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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA
ON THE MENTAL STATE OF POLISH STUDENTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

A b s t r a c t . In the era of growing popularity of social media, it is important to understand their impact on the mental state of their users. Social media have become a key communication tool of the 21st century and an integral part of interpersonal relationships. They are used to share information, distribute content, promote social initiatives. However, the rapid influx of digital content exceeds the cognitive capabilities of the users, which leads to anxiety, stress and problems with mental state. The article analyzes the impact of social media on the mental state of their users, based on a literature review and a CAWI survey conducted among 190 respondents aged 18–40. The participants of the study were students of the University of Warsaw, who were invited to participate in the study and informed about the topic and purpose of the study. The results indicate a lack of conscious control over the time spent on social media and a variety of emotions depending on the content consumed, with a predominance of positive emotions. At the same time, constant exposure to social media leads to cognitive fatigue and a general deterioration in well-being, with a dominant preference for personal social interactions.

Keywords: social media; mental state; emotions

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, it is impossible to ignore the role and significance of social media in daily life. The use of applications and online platforms has become widespread, and our society is now on the threshold of an era where rapidly advancing technology undeniably and significantly impacts everyone's life. Social media users are increasingly joining online communities, becoming

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primary recipients of content shared on various internet platforms. Being exposed to so many stimuli generated by social media, it's the effects can be seen in the users' interests and behaviors. Social media engagement shapes their reality and influences their way of functioning, fulfilling needs for belonging, acceptance, recognition, and building new relationships. This idealized online reality compels people to compare their lives with the unrealistic world of social media, which frequently evokes negative reflections and dissatisfaction with personal life. Prolonged and excessive use of social media, which no doubt affects one's self-image, can impact their users' mental state, which is why this article aims to examine the effect of social media on people's mental state.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL STATE: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social media are currently considered a critical form of global interpersonal interaction and communication. Typically, they are defined as a collection of tools and websites that enable a specific social group to generate content and interact online (Opioła and Popiołek, 2014, p. 13). The term also encompasses digital media and technologies that allow users to create and exchange content in both bilateral and multilateral interactions. Thus, social media include all platforms that support mutual communication and interactive information exchange through digital channels. This understanding is adopted in this article.

The rise and entrenchment of social media applications have revolutionized communication, turning it into interactive dialogue. This shift has altered the traditional one-to-many communication model into a social dialogue based on many-to-many relationships. Kaplan and Haenlein describe social media as a set of applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0.4 (Drzazga, 2013). Their widespread availability and accessibility have embedded social media into contemporary life. This dynamism has contributed to an increase in online time and heightened the risks associated with network presence, both reputational and business-related. Risks include breaches of confidentiality, disclosure of private information, and mechanisms of rapid dissemination. A drawback of unrestricted freedom of expression and internet accessibility is that it has become a platform for spreading gossip, unsubstantiated accusations, which can quickly reach millions and harm people's reputations (Głuszek, 2013). The digital space has swiftly become attractive and dominant, impacting not only

communication methods but also people's mental state. In the early 1990s, the internet was primarily used for entertainment. Only with the emergence of "new media," a term introduced by Paul Levinson, which includes social media and blogs (Levinson, 2010), did the internet become popular across all social groups, bringing with it numerous consequences.

A key element that is currently observed is the impact of social media on users' mental state. There are controversies surrounding the definition of mental state. In an article analysing this, it was noted that mental state encompasses affect and mood, anxiety, feelings of helplessness, loss of informational control, cognitive fatigue, and pleasure. According to the WHO, subjective well-being is a state where an individual realizes their abilities, copes with daily stress, and contributes positively to society (WHO, 1948). Thus, according to this definition, a mentally healthy person effectively responds to the needs and expectations of the environment in which they live. Keyes further describes well-being as encompassing emotional, psychological, and social satisfaction, including experiencing positive emotions (e.g., happiness, satisfaction) and maintaining positive attitudes toward one's responsibilities and others (Keyes, 2014). This understanding includes a recognition that people may also experience difficult emotions: sadness, anger, or fear. When assessing one's mental state, it is crucial to consider the absence of mental disorders, psychological balance, and an individual's ability to harmonize with and adapt to changing conditions (Dąbrowski, 1974). This article also adopts this holistic approach to the mental state.

