

Internet and Social Media Use among Primary School Students: Digital Habits, Online Safety, and Parental Supervision in a Local Polish Survey

Korzystanie z Internetu i mediów społecznościowych przez uczniów szkoły podstawowej: nawyki cyfrowe, bezpieczeństwo w sieci i nadzór rodzicielski w lokalnym badaniu ankietowym

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Abstract: This empirical study analyses Internet, social media, and mobile device use among students in grades 6–8, focusing on their digital habits, perceptions of online risks, social relationships, and parental supervision. In 2024, an anonymous, voluntary paper questionnaire was completed by 80 students, including 43 girls and 37 boys, at a primary school in the Podlaskie Voivodeship, Poland. Most respondents used the Internet for 1–4 hours per day, primarily for gaming and entertainment, although educational and social uses were also common. Students frequently identified Internet addiction, impaired academic performance, online hate, and personal data theft as major risks. Most preferred face-to-face contact with peers and understood that online activity was not completely anonymous. However, 57.5% reported using mobile phones at night, while only 13.8% were subject to parental time limits on Internet use. The findings indicate a need for school-based digital education combining online safety, responsible time management, critical media use, and parental involvement. Given the single-school sample, the results provide a local and context-specific account of students' digital behaviours.

Keywords: primary school students, Internet use, social media use, digital habits, online safety, parental supervision, peer relationships, Podlaskie Voivodeship

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Abstrakt: W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania empirycznego dotyczącego korzystania z Internetu, mediów społecznościowych i urządzeń mobilnych przez uczniów klas VI–VIII. Analizie poddano ich nawyki cyfrowe, postrzeganie zagrożeń internetowych, relacje społeczne oraz zakres nadzoru rodzicielskiego. W 2024 roku anonimowy i dobrowolny kwestionariusz w formie papierowej wypełniło 80 uczniów, w tym 43 dziewczęta i 37 chłopców, uczęszczających do jednej ze szkół podstawowych w województwie podlaskim. Większość respondentów korzystała z Internetu przez 1–4 godziny dziennie, przede wszystkim w celach rozrywkowych i związanych z grami, chociaż powszechne było również wykorzystywanie sieci do nauki i kontaktów społecznych. Uczniowie najczęściej wskazywali uzależnienie od Internetu, pogorszenie wyników w nauce, hejt oraz kradzież danych osobowych jako główne zagrożenia. Większość preferowała bezpośrednie kontakty z rówieśnikami i rozumiała, że aktywność w Internecie nie jest w pełni anonimowa. Jednocześnie 57,5% badanych korzystało z telefonu w nocy, a jedynie 13,8% podlegało ustalonym przez rodziców ograniczeniom czasu korzystania z Internetu. Wyniki wskazują na potrzebę edukacji cyfrowej łączącej bezpieczeństwo w sieci, odpowiedzialne zarządzanie czasem, krytyczne korzystanie z mediów oraz zaangażowanie rodziców. Ze względu na objęcie badaniem jednej szkoły, wyniki przedstawiają lokalny i kontekstowy obraz zachowań cyfrowych uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe: uczniowie szkoły podstawowej, korzystanie z Internetu, korzystanie z mediów społecznościowych, nawyki cyfrowe, bezpieczeństwo w sieci, nadzór rodzicielski, relacje rówieśnicze, województwo podlaskie



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INTRODUCTION

Modern society is characterised by widespread access to digital technologies, including the Internet and social media, which affects the daily functioning of children and young people. The Internet has become an integral part of social life, revolutionising both the process of information gathering and interpersonal communication. The ability to use computers effectively and to access the Internet have become almost essential for full participation in various spheres of social life. At the same time, Internet use is ambivalent – although it brings numerous benefits, it also presents new challenges and problems unknown to previous generations (Zduniak and Rubas 2021, 5; Zduniak 2024, 56–57). Activities such as spending time online, using mobile phones, and interacting on social media can have both positive and negative consequences for students' social, emotional, and educational development. Excessive use of new technologies and the transfer of a significant part of life to the virtual environment currently pose a serious social challenge. Since the late twentieth century, research has shown that Internet use can spiral out of control, hindering, and in extreme cases even preventing, young people from functioning properly in social life (Zduniak and Rubas 2021, 5). The continuous connection of the human mind to an ever-evolving collective intelligence and memory leads to lasting changes in the processes of information and knowledge exchange among people. Consequently, profound transformations in learning and social interaction may come to be perceived as trivial (Cantelmi 2014, 13).

