PERSONAL VALUES OF GENERATION Z DURING COVID-19

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Abstract - This paper highlights how evolving measures of the COVID 19 epidemic change the values of Generation Z individuals. We analyzed how measures of COVID-19 before, during, and after the first wave of epidemic affect four higher-order personal values of a cohort comprising 85 students from Slovenia in the first half of 2020. Contrary to prior literature, our analysis revealed that the social lockdown during the COVID-19 significantly decreased the importance of all personal values and changed their hierarchy, while values mainly return to initial levels after the crisis. Results of our present behavior capacities of Generation Z for dealing with potentially unfavorable and threatening circumstances in the future.

Keywords - COVID-19, Generation Z, Personal Values, Social Lockdown, Values Change.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) poses a major challenge to humanity, the future of which depends on the ability to control and overcome the outbreak of acute coronavirus syndrome - SARS-CoV-2 [1]. Despite global capacities and efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, societies face numerous barriers to developing an appropriate response to the pandemic its social consequences [2].

The outbreak of COVID-19 was first recorded in Wuhan City (China) in December 2019, subsequently escalating into several local epidemics [2]. Finally, it caused a current global health pandemic declared on March 11, 2020 [3]. The COVID-19 epidemic differs significantly from previous health epidemics mainly due to its global prevalence, recurrent development, and large differences in the spread of disease between countries and areas worldwide [1; 2]. In Europe, Western European countries were more affected in the first half of 2020 than other parts of Europe [3; 4], while in the second half of the year most infections were in Central and Eastern European countries Europe [3; 4].

Differences in the emergence and prevalence of COVID-19 raised questions about countries' capabilities to deal with current epidemics and future health crises [5; 6].The health institutions have developed a response system to contain the disease through a series of different measures [5; 7], and countries have adopted most of the possible epidemic measures at the beginning of 2020 [4; 6]. Specifically, in April 2020, most of the population in Europe was under various forms of lockdown, as were 3.9 billion people worldwide [3].

Contradictory results of the effects of using different disease control measures highlight the need to understand how different disease control measures can contain the COVID-19 epidemic.

Considering that overcoming the epidemic depends primarily on people, society must ensure their compliance and prosocial behavior to deal with health threats [8; 9]. Individuals' moral development, beliefs, values, and attitudes guide their behaviors [10; 11; 8].

Among these, personal values considerably shape the full spectrum of human behavior [12; 13]. This raises questions about the effect of epidemic measures, as situational characteristics of COVID-19, on individuals and social groups with diverse personal values.

To answer this question, we drew upon values theories [13; 8] that conceptualize actual behavior through the effects of gradual development and situation changes in values [12; 14]. Initial behavior studies have addressed people's values in crises by studying entire populations [12, 11], while more recent studies have focused on examining social groups and generational cohorts with similar personal values [10; 15]. Among them, the effect of evolving anti-epidemic measures on the personal values of young adults has not yet been systematically analyzed or theoretically situated [16]. Therefore, how the implementation of different measures of the COVID-19 epidemic affected changing personal values among young adults, considering their specific behavior characteristics and social situation, is unclear.

We addressed the above-mentioned question using a sample of students' representative of the general young adults from Generation Z [17] and explored their formation of personal value orientations [10]. We analyzed data from one cohort of pre-graduate and graduate students in the Faculty of Economics and Business (Slovenia) collected by three surveys in the first half of 2020. We focused on the evolution of COVID-19 epidemic measures during the first half of 2020, when Slovenia was among the less affected European countries [3; 4].

II. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Theoretical background

COVID-19 pandemic - At the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, states responded by activating epidemiological plans and associated measures [1; 7], but this has not prevented more than 84.21 million

cases of infections and more than 1.83 million deaths by the end of the year 2020 [3]. The emergence of COVID-19 prompted the European Union (EU) and individual EU members to activate epidemic plans and associated measures to contain the SARS-CoV-2 [4; 6].

To address the course of COVID-19 in Europe during 2020, the researchers formed three time periods reflecting specific pandemic circumstances, namely, the period of the 1st wave of the epidemic, the summer period of the epidemic, and the period of the 2nd wave of the epidemic [4; 6].According to the number of deaths per 1 million populations in 2020, the 1st wave affected harder Western European countries, especially Belgium, Spain, and Italy, while the 2nd wave affected more the Central and Eastern European countries, especially Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria [4].

Perceived differences in the dynamic of COVID-19 among countries lead to the question of the reasons for their occurrence [5, 2], and possible solutions to overcome them in future outbreaks of new diseases.