Social media's popularity across all social groups and stages of human development deepens the discrepancy between reality, its perception, and future plans. Other essential factors affecting users' mental state include quality of life and peer relationships, violence, serious socioeconomic problems, discrimination, and exclusion (WHO, 1948). Additionally, the issue of overstimulation arises alongside the digital content transmitted to users. The sheer volume of information delivered via the internet exceeds the adaptive capabilities of humans. This is particularly true of young people, who treat the internet as a part of reality, experiencing constant technological progress and digitalization (Wrzesień, 2016). The most frequently used applications in Poland include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok (Polewko, 2023).

Based on these considerations, people are increasingly perceived as beings who live in a media-driven world. Mass culture permeates all areas of life, and we are immersed within it (Bauman, 2008).

2. THE MENTAL STATE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Polish research (Thinkstat, 2024) on youth internet activity indicates that sharing content on social media is a priority. Through profiles on various platforms, young users engage with a virtual society and shape their self-image (Makaruk, Włodarczyk, and Skoneczna, 2019). The need for visibility often turns into a desire for popularity. Modern technologies make it quick and easy to gain recognition in the virtual world, enhanced by artificial intelligence tools. This can lead individuals to identify with an idealized, "better" version of themselves, distancing them from they really are. Self-presentation plays a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relationships, allowing users to observe, draw inspiration from, and imitate others. In this way, the world of media becomes a point of reference, especially for young people, on crucial issues such as self-identity and lifestyle. The virtual space has become a stage where user-generated images and content serve not only to communicate information but also to influence how others perceive them (Mentel, 2020). This self-curated image often reflects aspirations users hope to achieve in reality. This process is reinforced by gratification mechanisms, such as likes and comments, that reward and reinforce specific online behaviors. However, social media's growing popularity also involves risks, including manipulation, loss of authenticity, and negative impacts on well-being. Frequent comparisons to idealized images can lead to frustration and lower self-esteem. In the context of social media, users present their identity by showcasing their interests, favorite movies, books, music, and other preferences. As a result, profiles become a fragmented and superficial reflection of the individual, reducing their rich and multi-dimensional identity to a set of selected information and activities (Turkle, 2013). This form of communication allows for a selective display of one's life, often focusing on positive aspects and successes while overlooking difficulties and failures (Walrave et al., 2016).

The manipulation of social media content affects both individuals and society, creating unrealistic standards that others may perceive as normal, fostering a collective illusion of perfection. This leads to a visual culture filled with artificiality, potentially contributing to social alienation. The escalation of egocentric behavior can hinder young people's mentalstate development, especially if they neglect real life social interactions to focus on their online image (Alloway et al., 2014). Messages shared via social media don't always convey emotions clearly, which can lead to misunderstandings, particularly for individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, or other mental state issues (Tanaś and

Welskop, 2019). Anonymity is a frequently utilized aspect of the internet; with it, people often mask unfavorable personality traits or those associated with low self-esteem, leading to a digital self-idealization. As a result, in the digital space, we present an idealized version of ourselves, flawless and without weaknesses that we strive to hide from others. Online users also feel less obligated to adhere to social and ethical norms (Kamińska-Feldman, 1988).

When analyzing the risk factors associated with internet use (CBOS, 2012), individual aspects are often highlighted: introversion, shyness, difficulty establishing connections, and a disrupted sense of self-worth. The problem is twofold: people with such tendencies trust social media more, and these traits can also be the result of problematic media use. Additionally, focusing on online relationships may stem from unsatisfactory real-world relationships.

The negative effects of social media use follow from the novel way they are used, for example to regulate mood, alleviate stress, loneliness, or symptoms of depression (Xu and Tan, 2012). Additionally, the dynamic growth of social networks and increased time spent online contribute to addiction, particularly among individuals with psychosocial deficits (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). Certain user behaviors linked to social media use may also be associated with narcissism (Carpenter, 2012). In this context emerges the concept of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), which describes the anxiety of missing important or interesting events (Jupowicz-Ginalska et al., 2023).

