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Use of Facebook by Children Aged 10–12. Presence in Social Media Despite the Prohibition

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Abstract

Social media, such as Facebook, play an important role in human life. More and more often we can observe them also finding their way into the world of children, who use them to achieve specific benefits. The research sample consisted of children aged 10–12, namely those who – due to the restrictions in the Facebook regulations – are not allowed to use it. The purpose of the study was to identify the number of children aged 10–12 who use Facebook, as well as how they use this medium. The research findings, obtained in the diagnostic survey and the focus interview, indicate that: the vast majority of the respondents have accounts on Facebook, and the older the child, the greater the probability that he/she has his/her own profile. Girls have more friends and photos on the Facebook profile than boys, and the number of friends grows along with the users' age. The research results presented in the article are the benchmark for educational activities that should be undertaken in order to regulate the usage of Facebook by children under 13 years of age.

Keywords: children aged 10–12, benefits, Facebook

Introduction – Theoretical Background for Selecting the Subject, Terminological Findings

At present, new media are a permanent element of social and cultural functioning of children (Huk, 2015). More and more often, a special place in the areas

of use of the new media by children is taken by social networking portals, access to which is obtained through mobile media, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Currently, Facebook is the most popular social website, which frequently makes it an object of scientific research (Wilson, Gosling, Graham, 2012). Due to the fact that the medium is intended for people over 13, research in this respect is rarely conducted among the population of children aged 10–12. This problem was highlighted by Anna Brosch (2016), describing a situation in which children begin to function on the Internet for the first time. On the other hand, Mirosława Wawrzak-Chodaczek (2004) emphasises the role of the Internet in fulfilling the communication needs of teenagers. The author indicates that the Internet users “manipulate their identity” in order to make other Web participants pay attention to them. Manipulation is often related to ascribing certain features thanks to which the Internet user may be liked by other Internet users. The Polish research conducted in this respect indicates that contemporary teenagers are “forced to literally construct their identity by creating their profile: selecting photos, specifying preferences, publishing general and casual self-descriptions” (Wójcik, 2013). Thanks to the information provided by children and teenagers on such websites, we know “who became whose friend, who ended their relationship with whom, who posted pictures, who has a lousy day [...]”. Unfortunately, such information may be used by all Web users – regardless of their age and intentions, e.g., for cyberbullying (Kowalski, Limber, Agatston, 2010). The research conducted in 2010 among the group of 9–16-year-olds indicates that 71% of the surveyed have a profile on one of the web portals. Additionally, on the basis of analyses, Katarzyna Makaruk (2013) confirms that teenagers aged 14–17 actively participate in Internet communities. Additionally, girls have social media profiles more often than boys, and girls devote more time to this kind of activity. The author also demonstrated the relation between the frequency of using the social media and the dysfunctional use of the Internet, as well as the psychological and social problems found in those Internet users. On the other hand, the research findings presented by Magdalena Wasylewicz (2011) describe a group of secondary school students, who, as it seems, did not have a habit of repeatedly visiting the social media website. It turns out that 34% of the surveyed students visit such websites several times a week, 29% – once a day, and 22% – once a week. We should add that these results may apply to the period (before 2011) when social networking portals were not as popular as they are now. In the opinion of Manfred Spitzer (2015), “for children, replacing real interpersonal contacts with Internet portals [Facebook] may lead in the long run to reducing the social modules in their brains. Therefore, there is a hazard that, in the future, Facebook and other similar websites may lead to shrinkage of entire

areas of our brains responsible for social functions.” The basis for the formulated theses may be the use of Facebook among children aged 10–12 who make it a habit to check their profiles within short time intervals, using a smartphone in every possible place (e.g., at school), adding messages, photos, browsing profiles, posts, and commenting on those posts on the social media sites. They begin to ascribe value to the number of “likes” under their own posts and the number of friends in their friend lists.

It was expressed to the fullest extent by Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan (2011), who believe that when we become dependent, e.g., on repeatedly checking for new posts on Facebook, the executive area of the brain, called the anterior cingulate cortex, loses control. This area is located in the front part of the brain, responsible for decision-making and judgment. The authors claim that addiction therapy should include not only regulating production of dopamine, but also strengthening the nerve circuits of the anterior cingulate cortex, and thus it is a strictly psychiatric activity, going beyond pedagogical activities.

An important phenomenon in the context of the use of social media is the lack of Internet access and the related fear of missing out, called “FoMo”. Spitzer (2016) points out that “since the beginning of social networks, where millions of people constantly do something and inform others about it, this fear has greatly intensified”. Young people want to be kept up-to-date with the information published by their peers on social websites, since they are the topic of conversations held in the virtual world and in the real one, ensuring a specific social position among the group of friends.

