining the well-being of mothers and their preschool children (aged 2 to 5), also came to the conclusion that the restrictive rules on leaving the house and the lack of childcare outside the home were leading to a major breakdown of daily routines and more **stress within families**. The mothers reported that they had noticed sadness, frustration, and hyperactivity in their children. Mothers who were working from home felt especially stressed, while those who were working outside the home

suffered less from this situation (Di Giorgio et al., 2020, p. 19).

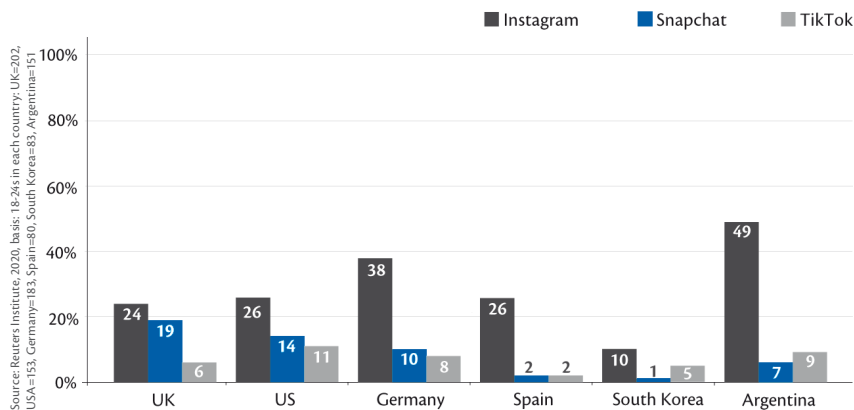
1,143 parents from Spain and Italy with children aged between 3 and 18 responded to a questionnaire about the psychological effects of the coronavirus pandemic on their family (Orgilés et al., 2020). 85.7% of the parents observed changes in the **emotional well-being** of their child. Concentration problems, boredom, irritability, nervousness and loneliness were the most commonly mentioned issues. The children and adolescents were spending more time with screen media, were less physically active, and were sleeping longer during quarantine. One third of parents felt (very) stressed by the situation.

A comparative European study (n=75,570) between the end of March and the middle of April 2020 investigated the stress level of people aged over 18 in the respective populations (Travaglino et al., 2020). It emerged that worries about children's schooling and living with children were a medium-level stress factor in comparison to the economic and health-related effects, which were more feared by the adults.

A study from China (Liang et al., 2020), 2 weeks after the outbreak of the epidemic there, examined the mental health of 14- to 35-year-olds in an online survey (n=584). The results showed that 40.4% of the respondents said they were suffering from psychological problems, and 14.4% displayed **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms**. Negative effects on mental health were especially common among boys and young men, and respondents with a low level of schooling.

Another study from China comes to the conclusion that younger age can be a risk factor for developing anxiety and depression in the crisis (Huang & Zhao, 2020).

An international study with a sample of 101 young people aged between 8 and 18 from 13 countries (Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Sierra Leone, and child refugees from Syria living in a camp on the Syrian-Turkish border) found that the **living conditions** of the respondents had undergone changes, in some cases hugely negative ones (World Vision, 2020). 71% of the children and adolescents surveyed said that they felt isolated and alone (ibid., p. 17). Furthermore, many are suffering from growing poverty and an insufficient food supply (ibid., p. 21). What many of the children and adolescents surveyed find especially stressful is the uncertainty about the duration and extent of the crisis. Learning conditions have become much more difficult, since the



Ill. 2: Instagram is an important information source of coronavirus news for young adults in several countries

schools are closed and home schooling is inadequate or cannot take place at all (ibid., p. 18).

A study from Austria (n=1,000), from 25 March to 8 April 2020, investigated how adolescents and young adults saw their future after the coronavirus pandemic. One third of the 16- to 29-year-olds surveyed agreed with the statement that their outlook on the future was becoming gloomier because of the coronavirus epidemic and its consequences (T-Factory, 2020, p. 5). Those under 20 and adolescents with a low or medium level of education are especially likely to take a pessimistic view of their future (ibid., p. 6). Around 40 % of the respondents are afraid that the state could misuse the restrictions during the coronavirus to limit civil liberties after the crisis (ibid., p. 12). The top fear, however, is of an imminent global economic crisis (66.7%). This is followed by fear of the death of a close relative (61.8%), and then in third place the fear of restrictions to the freedom of movement (53.4%). Among the 16- to 19-year-olds surveyed, over 50% are worried that the completion of their schooling might be delayed (ibid., p. 16). Although the fear of infection is only moderate in this age group, the willingness to social distancing is very high, at around two thirds of respondents (ibid., p. 10).