The easy accessibility of digital services creates opportunities for constant online presence, which can reinforce destructive behaviors (Przybylski et al., 2013). Depression and anxiety disorders in young adults are increasingly important issues related to their mental state. Numerous studies document a link between social media use and an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety disorders (Primack et al., 2021). Online communication can be as complex as face-to-face interactions, and there are many correlations between social media use and mental state challenges such as depression and anxiety (Seabrook et al., 2016). Social media use is associated with lower levels of loneliness, a greater sense of belonging, better access to social support, and higher life satisfaction and self-esteem (Baek et al., 2013). However, for individuals with depression or anxiety, it can negatively impact well-being and functioning. Specifically, envy-driven social media usage has been shown to exacerbate depressive symptoms (Tandoc, Ferrucci, and Duffy, 2015). Furthermore, their excessive use can get in the way of or even replace real-life social interactions, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. High levels of social media use have been linked to a reduction in both the quantity and quality of face-to-face interactions (Ryan and Xenos, 2011). Virtual connections tend to be superficial and cannot

replace deep, emotional bonds formed through in-person interactions. A lack of direct social contact can contribute to depression and anxiety, as virtual engagement only temporarily boosts the person's mood. Studies show that individuals who feel they are getting less support from their immediate environment are more likely to turn to social media for compensation (Brailovskaia et al, 2020). However, relying on social media as the primary source of social interaction can lead into a vicious cycle. Those who feel lonely seek support online, but instead of making their loneliness more bearable, they often experience an even greater sense of isolation.

Difficulties impacting a person's mental state due to her excessive social media use include negative self-comparison. Social media platforms offer ideal conditions for self-presentation, enabling users to highlight only the most appealing aspects of their lives. This often leads individuals to juxtapose their own lives with the virtually impeccable images they see online.

Low self-esteem and introversion are associated with a more frequent use of social media as a way to boost self-perception (Mehdizadeh, 2010). While passively consuming content, for example, by scrolling through profiles or reading posts, can lower self-esteem, active engagement, like participation in discussions or curating one's online image, may temporarily enhance self-perception (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). However, excessive identification with the idealized portrayals presented on social media can result in self-devaluation, unrealistic standards, and striving for an unattainable ideal, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy (Roccaforte, 2024).

Cyberbullying has become a significant factor affecting the mental state of social media users. It occurs in forms such as harassment, threats, humiliation, spreading rumors and false information, social exclusion, and sharing private data or images without consent. Victims of cyberbullying often experience severe psychological impacts, including depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, and suicidal behaviors. Meanwhile, perpetrators tend to exhibit aggression and engage in criminal activities (Nixon, 2014). Victims frequently endure intense stress, which profoundly affects their mental state. Prolonged exposure to hostile comments, lack of support, and feelings of isolation can lead to a deep sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Symptoms include panic attacks, heightened anxiety, trouble concentrating and sleep disturbances. Over time, this can result in depression and social withdrawal. Some victims may avoid the internet and social media altogether, leading to social exclusion and missed opportunities for peer connection. In extreme cases, they may resort to self-harm or substance abuse as coping mechanisms for emotional pain.

An often overlooked but significant effect of social media on mental state is sensory overload. The constant barrage of stimuli from technology can degrade the quality of neural connections, potentially leading to irreversible changes in cognitive and psychological functioning. The daily influx of massive amounts of data can negatively impact users' mental states (Bawden and Robinson, 2020). Excessive stimuli make it difficult for the brain to process and organize information, resulting in cognitive fatigue and concentration issues. This social media exhaustion can increase stress, anxiety, fatigue, boredom, and low mood. The overstimulation triggers the sympathetic nervous system, disrupting the emotional balance crucial for mental well-being (Wrzesień, 2016). The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like decision-making and behavior regulation, is particularly affected. Overstimulation can impair these functions, leading to difficulties in emotional expression and interpersonal communication. (Jobst and McDonald, 2009). Biochemical limitations on reflective thinking may also encourage morally questionable behaviors, such as sharing videos of peer bullying. Satisfaction from such actions often grows with increased audience engagement (Wrzesień, 2016).

Modern social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok are specifically designed to maximize user engagement and retain attention for as long as possible. A key element in this process is the dopamine-driven reward system, which is closely tied to motivation and the experience of pleasure. Dopamine release occurs in response to fulfilling both biological and social needs, creating a positive association with the behavior and encouraging its repetition (Burhan and Moradzadeh, 2020). In social media contexts, this mechanism is exploited to boost user interaction. Notifications, likes, comments, and shares trigger dopamine surges, resulting in pleasurable feelings that motivate users to continue engaging. Consequently, people tend to spend more time on these platforms, constantly seeking the next "rewarding" stimulus.

