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The Analysis of Life Satisfaction Predictors Among Ukrainian Students During Times of
Conflict

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Abstract

Ukraine has recently witnessed relatively diminished levels of life satisfaction within its population often explained by poverty and large income inequalities in the country. The war with Russia has further exacerbated these challenges, significantly impacting the overall subjective well-being of Ukrainians. This study examines life satisfaction of students at Kyiv universities, drawing upon a unique survey conducted in November 2023. Based on the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, the analysis shows that students' contentment with life in war times is influenced by their study formats and perceived isolation levels. Furthermore, the findings indicate that universities can mitigate the adverse impact of war by providing psychological support to their students and adopting mixed or offline forms of study. Contrary to the expectations, the results suggest a strong resilience among Ukrainian students to war conditions in terms of their life satisfaction. Notably, there is no discernible decrease in overall contentment with life that could be attributed to exposure to war-related news, internalization of such news leading to preoccupation with thoughts of war, or the development of sleep-related issues.

Keywords: Life satisfaction, Subjective well-being, Conflicts, Ukraine

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Introduction

Life satisfaction plays a central role in shaping individuals' perceptions of their roles within their workplace, community, and society. In particular, higher levels of satisfaction are associated with increased productivity, greater political engagement, and elevated motivation in various aspects of life (Luhmann and Hennecke, 2017). Ukraine is known for having relatively low levels of subjective well-being among its population if compared to European Union member states or former post-communist countries (Abbott and Sapsford, 2006; Melnyk, Hryniv and Petrynka, 2023). Contributing factors often cited by studies include poverty and income inequalities that are characteristic of the country. The war with Russia has further exacerbated these challenges, significantly impacting the overall subjective well-being of Ukrainians.

This study is centered on investigating the life satisfaction of the young population in Ukraine, with a specific focus on students in Kyiv's universities, following 23 months of ongoing conflict. The primary objective is to define the main factors influencing their current state of contentment with life, particularly those directly linked to the tangible effects of the war. The analysis aims to identify both the direct and indirect pathways through which the war impacts the life satisfaction of young individuals in Ukraine.

Utilizing data obtained from a unique survey conducted in November 2023, this research seeks to deepen our understanding of the potential effects of the ongoing military conflict between Ukraine and Russia on young people. Additionally, defining the principal determinants of

contentment with life amidst wartime conditions in Ukraine may contribute to a more profound comprehension of the overarching dynamics of life satisfaction in conflict zones.

Literature review

Life satisfaction is a complex and multidimensional construct influenced by the interplay of a wide range of psychological, economic, and social conditions (Lomas and VanderWeele, 2023). War can influence each of these conditions, essentially changing experiences with the contentment with life. Military conflicts are linked to the upheaval of daily routines, displacement, disruption of social networks, and exposure to death, giving rise to a broad array of challenges (Kaushal, 2009; Sereda, 2023).

In particular, individuals directly exposed to the realities of war typically manifest heightened levels of anxiety and stress that exert a negative impact on their overall satisfaction. Similarly, displacement creates a profound sense of loss, insecurity, and the challenges of adapting to new environments (Murthy and Lakshminarayana, 2006; Osokina, Silwal, Bohdanova, Hodes, Sourander and Skokauskas, 2023). The disruption of social networks, including family and community ties, further compounds the emotional toll, diminishing the support structures crucial for maintaining life satisfaction.

The adverse effects of war extend beyond the direct experiences of violence, influencing daily decisions, relationships, and long-term planning. The anticipation of continued conflict and its potential aftermath inflicts a pervasive sense of insecurity on individuals (Vahabi, 2009). This state of uncertainty not only disrupts immediate well-being but also undermines the foundations of psychological resilience (Robinson, Vytal, Cornwell and Grillon, 2013). The looming threat of prolonged uncertainty casts a shadow over individuals' aspirations, impacting their ability to pursue fulfilling and meaningful lives (Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). The constant fear and anxiety

associated with the unpredictability of war create a profound psychological toll, eroding the sense of control and stability that is essential for life satisfaction.