Constantly and excessively repeated activities related to the use of digital media, which give pleasure to the young user and let him or her “detach” from the real problems, may lead to addiction. Therefore, digital media have a high addictive potential that is based on “high unpredictability of events”. Additionally, the emergence of social media, such as Facebook, creates an opportunity for such a situation to appear among children. “Social networking portals have a strong influence on young people and force them to almost constantly be on the Internet, in fear that they would miss some event” (Spitzer, 2015). Despite a number of negative aspects, education concerns the use of Facebook in developing attitudes (Rosen et al., 2013), knowledge and skills among children and teenagers, which at present seems to be more efficient than using the traditional teaching methods (Frانيا, 2014).

Research Methodology

The research area I explore is a certain section of reality concerning participation of children aged 10–12 in the Internet social media networks. An example of this section is Facebook – a social network, which may be used by people above 13 years of age. The scarce research conducted in this field indicates that such services are also used by younger children (Makaruk, 2013). Therefore, it is important to undertake studies that would contribute to diagnosing this phenomenon among children below 13, as well as to expanding the scientific knowledge in this respect. I formulated the research problems on the basis of the “uses and gratifications theory”, pursuant to which “using the media is determined by gaining a sense of satisfaction from them, by the needs, wishes or motives of a potential user”. The basic needs in this case are: “information, the need for relaxation, company, entertainment or »escape«” (McQuail, 2008). On the basis of the aforementioned theory, I formulated the research problem: Do children aged 10–12 use Facebook, and if so – how?

The conducted research was quantitative and qualitative. In order to answer the research problems, I used: a survey questionnaire addressed to children aged 10–12, a focus interview with children aged 10–12, an interview with the parents of the examined pupils, as well as a quantitative analysis of the Facebook profiles belonging to children aged 10–12. I randomly selected the sample, in which the general population consisted of children aged 10–12, attending one of the Polish schools. The sampling frame constituted the list of children attending the given school, and thus the results obtained in the study may be generalised only for the general population of this school or very similar populations. Assuming the level of significance $\alpha=0.05$ and the estimate error level $e=0.05$, I set the minimum sample size as 157 children. The questionnaire covered 71 girls and 86 boys. The focus interview was conducted with 10 children with their own Facebook profiles and 2 parents of the children from the focus group. Due to the children’s attribute, namely having a Facebook profile, I selected the respondents for the interview in a purposeful manner, on the basis of the data obtained from the questionnaire. I analysed 113 profiles of children aged 10–12, originating from the general population, who had a Facebook account.

The children came from a Polish town with 360 thousand inhabitants. Their families belong to the middle class. The obtained results underwent statistical analysis. In order to determine the relation between the age of the children taking part in the study and the surveyed having a Facebook account, the χ^2 test was used. In turn, in order to determine the correlation between the selected variables, I used

Pearson's r formula. I also calculated the relation between the studied variables. For statistical calculations, I used the Statistica program, version 12.

Results

In the study, the pupils were asked to state if they had a Facebook profile (Table 1). In the examined sample, 71.97% of the pupils admitted that they had a Facebook profile, including 87.5% of children aged 12. Analysis of the results in this respect indicates that the number of Facebook profile holders increases along with age. At this point, it should be emphasised that a profile on this social networking site may be held by people who are at least 13 years of age – as stated in the regulations. Therefore, the vast majority of the respondents have a Facebook account, despite the restrictions of the website's regulations. We can thus state that, when setting up the profile, they stated untrue data related to their age. The results obtained in the diagnostic survey underwent a statistical analysis. An alternative hypothesis was adopted, indicating that the age of the examined person influences holding a Facebook profile. Since $\chi^2_{emp} > \chi^2_{tab}$ ($13.7 > 7.815$), it is determined with the probability of 0.95 that there are grounds to reject H_0 . This means that the older the child, the greater the likelihood of him/her having a Facebook account. The research did not demonstrate any statistically significant differences between having a Facebook account by girls (71.83%) and by boys (72.09%).

Table 1. Children having a Facebook account, with breakdown into age N=157

Age	10 years		11 years		12 years		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
With a FB account	32	59.26	25	64.10	56	87.5	113	71.97
Without a FB account	22	40.74	14	35.90	8	12.5	44	28.03

Source: the author's own studies

Analysis of Facebook accounts of the examined children indicates that the average number of Facebook friends grows along with age (Table 2). 10-year-old children have on average 108 friends, 11-year-olds – 180, and 12-year-olds – 201 friends. Girls have on average more friends (180) than boys (156). The analysis also covered the number of photos posted by the user and photos with the user's face. The examined children on average have 40 photos on their profiles, including on average 15 photos containing the face of the examined children. The girls have

more photos on their profiles (49) than the boys (33). The photographs of the examined girls also more often present their faces (23) than the photographs of the examined boys (9). The obtained results indicate that the number of photos posted on Facebook by children increases along with age. This trend persists also in the case of photographs with the user on them. An important element of Facebook's functioning is obtaining and leaving "likes". On average, the respondents receive 180 "likes" under the published photos. This number increases along with the age of the users; a great difference can be observed between the "likes" received by the surveyed girls (245) and by the surveyed boys (90). I have observed a similar situation in the case of "likes" obtained under posts published by the surveyed. Therefore, the number of obtained "likes" increases along with age, and the average number of obtained "likes" is greater in the case of the examined girls (349) than the examined boys (132).