For younger users, who often straddle the line between the real and digital worlds, this dynamic presents unique challenges. The integration of these two realms requires them to develop new skills to navigate both environments effectively. Mastering the ability to balance these worlds is becoming crucial for maintaining mental and emotional stability.

In the context of analyzing the possible impact of social media on the mental state of recipients, both content and time are important, as well as other psychological factors important for users. They were not included in the study because they did not constitute the content of the analysis of this research.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL STATE:
ANALYSIS OF OWN RESEARCH

Over three-quarters of the adult population of Poles declare regular presence on social media (Kemp, 2024). According to the Public Opinion Research Center, even 100% of people aged 18–24 go online. Those under 35, especially in the 18–24 age bracket, mostly report being constantly online, meaning they are constantly receiving information and responding to messages. The most notable group in this regard is the aforementioned age range—almost 53% of individuals in this group actively used social media. Additionally, 93% of this group used messaging services like Messenger or WhatsApp. Over half of Poles declare having an account on a social networking site (96% of them aged 18–24). The time spent on social media raises important research questions (CBOS, 2022).

Q1. What emotions do people most often feel when using social media?
Q2. Does the mental state of people change when they use social media?
Q3. Do they use social media to improve their mood?
Q4. After spending a long time using social media, do the users feel tired?

The conducted original study, in the form of CAVI, was anonymous and involved 190 respondents aged 18–40 years. The participants were students of the University of Warsaw, to whom a request to participate in the study was sent, stating the topic and purpose of the study. A link to the survey. (a Google form) was included Participation in the study was voluntary, respondents were informed about the anonymity of the study, collective analysis of data, and the scientific use of the results. The study contained seven content questions and one about gender. The survey was available for three weeks. The time to complete it was about 15 minutes.

The surveyed group included 65.3% of women and 33.2% of men. Two persons did not wish to disclose their gender, and one person identified as intersex. The composition of the study participants is presented in Chart 1.
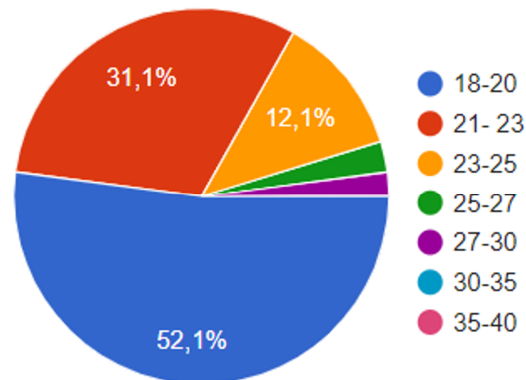
Chart 1. Gender distribution of the respondents.
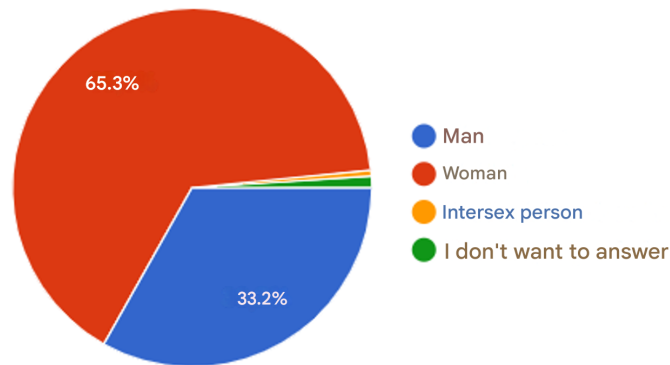
A significant majority were individuals aged 18–20 years (52.1%), 21–23 years (31.1%), 23–25 years (12.1%), 25–27 years (2.6%), and 27–30 years (2.1%). The data is presented in Chart 2.

Chart 2. Age range of respondents.

The time spent using social media is significant for mental state; so is the content. The results show that 64.7% (the sum of the responses "I don't analyze" and "all the time") of respondents are constantly engaged in digital relation-ship spaces. The remaining responses range between three hours (15.8%) and two hours (13.7%). The results confirm the importance of social media in people's lives (Chart 3).