Forsa (2020). Familienleben während der Corona-Krise. April 9, 2020. Berlin: forsa Politik- und Sozialforschung.

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YOUTH AND MEDIA USE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Media play a crucial role for adolescents in the pandemic. On the one hand, they serve as a learning tool, a means of communication and a source of information on the events of the crisis. On the other hand, they are used for distraction or for (more or less creative) stress management during the crisis (see also vom Orde and Götz et al. in this issue).

A German study has found that students (n=1,002) take a fairly relaxed view of home schooling, which is cited as a stress factor by parents (mpfs, 2020). More than half of the 12- to 19-year-olds receive their schoolwork by email, though 30% claim that they have had virtually no contact with their teachers since the schools were closed. The older students are more likely to work with their class in a cloud, and to use video conferencing or online chats as channels of communication (ibid., p. 7). YouTube and Wikipedia are at the top of the list of media learning services utilised, and the adolescents also use documentaries and educational television programmes for their learning (ibid., p. 13, Ill. 1).

The devices most commonly used for learning purposes are mobile phones and PCs or laptops (ibid., p. 14). The adolescents state that they are using media in their free time more often than before the coronavirus crisis. Here they mention streaming services and television as well as YouTube (ibid., p. 20). While WhatsApp is the main medium for keeping in touch with friends, older relatives are contacted by telephone (ibid., p. 22 and 26).

A study from the UK was also able to observe an increase in media use among young people in April 2020 in comparison to previous years (Dubit, 2020). Among older children, the use of streamed TV content is increasing, while preschool children watch more linear TV (ibid., p. 10). A significant increase in the use of TikTok (50%) and

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Messenger Kids (45%) can be observed in comparison to the previous year. Television plays an important role as a [source of information](#) about the events of the pandemic: 33% of the 11- to 15-year olds say that they use TV, radio or newspaper websites for this (ibid., p. 20). Across all age groups, however, parents are the most important contacts in the crisis.

A further study from the UK (Ofcom, 2020) confirmed the importance of television as a source of knowledge among the 12- to 15-year-olds surveyed (n=500). Here too, family members were the most important and most trusted source of information. 52% of the respondents agree that they “find it hard to know what is true and what is false about coronavirus.” A quarter agree that they are “confused about what I should be doing in response to coronavirus” (ibid., p. 2).

A study from Austria (T-Factory, 2020, p. 17) also confirmed the high relevance of information from television for adolescents in the COVID-19 crisis. A survey of parents in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Tonies.com, 2020) between 21 April and 10 May 2020 found a similar picture with regard to the increasing use of screen media by children under the age of 18: two thirds of parents stated that their children were spending more time with

media. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents observed increasing anxiety or sadness in their children. The use of media as a [coping strategy](#) for young people seems to be international.

An international comparative study (Reuters Institute, 2020) comes to the conclusion that Instagram is an important source of information for 18- to 24-year-olds in this time of crisis (Ill. 2). In Argentina, for example, celebrities and influencers with their video posts and comments play a major role in the everyday life of their followers during the pandemic (ibid., p. 12).

In the above-mentioned study by World Vision (2020), the children and adolescents surveyed mostly get their information about the coronavirus from the internet. Since many adults only have limited access to digital services, the authors posit that young people are better informed and support their communities as [multipliers](#) (ibid., p. 22). A majority of the respondents say that they use their own networks on social media to spread information about the virus and the right way to deal with it. In countries with inadequate internet infrastructure such as Sierra Leone, the young people surveyed mainly use mobile phones to disseminate pandemic-related information. According to the authors, children in refugee camps and in areas without access to the internet

or to mobile phone systems suggest that local radio stations should report more intensively on the coronavirus and the related measures (ibid., p. 25). This is an important suggestion from the younger generation, to help stop the pandemic from developing into the infodemic feared by the WHO. ■

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