Therefore, research on the digital behaviour of young people constitutes an important element in monitoring educational and social trends and in formulating recommendations for schools and parents. The dynamic advancement of digital and multimedia technologies, the growing commercialisation of the entertainment market, the rapid development of computer games, and the use of increasingly sophisticated persuasive mechanisms in virtual environments mean that younger users face new challenges related to functioning in the digital world. These phenomena require an adequate response from the education system, which should not only keep pace with the technological change but also effectively prepare children

and young people for the conscious, critical and responsible use of the resources of the virtual world (Drożdż 2006, 248).

1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to examine how students at one primary school use computers, the Internet, and social media, and to identify the social and educational consequences of these activities. The analysis focused on the frequency and purposes of using new technologies, preferred forms of online activity, and students' perceptions of online safety. In addition, the study examined the impact of Internet use on peer relationships, students' emotional functioning, and the role of parental control in shaping young people's digital habits.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. How often and for what purposes do primary school students use computers and the Internet?
2. Which forms of online activity and which social media platforms are most commonly used by students?
3. How do students perceive Internet safety and the associated risks?
4. Does Internet use affect students' social relationships and emotional functioning?
5. To what extent are students' computer and Internet use subject to parental control?

These research questions defined the main areas of analysis concerning primary school students' use of the Internet. The research hypotheses were formulated based on these questions, the theoretical framework, and the findings of previous research on the functioning of children and adolescents in the digital environment.

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Based on theoretical framework and the findings of previous research in the fields of pedagogy, psychology and sociology of the media, research hypotheses concerning the intensity of primary school students' use of information and communication technologies were formulated. These hypotheses relate to the dominant forms of activity in the digital environment, the ways

in which students use the Internet and social media, as well as the potential impact of these technologies on the social, emotional, and educational functioning of primary school students.

1. Primary school students use computers and the Internet every day, mainly for entertainment and communication purposes.

2. Social media and instant messaging applications are the dominant forms of students' online activity.

3. Students are aware of the risks associated with excessive Internet use.

4. Frequent Internet use may limit students' direct social interactions.

5. Most students do not have time limits imposed by their parents on their Internet use.

These hypotheses provided the basis for designing the research process and selecting appropriate research methods and instruments. To verify them, an empirical study was conducted using the diagnostic survey method. The adopted methodology made it possible to collect data on the ways in which primary school students use computers, the Internet, and social media, as well as to analyse the social, emotional, and educational aspects of these activities. The following section presents a detailed description of the research methodology and procedure.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The study was conducted in 2024 at a primary school in one of the municipalities of the Podlaskie Voivodeship. As this was the only primary school in the municipality, the school administration requested that the participants remain anonymous to ensure complete confidentiality and data security. The study was based on an original questionnaire developed by the researcher to obtain reliable information about students' use of the Internet, social media, and mobile devices.

Students in grades 6–8 were invited to participate in the study, and participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was anonymous, and its completion had no consequences for the participants and was not subject to assessment by teachers. Formal consent to conduct the study was obtained from both the parents and the school administration, ensuring compliance with legal requirements and school regulations.

The questionnaire was administered in paper format, allowing students to complete it comfortably in a familiar school environment. The use of a paper-based questionnaire also enabled the researcher to oversee the questionnaire completion process and minimise the potential influence of digital technologies on participants' responses.

From an ethical perspective, all principles of research involving human participants were observed. Anonymity and voluntary participation were ensured, and participants were free to omit any questions they did not wish to answer. The data were analysed in aggregate form, making it impossible to identify individual participants. Protecting students' data and respecting their rights were treated as priorities, and the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing educational research.

Data were collected using a questionnaire in which participants answered questions concerning their gender, grade level, time spent online, use of mobile phones and social media, and their perceptions of the virtual world. The questionnaire allowed participants to select multiple responses to questions concerning the risks and benefits associated with Internet use, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of students' digital behaviours.

Psychologists and researchers investigating the functioning of children and adolescents in the digital environment emphasise that the risks do not arise directly from cyberspace itself but rather from a lack of knowledge about it and the mistaken belief that children and very young users are capable of navigating the digital world independently and using its resources in a fully safe and informed manner. Human interaction with the world is mediated through the senses; therefore, the reality experienced by Internet users is shaped by the stimuli that generate the strongest perceptions and emotions. If these emotions originate predominantly from virtual environments while, at the same time, exposure to the outside world is reduced (e.g. spending long periods alone in one's room, a lack of face-to-face social interactions, and rarely leaving the house), contact with the real world may gradually become less authentic. Consequently, the subjective sense of authenticity of real-life experiences may diminish, making their interpretation and verification increasingly complex (Cantelmi 2014, 187; Bienvenu 2024, 5–6).