Chart 3. Time spent by respondents using social media.
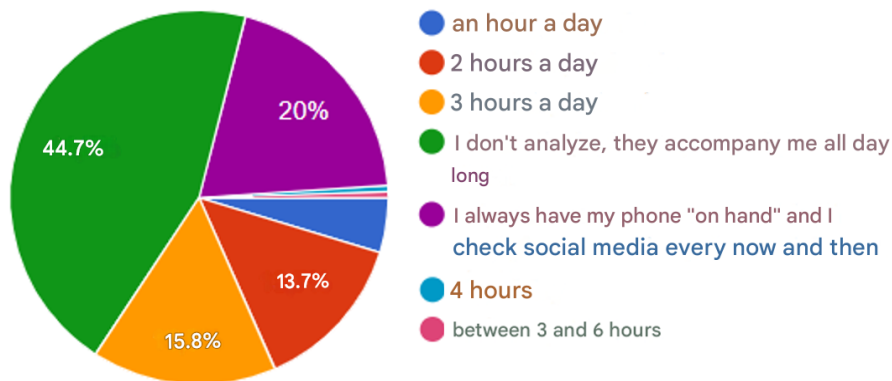
With such a high frequency of interaction with social media, their impact on the users' mental state seems inevitable. A large influx of information and strong emotional intensity subconsciously influence our reactions. In this context, it was important to verify the awareness of the emotions respondents experience while using social media. The answers were distributed as follows: positive (13%), negative (4.4%), "I don't think about my emotional state while using social media" (13%), and "they change depending on the content read" (69.6%) (Chart 4). Therefore, in reply to Q1, let us say that users' emotions change depending on the content read, which indicates their impact on the mental state of the audience.

Chart 4. Emotional experience while using social media.
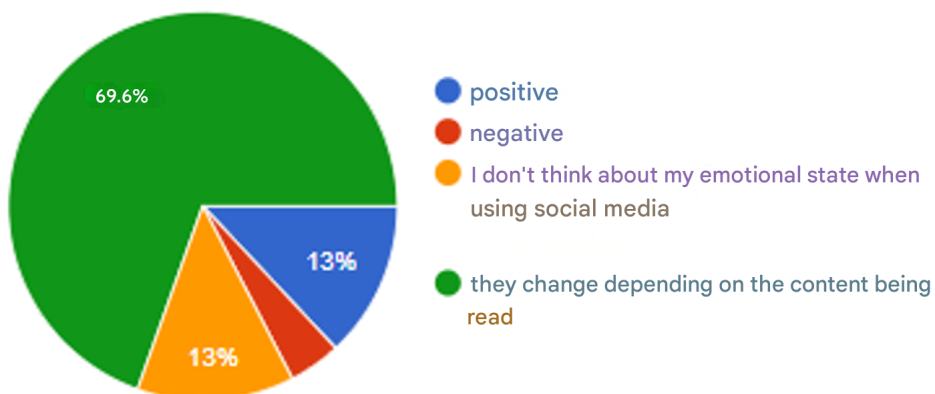
The predominance of emotional variability based on the content read confirms the assumption that using social media changes the mental state of users (answer to Q2). This is evidenced by the results (Chart 5) of the second question in the survey, which indicates that the mental state changes while using social media. 80.4% of the respondents answered positively, 15.2% answered "I don't think about it" (passive consumers of online content), and 4.4% of respondents disagreed.

Chart 5. Change in mental state due to social media.
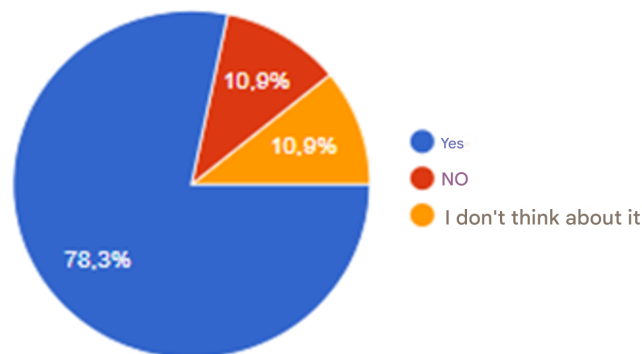
The sign of mental changes caused by electronic mediais "information fatigue" caused by intensive contact with social media. 78.3% of respondents experience fatigue, while 10.9% either disagree or don't think about it. The results are presented in Chart 6. This confirms the theoretical considerations outlined in the first part of the article, which highlight cognitive fatigue as an important element of mental state.