The consequences of war also encompass broader dimensions of social and economic well-being on a collective scale. War induces social uncertainty, as communities face the breakdown of social ties and a pervasive sense of vulnerability (Kaushal, 2009). Simultaneously, the economic repercussions of war, often characterized by downturns or outright economic collapse, exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals in conflict zones (Guénette, Kenworthy and Wheeler 2022). These economic insecurities directly impede individuals' ability to find satisfaction in their lives.

Recent studies concentrating on the Russian invasion of Ukraine have validated the aforementioned findings for the case of Ukraine by demonstrating that war trauma and daily stress were higher among individuals in the conflict regions (Kurapov et al., 2023; Osokina et al., 2023), creating numerous repercussions for their subjective wellbeing. Similarly, the studies showed that the average level of happiness declined substantially in areas that experienced war directly. Moreover, this drop could roughly be comparable to the loss of happiness a relatively well-off person would experience if he/she were to become a poor person (Coupe and Obrizan, 2016). Furthermore, research has expanded its scope by juxtaposing the mental health outcomes of individuals fleeing Ukraine in search of refuge with those who opted to remain within the country. Intriguingly, this research concludes that individuals who chose to stay in Ukraine exhibited notably lower levels of subjective well-being measured through anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma-related symptoms in comparison to those who relocated abroad (Kurapov et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, similar to the aforementioned studies, the majority of the relevant analysis predominantly focused on Ukraine before the full-scale invasion, failing to account for war repercussions when the conflict extends across the entire territory, as opposed to being localized

as was the case in 2014. More recent studies show that the consequences can be significantly more severe for the subjective well-being of individuals in the current conditions of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The exposure to war-related news and internalization of their impact by inducing obsessive thoughts about war can have profound implications for the entire population leading to increased anxiety levels and a reduced perception of safety.

The overall war influence is particularly pronounced for young individuals since the full-scale invasion introduced an additional adverse effect on individuals by compelling a shift towards online learning as opposed to traditional offline modalities (Tamilina et al., 2024). The findings primarily show that remote learning proves less efficacious for students when contrasted with face-to-face learning in terms of their subjective well-being. The challenges may arise from the fact that young individuals often struggle to adapt and communicate effectively in their social environments, while online forms of studies hinder the development of trusting interpersonal relationships with peers and educators (Wang 2023).

Despite the extensive body of research dedicated to investigating the impact of military conflicts on the individual, there exists a noticeable gap in the scholarly discourse concerning Ukraine. The recent analysis primarily focuses on the economic, political, and psychological consequences of this war. Due to the lack of data, scholars largely overlooked how this war impacted the life satisfaction of Ukrainians. This is a significant weakness since gaining insight into the specific channels through which the ongoing military conflict with Russia affects the subjective well-being of the population can significantly contribute to advancing our comprehension of the consequences of the invasion. Additionally, detecting the principal determinants of contentment with life amidst wartime conditions using Ukraine as an example may

deepen the overall understanding of the dynamics and determinants of life satisfaction in conflict zones.

On the other hand, little research has been done on the consequences of war for the subgroup of young individuals. The demographic comprising young people distinguishes itself from the broader population due to the imperative of pursuing education. The extant literature on life satisfaction acknowledges that this youthful demographic diverges in its outlook on life, placing significant emphasis on relationships and academic pursuits as central spheres shaping their overall contentment with life. Consequently, undertaking a comprehensive analysis encompassing the entire population without incorporating these distinctive features of young individuals may inadequately capture the nuanced pattern of life satisfaction formation within conflict zones, providing an incomplete analysis of how wars impact young people.

This research addresses the aforementioned gaps by narrowing the study population to students enrolled in universities in Kyiv exclusively. The primary objective is to define the predominant factors influencing their life satisfaction following 23 months of war in Ukraine. Our primary premise is that the ongoing conflict has resulted in mass displacement, a transition towards online educational modalities, and an escalated demand for psychological assistance and protective shelters owing to frequent missile assaults in Ukraine.