Due to the good outcomes of the 1st wave of COVID-19 in Central Europe [4; 6], we focused the analysis on Slovenia as a Central European country that was among the least affected countries in the 1st wave of epidemic and placed 18th in Europe by the number of deaths [4].The course of COVID-19 in Slovenia marks the changing epidemic situation, which we examined in periods before, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic in the country [18; 19]. The period "before COVID-19 epidemic" (hereinafter referred to as period before epidemic) lasted from January, and it was marked by the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 in Europe[18; 19]. The period of "COVID-19 epidemic" (hereinafter referred to as period during epidemic) lasted from March to May [18; 19]. During this period, epidemic lockdowns and mass quarantines have significantly restricted life in society and increased people's perception of social insecurity [19]. The "post COVID-19 epidemic period" (hereinafter referred to as period after epidemic) lasted from May to the end of June 2020[18]. By the end of May, the government lifted most of the epidemic restrictions, and life returned to normal by the end of June [19].

Such a situation opens a question about the need to change people's behavior to improve COVID-19 outcomes and achieve better control over the epidemic.

Humans' behavior and personal values - The individuals' behavior of shapes several societal and personal factors [11; 13]. Scholars have exposed the importance of personal values as a psychological construct that decisively defines human behavior in crises [20]. Socio-psychological studies define "values as an individual's personal beliefs about how he or she should behave in their social environment" [11; p. 354], revealing that values transcend specific situations, are inter-culturally consistent, and have a significant effect on the full spectrum of behaviors [12; 14]. We focused on the widely used and well-validated model of basic personal values proposed by Schwartz [14; 15].

Schwartz's [14] two-dimensional model of values contains ten basic groups of universal values, which are first classified into four categories of higher-order values, namely, Self-transcendence, Conservation, Self-Enhancement, and Openness to change, and subsequently classified into two groups of values, one focusing on social and personal motives and the other one on growth and self-protection motives.

The findings of the strength and duration of the effect of situational circumstances on personal values are contradictory [19; 20]. Studies have established a weak direct effect of security on changing personal values in the short term and its possible indirect long-term effects through acquired life experiences [14; 20]. Thus, uncertainty affects changes in personal values strongly and immediately, but values return to previous levels after restoring stability [12; 15].

In accordance with the prediction meaning of situational circumstances for personal values [10; 22]and considering media news of violations of epidemic measures by the young generation [23; 20], we continually analyzed the meaning of COVID-19 measures for personal values of Generation Z.

Personal values of Generation Z - The restrictive measures of the COVID-19 epidemic worsened the social situation globally [1] and negatively affected especially the young generation, which is in the decisive phase of their social development [10; 16]. The concept of social generations was conceptualized in the 20th century by psychology scholars [12; 24], dividing the entire population into generational cohorts as social groups with similar characteristics and experiences. The current youth belongs to Generation Z; which literature defines as a social group of "people born from the mid to late 1990s to early 2010s" [17].

Media describes Generation Z as digital natives who truly live and breathe a life of virtual connection, care for the common good, believe that everyone has the right to be what they want in their lives, and support credible people and groups [23]. Past research on Generation Z has reported that growing up in a socio-economically prosperous and secure society supports relatively stable gradual development of egalitarianism, individualism, interpersonal trust, and tolerance towards diversity values orientation [25; 26]. Conversely, lack of social security in their childhood affects their values so that they are less able to control the threats, avoiding conflicts, and protecting themselves and close others [26; 7].

Several social events influenced generation Z in Europe in their youth, such as the integration of the European Union, the migrant crisis, and the 2009 global economic crisis and its consequences [25]. However, these events have not significantly influenced the personal values of the young

population in Europe in recent decades, mainly due to their lower intensity and shorter duration of previous crises [25; 21]. In contrast, the circumstances of COVID-19, especially the social life and social development limitations, confronted Generation Z in Europe with greater uncertainly and insecurity in their lives for the first time [5]. Therefore, we also assumed that the measures of COVID-19 affect the changing personal values of Generation Z in Europe.

In line with the proposition that the health epidemic affects the personal values of the young population [27; 16], we continued with the development of hypotheses about the relations between evolving of COVID-19 measures and changing of personal values of Generation Z.

Research development

Effects of the societal security on personal values of Generation Z - The personal values of Generation Z in Europe are influenced by conditions of high security in their childhood and by the experience of similar macro societal events [25; 9], which form the structure of this generation's specific values that differs from previous generations as well as within this generation living in different areas [12; 11]. Such conditions lead to the development of post-modernistic values related to self-confidence, skepticism, and care for responsible relations with others [11; 28; 15] and shape their individualistic values orientation.

Thus, studies that have analyzed data from student samples in favorable social circumstances from more countries, such as the UK[10], and study of more samples of students from one country [21] noted weak and short term effect of such conditions on the gradual development of respondents' personal values, which does not necessarily change the importance of values.

Relations between societal security and changes in personal values' hierarchy have been less explored; however, individual studies have revealed that security circumstances do not change the hierarchy of personal values among individuals with the same values orientation [29; 15].