Chart 6. Feeling of fatigue after prolonged contact with social media.
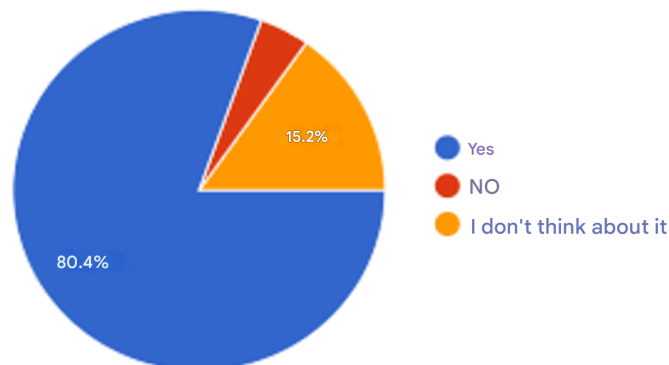
Extended use of social media impacts the psyche of users unconsciously, manifesting itself as boredom, lack of concentration, detachment from reality, and general anxiety. This also answers the fourth research question (Q4).

The subsequent reflection led to the verification of Q3:"Do users engage with social media to improve their well-being?" Positive responses were given by 71.1% of respondents, with 14.4% answering negatively. The remaining responses were split between "I don't think about it" and "sometimes" or "other" (as shown in Chart 7).

The percentage of positive responses suggests that social media may serve as a source of self-affirmation, improvement of self-image, or self-esteem.

Chart 7. Social media as a tool for improving well-being.
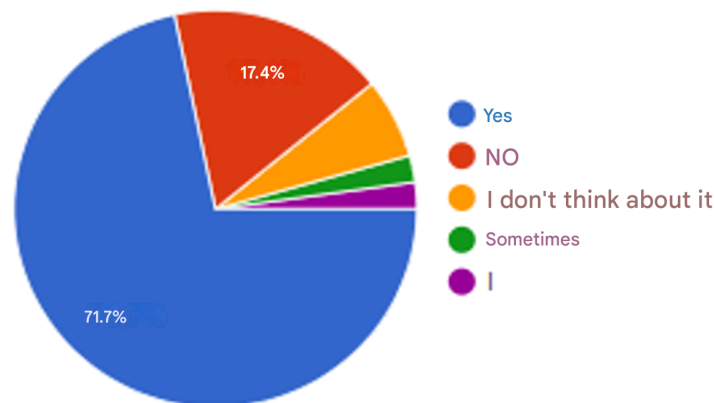
To validate the above information, the study also examined the negative impact of social media on users' well-being. A question was posed regarding feelings of anxiety and stress after reading social media content. The results showed that 58.7% of the respondents denied feeling this way, while 41.3% confirmed experiencing such feelings (Chart 8). This distribution of responses calls for further reflection on the scale of this issue.

Chart 8. Psychological breakdown after reading content on social media.
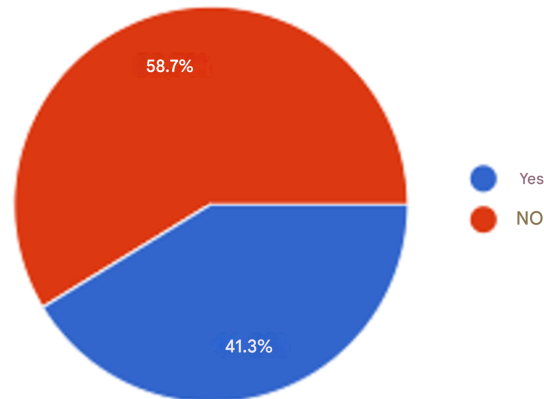
Social media usage can also become a space for users to vent their mental states. The anonymity of the internet, the use of pseudonyms, and impersonating others' accounts may give rise to various unethical behaviors. While the theory suggests using the digital space to release emotional tension, the results of the survey largely contradict this idea. 71.7% of the respondents denied engaging in such practices, while 19.6% confirmed they did. Only 8.7% could not recall such situations. The results are shown in Chart 9.