Data and method description

The analysis is based on data derived from an online survey of students enrolled in universities in Kyiv, which was conducted in November 2023. The sampling strategy relied on voluntary participation, affording interested students the opportunity to contribute. We recognize that there may be a selection bias in our sample, given that participants may be more self-aware of

their life satisfaction issues than non-participants. Overall, 184 students provided responses in this survey. The sampled individuals ranged in age from 18 to 25, with a mean age of 18.6 years. The gender distribution indicated that 70.3 percent of respondents were female, while 29.7 percent were male. Additionally, half of the respondents were students of the Kyiv School of Economics, reflecting the author's affiliation with this university and facilitated access to the study population.

Our dependent variable is life satisfaction, operationalized through the question asking respondents to evaluate their contentment with life by selecting a value from a range of 1 to 10, where higher values indicate increased satisfaction with life. Since the dependent variable can be considered continuous, we use an OLS regression to perform the analysis. This statistical method enables the analysis of relationships between the continuous dependent variable and multiple predictors, allowing one to assess their effects jointly. The model for estimating the parameters takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Life_satisfaction} = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Affected_by_war_news} + \alpha_2 \text{Sleep_is_affected_by_war_news} + \\ & \alpha_3 \text{Community_change} + \alpha_4 \text{Obsessed_by_war-related_thoughts} + \alpha_5 \text{Alone} + \alpha_6 \text{Study_format} + \\ & \alpha_7 \text{Availability_of_psychological_support} + \alpha_8 \text{Provision_of_shelters_by_universities} + \\ & \alpha_9 \text{Life_improvements} + \alpha_{10} \text{Gender} \end{aligned}$$

The set of independent variables includes the following measures: Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female), recent improvements in life (1 = No improvements, 2 = Insignificant improvements, 3 = Significant improvements), sense of loneliness (1 = Yes, 0 = No), study format (Online, Mixed, Offline), availability of psychological support at the place of study (1 = No, 0 = Yes), and availability of university-provided shelters (1 = No, 0 = Yes).

In addition, we control for whether individuals feel emotionally affected by war-related news (1 = Yes, 0 = No), whether the respondent feels that war news negatively affects their sleep (1 = Yes, 0 = No), whether there has been a change in the individual's location after February 2022 (1 = Location is now different from pre-war, 0 = Location remains the same), and whether respondents feel consumed by thoughts related to the war (Frequently, Sometimes or Seldomly obsessed with thoughts about war). Given the selected set of determinants (Annex 1), our hypotheses can be formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: War-related factors such as war news effects, obsession with war-related thoughts, and community change are expected to be negatively associated with life satisfaction among students.

Hypothesis 2: Isolation is negatively associated with life satisfaction of students.

Hypothesis 3: Shifts to online study formats are negatively associated with life satisfaction of students.

Hypothesis 4: The provision of psychological support and shelters by universities are positively associated with life satisfaction of students.

Hypothesis 5: Perceived life improvements are positively associated with life satisfaction of students.