4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As regards gender, 53.8% of the participants were girls and 46.3% were boys. This indicates that the survey results reflect the opinions and behaviours of girls to a slightly greater extent.

With regard to grade level, 35.0% of the participants were in grade 6, while 32.5% were in grades 7 and 8, respectively. This relatively even distribution of participants allows for comparisons between grade levels.

Regarding daily Internet use, 35.0% of students used the Internet for 1–2 hours per day, 33.8% for 3–4 hours, 25.0% for 5–6 hours, and 6.3% for 6 hours or more. These results indicate that most students use the Internet for a moderate amount of time, however, a significant proportion spend considerably longer online, which may adversely affect their learning and health.

Taking into account nighttime mobile phone use, 57.5% of respondents reported using their phones at night, while 42.5% indicated that they did not. Regular nighttime phone use can negatively impact students' sleep and concentration.

When analysing whether parents had imposed time limits on Internet use, 13.8% of respondents confirmed that such restrictions had been introduced by their parents, 82.5% stated that no such limits were in place, and 3.8% were unaware of their existence. These results indicate that parental control over the amount of time children spend online is limited.

Analysis of the relationships between time spent online, parental supervision, and nighttime mobile phone use revealed clear patterns in students' digital habits. Most participants used the Internet for a moderate amount of time (1–4 hours per day), however, a significant proportion spent 5 hours or more online each day. At the same time, only 13.8% of students reported that their parents had imposed time limits on their Internet use, suggesting limited parental supervision of children's Internet use. Moreover, 57.5% of respondents admitted to using their phones at night, which may disrupt sleep and reduce concentration. These findings indicate that the lack of systematic parental supervision may contribute to longer Internet use during the day and increased nighttime mobile phone use, which may negatively affect young people's health, learning, and social functioning.

With regard to perceptions of Internet safety, 58.8% of participants considered the Internet to be safe, 18.8% believed it was unsafe, and 22.5% were undecided. These results indicate the need to increase students' awareness of online risks.

When analysing the risks associated with excessive Internet use, addiction was the most frequently identified problem (82.5%). Furthermore, 51.2% of participants believed that excessive Internet use could impair academic performance, 46.3% identified online hate as a potential risk, and 38.8% pointed to the risk of personal data theft. Weakening interpersonal relationships was noted by 25.0% of participants, 8.8% perceived no risks associated with Internet use, and 3.8% reported other problems, such as eye conditions. These results suggest that students are aware of the main risks associated with excessive Internet use, particularly addiction, although they do not always recognise its broader social consequences (Raport Rzecznika Praw Dziecka 2021, 24).

With regard to social media use, YouTube was the most frequently used platform (77.5%), followed by TikTok and Messenger (71.3% each), Snapchat (60.0%), Instagram (47.5%), and Facebook (38.8%). WhatsApp (10.0%) and Twitter (3.8%) were the least frequently used platforms. Student preferences indicate that platforms used for watching videos and communication are dominant, whereas more traditional social networking platforms appear to be losing popularity.

When asked about the possibility of deleting their Facebook account, 48.7% of participants declared that they would be able to do so, 30.0% stated that they would not, 20.0% were undecided, and 1.3% did not have a Facebook account. These results suggest that many students are aware of the possibility of limiting their social media activity, although some find this emotionally difficult.

Regarding the perceived benefits of social media use, 46.3% of participants stated that it brings them joy, 33.8% stated that social media offers no benefits, and 28.8% indicated that it provides a sense of belonging or an opportunity to make new friends. 17.5% regarded social media as a waste of time, and 7.5% reported that it increased their sense of self-worth. These results indicate that social media primarily serves social and emotional purposes, not educational ones.

Regarding the importance of likes received on photos, 45.0% of participants stated that they did not experience any emotions in response to them, 40.0% admitted that receiving likes made them feel more liked and accepted, 12.5% reported an increase in their sense of self-worth, and 6.3% stated that likes made them feel important. An additional 7.5% of students provided other responses, such as not posting photos online. These results indicate that, for most students, likes are not a significant source of self-worth, although they do influence the way some students perceive their social acceptance.

When asked whether they could imagine living without a mobile phone, 37.5% of students stated that they could, 41.3% said they could not, and 21.3% expressed no opinion. These results imply that young people are divided regarding the importance of mobile phones in everyday life.

With regard to anxiety associated with forgetting a mobile phone at school, 17.5% of participants admitted that they would feel uncomfortable, 70.0% reported that it would not be a problem, and 12.5% were unsure how to answer. These results suggest that most students do not display a strong emotional dependence on their mobile phones.