The effects of social insecurity on personal values of Generation Z - The theory posits that unfavorable and threatening circumstances significantly change the level and structure of individuals' personal values [10; 11]. Thus, studies about effects of previous wars [30], economic recession [28; 21], and outbreak of diseases [27; 31] have established positive correlations between increasing the imminent threat to people's health or lives and increasing pro-social personal values of people.

To date, studies that addressed these issues revealed that existential threats increased values related to the active control of people and material resources [28; 26] and decreased values aimed at avoiding conflicts, unpredictability, and compliance with broader social expectation [27; 14]. In contrast, such societal circumstances decrease people's motivation to realize their interests and consider the welfare of others and nature [12; 28].

Literature has also noted that social insecurity can change the hierarchy of values individual or social groups [13; 8]. Regardless of the importance of this issue for understanding values, there is a paucity of such studies, and the few studies that have been conducted offered conflicting results [21; 26]. Thus, most previous studies on human behavior in conditions characterized by societal and health insecurity conditions caused by various crises have reported that people value more self-protection values and less self-expansive values [10; 12].

Based on the above cognitions, we formulated the following research question for our consideration:

RQ1: How do the personal values of Generation Z change in conditions of social insecurity in society?

III. METHODS

Instrument - In this research, we used the questionnaire developed by prof. Dr. David Ralston in the frame of "The University Fellows International Research Consortium." Consortium questionnaire was validated in numerous cross-cultural studies [such as 32], as well in studies that included Slovenian samples [33; 34]. The questionnaire consists of four parts.

Sample and procedure - Our study sample comprised a cohort of 85 business students at the Faculty of Economics and Business (University of Maribor, Slovenia), who were surveyed three times in the first half of the year 2020 [29;24]. We surveyed the sample cohort of students for the first time before the epidemic, the second time after the COVID-19 was officially declared epidemic in Slovenia, and the third time after the epidemic ended. The sample included 37.6 percent males and 62.4 percent females. In terms of level of study, 38.8 percent were bachelor students and 61.2 percent master students. The average age was 22.61 years. We collected 255 responses to perform the analysis. All students participated voluntarily.

Measures - Personal values orientations were measured using the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) [8], in which respondents rate the importance of 56 single values on a 9-point interval scale, ranging from "opposed to my values" (-1) to "of supreme importance" (7). In line with the aims of this study, we collapsed 56 single values into four higher-order dimensions, namely self-transcendence ($N = 13$; $\alpha = .830$), self-enhancement ($N = 10$; $\alpha = .904$), openness to change ($N = 8$; $\alpha = .875$), and conservation ($N = 14$; $\alpha = .865$), which were used in this study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Individual-level higher-order dimensions of personal values before the lockdown, during the lockdown, and after the lockdown presents Table 1.

Variables	Before lockdown (N = 86)		Lockdown (N = 85)		After lockdown (N = 85)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F
Self-transcendence	4.83	1.31	4.54	.97	4.82	.54	2.33
Self-enhancement	4.27	1.43	3.46	1.38	4.43	.90	14.38***
Openness to change	4.36	1.46	3.35	1.14	4.66	.61	31.29***
Conservation	4.33	1.18	3.72	1.08	4.27	.67	9.33** *

[a]* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 1: Individual-level higher-order dimensions of personal values before the lockdown, during the lockdown, and after the lockdown

This study examined differences in personal values of the Generation Z' cohort in Slovenia during the Corona-19 epidemic. The analysis of data collected at three consecutive periods surrounding COVID-19 from sampled individuals from Generation Z revealed that the health epidemic caused a shift in (1) the importance of the considered groups' personal values and (2) the hierarchy of personal values among individuals from the sampled cohort. Additionally, the analysis revealed changing dynamics of COVID-19 epidemic measures and their changing effects on the personal values of Generation Z during the investigated six months' period.

The analysis showed that the importance and hierarchy of personal values among the members of the sample cohort in the pre-epidemic period were similar to those of Generation Z [28; 21]. In addition, results revealed that Generation Z, during the period officially declared as COVID-19 epidemic, was most motivated by conservation values[12; 14], followed by self-transcendence [10; 12]. Then follow Self-enhancement values and openness to change values [27; 21].In the post-crisis period, respondents rated self-transcendence values as the most important, followed by openness to change, self-enhancement, and conservation values.

Our results showed that measures adopted to overcome the COVID-19 epidemic significantly decreased all considered groups' personal values in that the openness to change and self-enhancement values decreased more, and conservation and self-transcendence values decreased less [10; 27]. The analysis of the effects of the duration of the COVID-19 measures on personal values confirmed theoretical presumptions that changes in societal conditions cause temporally shift in social groups' value orientation, which return to the previous state when environmental conditions stabilize again [12].

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