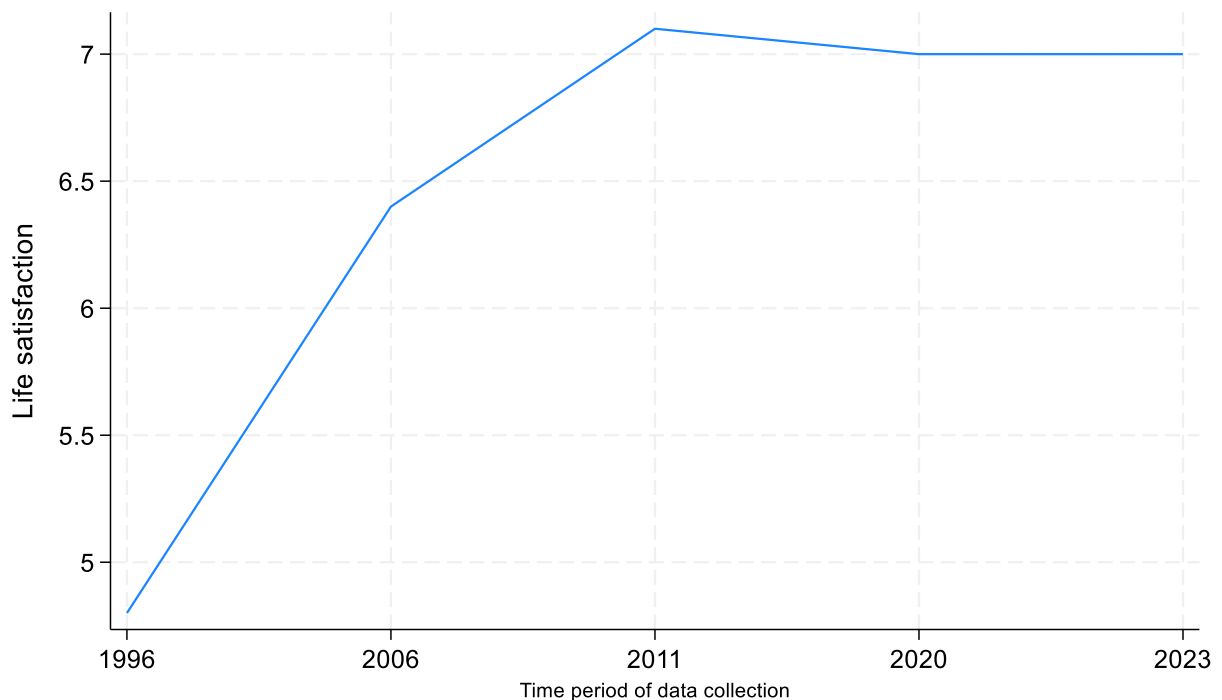
Hypothesis 6: Female students are expected to have higher life satisfaction levels compared to male students due to the threat of conscription after the completion of studies for males.

Empirical analysis and results

On a scale ranging from 1 to 10, the life satisfaction of young individuals can be assessed at approximately 7 in November 2023. When benchmarked against data from the World Values

Survey for a sample adjusted to the age range of 18 to 25 years, it becomes apparent that life satisfaction levels have remained relatively stable for this group of respondents over the last decade (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The dynamics of life satisfaction among individuals (aged 18 – 25) in Ukraine.