Regarding perceptions of anonymity on the Internet, 11.3% of students believed that they were anonymous online, 63.8% believed they were not, and 25.0% expressed no opinion. These results indicate that the vast majority of participants are aware that online activity leaves a digital footprint and is not completely anonymous.

With regard to preferences for contact with peers, 71.3% of students preferred visiting their friends in person, 11.3% preferred communicating via text messages, and 17.5% expressed no opinion. These results demonstrate that young people continue to value face-to-face interpersonal relationships.

When examining the reasons why students use computers, the most frequently reported were gaming (83.8%), spending free time (66.3%), using computers for pleasure (60.0%), and acquiring knowledge (57.5%). In addition, 43.8% of participants used computers to read messages, 37.5% for instant messaging and email, 16.3% to make new friends, 12.5% without any specific purpose, 7.5% to access Facebook, and 2.5% to visit “forbidden” websites. These results indicate that computers are used primarily for entertainment but also serve educational and communication purposes.

When analysing students' general perceptions of the Internet, 67.5% regarded it as an escape from everyday problems, 41.3% perceived it as an anonymous environment, and 13.8% considered it a way of life. These results suggest that the Internet serves primarily psychological and social functions, providing an escape from everyday difficulties and fulfilling an escapist role by enabling a temporary withdrawal from the problems and tensions of everyday life into the virtual world.

The observed relationship shows that students who perceive the Internet as an escape from everyday problems (67.5%) tend to spend more time online each day. Among this group, the proportion of students using the Internet for 5–6 hours or more is higher than among those who regard the Internet as simply a way of life (13.8%). This indicates that the psychological function of the Internet – as a means of relaxation and escape from everyday difficulties – may contribute to increased time spent online. These students also show a preference for platforms offering quick access to entertainment and real-time interaction. The most frequently used platforms were YouTube (77.5%), TikTok and Messenger (71.3% each), whereas Facebook (38.8%) and Twitter (3.8%) were used considerably less often. This relationship further indicates that the psychological function of the Internet is reflected in the preference for the social media platforms that provide immediate access to visual content and facilitate communication with peers. Similarly, students who perceived the Internet as an escape from everyday problems or as an anonymous space (41.3%) more frequently reported that excessive Internet use limits real-life social interactions (56.3%). This comparison suggests that students who use the Internet intensively for emotional and social purposes may experience some reduction in direct peer interactions, which underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between online activity and face-to-face social relationships.

Considering the impact of frequent Internet use on real-world interpersonal relationships, 56.3% of students believed that excessive Internet use limits real-life social interactions, 16.3% did not perceive such an effect, and 27.5% expressed no opinion. These results indicate that a significant proportion of young people recognise the potential negative impact of excessive Internet use on social relationships.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the use of the Internet, social media, and mobile devices by students attending a municipal primary school. These conclusions relate to students' digital behaviours, their perceptions of the virtual world, and the impact of new technologies on their social and emotional functioning.

1. Most students use the Internet daily, with the majority spending 1–4 hours online each day, although a considerable proportion spend more time online. This highlights the need to educate students about managing their time online in a balanced and responsible manner.
2. The findings show that most students do not exhibit a strong emotional dependence on social media or mobile phones, and for some of them, likes and online popularity are not a significant source of self-worth. At the same time, a considerable proportion of students use the Internet responsibly and recognise the social benefits, such as fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging.
3. Students are largely aware of the risks of excessive Internet use, with addiction, impaired academic performance, online hate, and personal data theft being the most frequently identified threats. Despite this, a small proportion of students do not recognise any risks, indicating the need for further digital education.
4. Face-to-face interactions with peers are still preferred to digital communication, underscoring the importance of real-life social relationships in young people's development.
5. The analysis indicates that entertainment is the primary purpose of computer use; however, a substantial proportion of students also use computers for educational, informational, and communication purposes, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of their online activity.
6. The findings indicate limited parental supervision of children's Internet use – only a small proportion of participants reported being subject to parental time limits. At the same time, most students are aware that online activities are not completely anonymous and recognise that frequent Internet use may limit real-life social interactions.