Chart 9. Releasing emotional tension on social media to improve well-being.
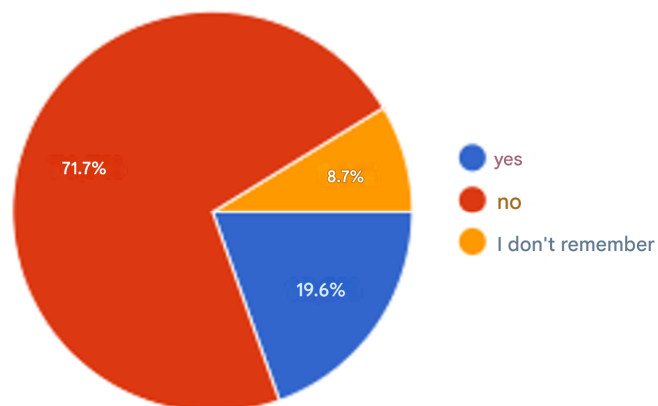
The conclusion of the author's research involved verifying the forms of interpersonal interactions among the surveyed social media users. The response is satisfactory, as 97.8% of the respondents prefer face-to-face contact, while only the remaining 2.2% prefer to interact online (Chart 10).

Chart 10. Preferences for interpersonal relationships.
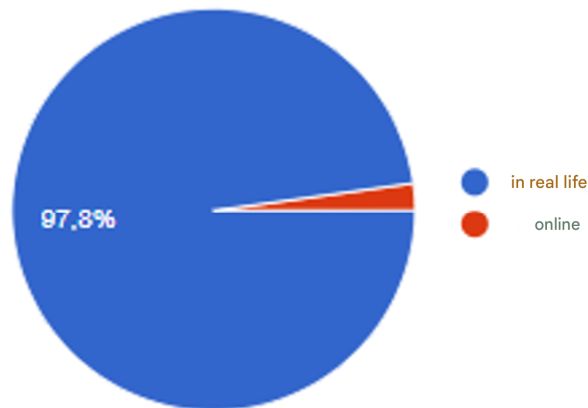
According to Aristotle, "man is by nature a social animal," and this is promising for human relationships. However, it is important to note that the CAWI method used in the study relies on declarative responses.

CONCLUSIONS

Identifying and highlighting the effects that frequent use of social media can have on well-being is of significant value for the younger generation. The research conducted does confirm the assumption that social media influence the mental state of their users. Its role and importance are felt and visible in the daily lives of the respondents. The development of applications, along with the increased frequency of their use, affect their mental state. This is evident in the emotional variability, cognitive fatigue, informational anxiety, fear of social rejection, and feelings of helplessness due to lack of acceptance reported by social media users. The growing self-awareness of the respondents is manifested in their identification of difficulties and the latter's impact on the perceived mental state. It indicates the need for media education and raising awareness of the scale of the growing problem.

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WPŁYW MEDIÓW SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH
NA STAN PSYCHICZNY POLSKICH STUDENTÓW
UNIWERSYTETU WARSZAWSKIEGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W dobie rosnącej popularności mediów społecznościowych, istotne jest zrozumienie ich wpływu na stan psychiczny użytkowników. Media społecznościowe stały się kluczowym narzędziem komunikacji XXI wieku i integralną częścią relacji międzyludzkich. Za ich pośrednictwem udostępniane są informacje, dystrybuowane treści i promowane inicjatywy społeczne. Jednak szybki napływ cyfrowych treści przekracza możliwości poznawcze użytkowników, co prowadzi do niepokoju, stresu i problemów ze stanem psychicznym. Artykuł analizuje wpływ mediów społecznościowych na stan psychiczny użytkowników, opierając się na przeglądzie literatury i badaniu metodą CAWI przeprowadzonym wśród 190 respondentów w wieku w wieku 18-40 lat. Uczestnikami badania byli studenci Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, do których wysłano prośbę o udział w badaniu, wskazującą temat i cel badania. Wyniki wskazują na brak świadomej kontroli czasu spędzanego w mediach społecznościowych oraz różnorodne emocje zależne od konsumowanych treści, z przewagą pozytywnych emocji. Jednocześnie stała ekspozycja na media społecznościowe prowadzi do zmęczenia poznawczego i ogólnego pogorszenia samopoczucia, przy dominującej preferencji dla osobistych interakcji społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe; stan psychiczny; emocje