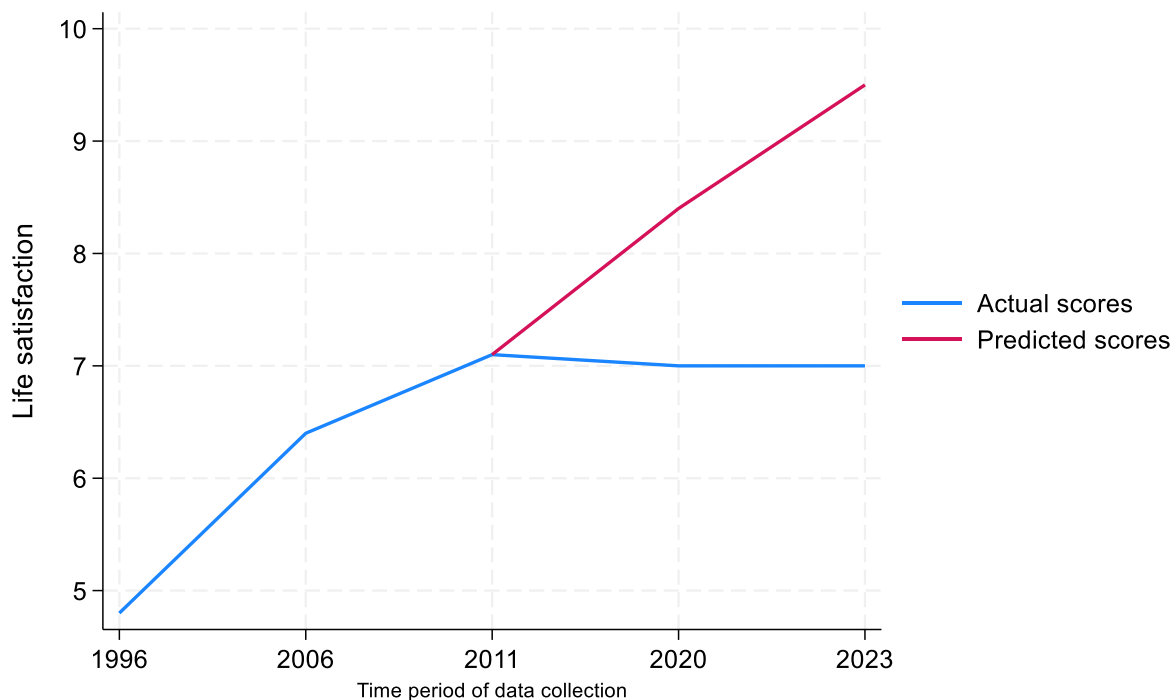


Note: The data pertaining to the year 2023 originates from the authors' own survey. Meanwhile, data spanning the years 1996 to 2020 has been derived from the World Values Survey, specifically targeting respondents within the age range of 18 to 25 years.

Prior to the wave of 2011, there was a discernible upward trend in life satisfaction of young individuals, stabilizing thereafter at approximately seven units on a ten-point scale (Figure 1). If this trajectory is extended and forecasted into the subsequent years, different scores (see the red line) would be expected (Figure 2). Life satisfaction among young Ukrainians could have reached levels similar to those observed in the old member states of the European Union (around 9.5 out

of 10). A noticeable gap is evident when these projected levels are compared with the actual scores (see the blue line).

Figure 2: A comparison of actual and predicted scores of life satisfaction among young individuals (aged 18 – 25) in Ukraine.



Note: The data pertaining to the year 2023 originates from the authors' own survey. Meanwhile, data spanning the years 1996 to 2020 has been derived from the World Values Survey, specifically targeting respondents within the age range of 18 to 25 years.

The question is how the conflict with Russia could contribute to preventing life satisfaction from reaching its potential levels in Ukraine. To understand this, an Ordinary Least Squares analysis is performed with the scope of estimating the impact of war-related factors on the contentment of life of students based on the sample collected in November 2023 (see Table 1). In

the initial stage (Model 1), all chosen predictors were included in the model jointly. In the second stage (Model 2), the regression analysis was reiterated, considering only those predictors that demonstrated statistical significance (Figure 3).

Table 2: Summary of coefficient estimates

Variables	Life satisfaction	
	(1)	(2)
Constant	6.352*** (0.652)	6.468*** (0.572)
Gender (1 = Male)	0.438* (0.251)	0.494** (0.236)
Recent improvements in life		
No improvements	Reference category	Reference category
Insignificant improvements	1.585*** (0.472)	1.697*** (0.456)
Significant improvements	1.010*** (0.366)	1.098*** (0.356)
Feels alone		
Never	Reference category	Reference category
Sometimes	-0.553** (0.262)	-0.612** (0.253)
Often	-2.009*** (0.330)	-2.098*** (0.318)
Study format		
Online	Reference category	Reference category
Mixed	1.322*** (0.320)	1.325*** (0.311)
Offline	1.324*** (0.278)	1.350*** (0.271)
Access to a psychiatrist at the place of study (1 = No)	-0.782** (0.359)	-0.802** (0.356)
Shelter availability at the place of study	-0.958**	-0.895**