7. According to the students, the Internet serves primarily psychological and social functions. For most participants, it represents an escape from everyday problems or an anonymous environment, whereas only a small proportion regard it as a way of life.
8. The study also showed that students are able to identify both the benefits and the risks associated with the use of digital media, which is an encouraging finding in the context of developing digital awareness and promoting the responsible use of technology.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are consistent with the conclusions presented in the NASK report *Teenagers 3.0: Report from a Nationwide Survey of Students and Parents*, which indicates that young people are increasingly engaged in digital environments and regard the Internet as a natural part of everyday life (Ładna et al., 2025, 121–132). Both the present study and the national data show that social media, communication, and entertainment remain the dominant forms of online activity, although the Internet is also used for educational and informational purposes. Similarly to the NASK report, the present study also demonstrates a relatively high level of students' awareness of digital risks. Participants most frequently identified Internet addiction, online hate, and impaired academic performance as the main consequences of excessive Internet use. At the same time, a small proportion of students do not recognise the risks associated with Internet use, pointing to the need for continued media education and the development of digital competences from the early stages of education.

The findings also indicate that students attending the municipal primary school continue to prefer face-to-face interactions with their peers, which represents a positive aspect of their psychosocial development. These findings are particularly important in light of previous research pointing to the risk of replacing direct interpersonal relationships with digital communication. At the same time, the participants emphasised that the Internet serves important social and emotional functions by providing a means of relieving stress and fostering a sense of belonging.

Another noteworthy finding is the limited level of parental supervision of children's Internet use. These findings are consistent with observations reported in the literature, which

suggest that parents often lack the knowledge, skills, or tools necessary to effectively monitor their children's online activity. This underscores the need for educational initiatives targeting not only students but also parents and teachers.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that the Internet is an integral part of young people's everyday lives, offering both developmental opportunities and potential risks. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen digital education, promote media and digital competences, and encourage a healthy balance between online activity and real-life social relationships.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the survey provided a detailed insight into the behaviours, attitudes, and opinions of students attending a municipal primary school regarding their use of the Internet, social media, and mobile devices. The findings indicate that most students use the Internet daily for a moderate amount of time; however, a considerable proportion spend more than three hours online each day, which may affect both their academic performance and their social lives. The findings also indicate that, although most students consider the Internet to be safe, nearly one-quarter of the participants expressed no clear opinion regarding its safety. This uncertainty highlights the need for systematic education on digital risks.

The study found that Internet addiction is perceived as the most significant risk associated with Internet use, while other problems, such as impaired academic performance and online hate, are also widely recognised. At the same time, most students do not experience strong emotional pressure related to social media use, and for some of them, likes are of little importance, suggesting a relatively mature approach to their online activity. The findings also show that young people continue to value face-to-face interactions with their peers and prefer visiting friends in person, which remains an important aspect of social development during the school years.

The findings also point to limited parental supervision of children's Internet use, with only a small proportion of students reporting that their parents impose time limits on their online activity. Despite this, most participants are aware that online activity is not completely anonymous and recognise that frequent Internet use may limit real-life social interactions. The

analysis of the purposes for which computers are used showed that gaming and entertainment remain the dominant activities; however, a substantial proportion of students also use computers for educational and informational purposes, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of their online activity.

Psychologists and researchers investigating the functioning of children and adolescents in the digital environment emphasise that the source of digital risks lies not in cyberspace itself but primarily in a lack of knowledge, digital competences, and a critical understanding of the mechanisms governing the online environment. The belief that children and very young users are able to navigate the digital world independently and use its resources safely without appropriate adult guidance is particularly concerning. A lack of media education, parental supervision, and open discussion about online risks may encourage risky online behaviours, which can lead to adverse emotional, social, and developmental consequences. For this reason, increasing emphasis is placed on consciously supporting children throughout the process of digital socialisation and systematically developing their digital competences from the early stages of education (Tanaś and Galanciak 2019, 43–44).

In light of the findings, several important conclusions and practical recommendations can be drawn. First, there is a need to provide systematic digital education in municipal primary schools, covering online safety, personal data protection, and raising awareness of the consequences of excessive Internet use. Second, students should be supported in developing the ability to manage their time online, for example by introducing simple tools for monitoring and limiting the time spent using mobile devices and computers. Third, parents should be actively involved in their children's digital education and encouraged to establish reasonable time limits and supervise their children's online activity while maintaining an appropriate balance between supervision and young people's autonomy.

In addition, schools should promote activities that encourage face-to-face social interaction, such as group activities, educational trips, and collaborative projects, in order to maintain a healthy balance between online activity and direct interpersonal relationships. It is also important to foster healthy attitudes towards social media by encouraging a critical approach to likes, online popularity, and social comparison, thereby supporting the development of students' self-esteem and psychological resilience.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate both the opportunities and the risks associated with Internet use among students attending a municipal primary school. Well-designed educational initiatives, parental involvement, and the promotion of real-life social activities may contribute to the development of informed, safe, and healthy digital habits among young people.

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