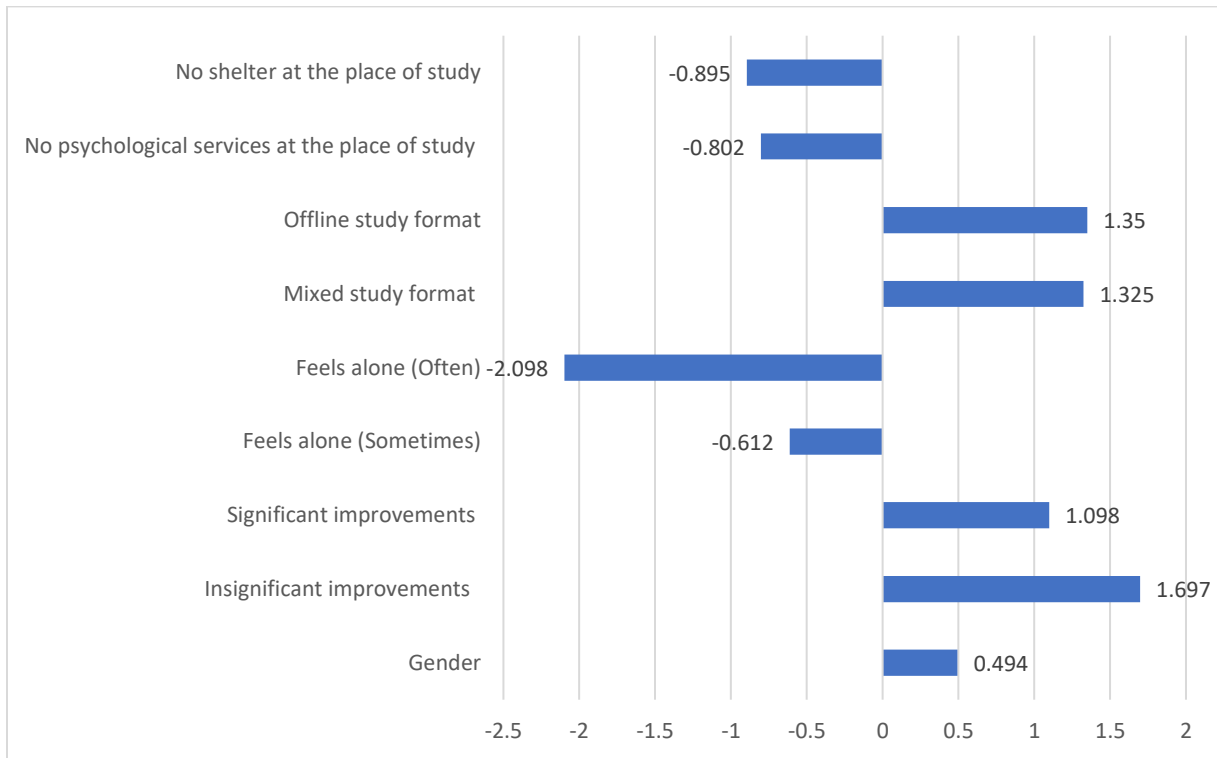
(1 = No)	(0.432)	(0.428)
Feels affected by war news (1= Yes)	0.105 (0.269)	
Sleep is affected by war news (1 = Yes)	-0.077 (0.267)	
Location change (1 = Yes)	-0.112 (0.244)	
Feels obsessed by thoughts about war		
Frequently	Reference category	
Sometimes	0.303 (0.302)	
Seldom	0.433 (0.294)	
Observations	184	184
R ²	0.423	0.412
Adjusted R ²	0.375	0.382
Residual Std. Error	1.458 (df = 169)	1.450 (df = 174)
F Statistic	8.849 ^{***} (df = 14; 169)	13.570 ^{***} (df = 9; 174)

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Overall, our results point to a strong resilience among Ukrainian students to war conditions in terms of their life satisfaction. Notably, there is no discernible decrease in contentment with life that could be attributed to exposure to war-related news, internalization of such news leading to preoccupation with thoughts of war, or the development of sleep-related issues. One plausible explanation for this lack of effect may be the substantial academic workload characteristic of Kyiv universities, preventing students from dedicating ample time to the consumption of war-related news or engaging in contemplation about the war that could potentially influence their subjective well-being. Additionally, young people may exhibit greater resilience to war-related stress due to factors such as developmental adaptability, a more flexible cognitive and emotional response

system, and a generally stronger ability to cope with adverse effects than adults (Backes and Bonnie, 2019; Reupert, 2020).

Figure 3: Change in life satisfaction of students by predictor.



Note: The graph illustrates coefficients derived from Model 2, as presented in Table 2.

Similarly, displacement appears to have no effect on students' life satisfaction. Being uprooted from their usual environment and experiencing a change in living conditions and communities does not significantly impact students' contentment with life. These findings align with previous studies showing that young people are often more flexible in adapting to new environments than adults (McCormick and Telzer, 2017). The ability of young individuals to navigate change effectively may contribute to their capacity to maintain life satisfaction even in the face of displacement during times of war.

Nevertheless, the findings highlight that any alteration in circumstances can negatively impact life satisfaction when accompanied by feelings of isolation (Figure 3). Specifically, students who frequently experience loneliness report life satisfaction scores that are 2 points lower than those who never feel alone. These findings are in line with the existing evidence that isolation negatively impacts life satisfaction of young people (Clair, Gordon, Kroon, M. *et al.*, 2021; Vus *et al.*, 2021).

The chosen study format also serves as an additional mechanism through which the connection to a social environment may be disrupted. Our results suggest that studying online is associated with lower life satisfaction compared to studying offline, presumably due to the potential challenges related to reduced social interaction, increased feelings of isolation, and the absence of in-person engagement with peers and instructors. More specifically, online students exhibit life satisfaction scores approximately 1.3 points lower than their counterparts opting for mixed or offline modes of study. The virtual nature of online learning may contribute to a sense of disconnection and hinder the social and collaborative aspects that are often integral to traditional offline educational experiences (Wang, 2023).

Universities also impact their students' life satisfaction by providing shelters or psychological support. Our results suggest that access to shelters at the place of study is associated with increased life satisfaction among students. This may be attributed to the sense of security and comfort provided by shelters during missile alerts, fostering a conducive environment for subjective well-being. Similarly, the university's provision of psychological support services has the potential to augment life satisfaction levels among students, promoting coping mechanisms, and fostering a supportive environment conducive to high levels of contentment with life.

Furthermore, students indicating recent improvements in their lives are more inclined to attribute higher scores to their life satisfaction (Figure 3). These results align with the recent findings that positive or negative life changes strongly predict happiness levels (Gusevik, 2013). Those with only mild changes exhibit a 1.7-point increase in life satisfaction compared to those reporting no improvements. However, the disparity in life satisfaction is somewhat smaller (1.1 points) between those experiencing significant life improvements and those without any reported changes. It is crucial to highlight that the question regarding improvements lacked specificity on what qualifies as such, raising concerns about an arbitrary understanding that may encompass various war-related impacts. While refraining from definitive interpretations, we suggest that young individuals perceiving war-related enhancements as improvements in their lives may positively influence their overall life contentment.

Finally, male students exhibit a life satisfaction of approximately 0.5 points higher than their female counterparts (Figure 3). The observed gender difference in life satisfaction can be explained by a wide range of factors, including societal expectations and gender-specific experiences that contribute to distinct perceptions of well-being by females and males (Mohsen and Veljko, 2020).

In summary, our empirical findings diverge from the expectations formulated in Hypothesis 1: Exposure to war-related news or its internalization through frequent contemplation does not correlate with a decrease in life satisfaction levels among individuals in Kyiv. Furthermore, community changes are observed to have a neutral impact on students' life contentment, indicating a notable resilience among students to environmental alterations. By contrast, our study substantiates Hypothesis 2, highlighting that heightened isolation significantly contributes to a negative impact on students' life satisfaction. Our empirical analysis also

supports Hypothesis 3, suggesting that students engaged in online study formats exhibit lower life satisfaction levels compared to their counterparts enrolled in offline or hybrid study programs. Moreover, our results support Hypothesis 4, indicating that the absence of psychological support from universities and the lack of shelter provisions at study locations have adverse effects on students' contentment with life. Additionally, any alterations in students' personal lives or surroundings perceived as an improvement in life are associated with an increase in life contentment, aligning with Hypothesis 5. Conversely, our results fail to support Hypothesis 6: Male students demonstrate higher levels of life satisfaction compared to their female counterparts, even amid the ongoing war and an elevated threat of conscription after the completion of their studies.

Conclusions

In summary, our analysis suggests that young individuals, particularly students, are influenced by war in a very specific manner. Unlike the direct impacts observed in adults, such as displacement, employment loss, or emotional distress stemming from exposure to war-related content, students exhibit a notable resilience to these adversities. However, they demonstrate an increased sensitivity to social isolation, whether directly experienced or indirectly through a transition to online forms of study. Additionally, positive changes in personal life or environmental conditions significantly contribute to elevating their overall life satisfaction. The university may further amplify their life satisfaction levels by enhancing their sense of security through the provision of on-campus shelters and offering psychological counseling services.

It is important to emphasize that our analysis was based on a sample of students from Kyiv and hence may be characterized by limited generalizability of findings. Despite Kyiv facing daily

missile attacks, it remains a relatively secure place of living where a semblance of normalcy is experienced at least for part of the day. Investigating life satisfaction in conflict areas situated in close proximity to active combat zones, such as Zaporizhia, Cherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk, could yield significantly divergent results.

Nonetheless, even if focused on Kyiv, our analysis provides important theoretical and practical implications. Based on the presented results, psychological theory should acknowledge the nuanced dynamics of how war impacts young individuals, specifically students. We suggest that the analysis of war effects should be done for young people through increased sensitivity to social isolation and the mode of study. War may enhance social isolation which can be particularly adverse for young people as it may impede the development of crucial social and emotional skills, hindering the formation of supportive relationships and leading to adverse mental health outcomes. The absence of meaningful social connections during this formative period can contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of well-being among young individuals.

Therefore, implementing policies that focus on the creation of safe communal spaces, youth engagement programs, and educational initiatives can help combat social isolation among young people. Encouraging community-based activities, such as sports or art programs, and providing mental health support services can contribute to fostering a sense of connection and resilience among the youth in conflict-affected regions. Additionally, the implementation of incentives to enhance the accessibility to traditional, in-person educational formats may elevate the quality of life among the young generation in times of war. This may include investing in infrastructure for on-campus facilities and building shelters at the place of study to make face-to-face learning possible even during the war.

Lastly, we recommend that universities provide psychological support services to assist students in coping with the mental strain induced by war-related thoughts. Engaging with specialists to discuss obsessive thoughts about war can be therapeutic, aiding students in navigating challenging circumstances. Furthermore, integrating psychological services within universities may alter student perceptions, fostering a more positive attitude towards seeking psychological support. Therefore, legislation mandating the establishment of such services at universities could contribute to minimizing the adverse mental health effects of the ongoing conflict on young individuals.

Supporting young individuals amid wartime conditions should establish a framework wherein the detrimental effects of war are mitigated. Future research should focus on designing a better measure for improvements in the overall environment. The objective should be to capture the degree to which perceived ameliorations in wartime conditions can enhance life satisfaction. Additionally, there is a need for a comparative analysis of war effects between young individuals and adults. This approach would allow us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the distinct impacts of conflict on individuals across diverse age groups.

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Annex 1: Descriptive statistics for the key variables used in the analysis

Variables	N	MEAN	ST. DEV	MIN	MAX
Gender (1 = Male)	184	0.30	0.460	0	1
Recent improvements in life	184				
No improvements	184	0.11	0.31	0	1
Insignificant improvements	184	0.14	0.34	0	1
Significant improvements	184	0.75	0.43	0	1
Feels alone	184				
Never	184	0.31	0.46	0	1
Sometimes	184	0.49	0.50	0	1
Often	184	0.20	0.41	0	1
Study format	184				
Online	184	0.24	0.43	0	1
Mixed	184	0.24	0.43	0	1
Offline	184	0.52	0.50	0	1
Access to a psychiatrist at the place of study (1 = No)	184	0.11	0.32	0	1
Shelter availability at the place of study (1 = No)	184	0.08	0.27	0	1
Feels affected by war news (1= Yes)	184	0.63	0.48	0	1
Sleep is affected by war news (1 = Yes)	184	0.40	0.49	0	1
Location change (1 = Yes)	184	0.68	0.47	0	1
Feels obsessed by thoughts about war	184				
Frequently	184	0.36	0.44	0	1
Sometimes	184	0.41	0.47	0	1
Seldom	184	0.23	0.33	0	1