Table 2. Variables concerning the analysed Facebook profiles of children aged 10–12, N=113

Age	10 years	11 years	12 years	Total
Average number of friends	108	180	201	169
Average number of photos posted by the user	13	43	54	40
Average number of photos posted by the user which include the user	7	13	20	15
Average number of all "likes" under the user's photos	53	139	231	160
Average number of "likes" under the user's posts	79	176	341	230
Average period of the profile's functioning in months	20	30	32	28

Source: the author's own studies

Among the drawn sample, almost all the respondents gave their true full name in their profile. The average time the examined have been present on Facebook is 28 months. 12-year-olds have been present on Facebook the longest. No significant difference in this respect has been observed between the surveyed girls and boys.

Table 3 presents the use of Facebook by the surveyed children. It turns out that 70.8% of the surveyed leave "likes" under photos, posts, videos of other users. The second most often performed activity on Facebook is "posting photos" – 39.82% of the surveyed. The respondents successively indicated: "commenting on posts and photos of other users" – 31.86% of the surveyed, "browsing profiles of other users" – 26.55%, "publishing posts" – 21.24%, "leaving friend invitations"

– 15.93%, “searching for friends” 13.27%. The respondents most rarely publish videos – 7.08%. In five out of eight categories, the examined girls performed the specified activities on Facebook more often than the boys. On the other hand, the activities performed on Facebook more often by the boys than by the girls include: “browsing profiles of other persons”, “publishing posts”, and “publishing videos”.

Table 3. The use of Facebook among children aged 10, 11 and 12, N=113

Age/Gender	10 years		11 years		12 years		Girls		Boys		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I leave “likes” under photos, posts, videos of other people	18	56.25	18	72	44	78.57	39	76.47	41	66.19	80	70.80
I publish photos	9	28.13	12	48	24	42.85	23	45.1	22	35.48	45	39.82
I comment on posts and photos of other people	8	25	9	36	19	33.93	17	33.33	19	30.65	36	31.86
I browse other people’s profiles	5	15.63	6	24	19	33.93	10	19.61	20	32.26	30	26.55
I publish my own posts	6	18.75	6	24	12	21.43	8	15.69	16	25.81	24	21.24
I invite people to the group of my friends	4	12.5	2	8	12	21.43	10	19.61	8	12.90	18	15.93
I search for friends	5	15.63	3	12	7	12.5	7	13.72	8	12.90	15	13.27
I publish videos	3	9.38	1	4	4	7.14	2	3.92	6	9.68	8	7.08

Source: the author’s own studies

The focus interviews conducted with children aged 10, 11 and 12 allowed for formulating conclusions, which expanded on the questionnaire answers described above and the analysis of Facebook profiles. The reasons for not having a Facebook account among the group of 10-year-olds are first of all associated with age restrictions and prohibitions of their parents. Few answers indicated other reasons. One of the children said: “I don’t want to have a Facebook account, because I am not 13 years old. Because someone may call us names and hate us. Someone may call us stupid, ugly and fat. Someone may keep sending us spam”. The group of 10-year-olds also includes those with their own profiles. Their answers indicate

that they are aware of the prohibition related to the user's age, which they broke. These answers indicate obtaining some benefits related to the use of social media. A 10 year-old girl argues for having a Facebook profile: "I can contact my friend through Facebook. I only accept those friends I know in real life. I browse You-tubers' posts. Through Facebook I access Messenger, where I can talk with my friends, my mom, my parents, but not with strangers. When I publish my photos, they are not detailed."

The 11- and 12-year-old children who participated in the study in their answers did not justify their illegal setting-up of a Facebook account, since this medium is used for communicating with their peers and building friendships.

The group of parents has both opponents and proponents of a 10–12-year-old child having a Facebook account. In the conducted interview, one of the mothers admitted that she had set up a Facebook account for her 10-year-old daughter herself, because she did not want her daughter to be rejected by her school peers. The mother stated that she had full control over her daughter's account and she reacted on a current basis to any threats created by other users of this website. On the other hand, the reasoning of the mother who opposed to her daughter having a Facebook account was justified by protecting the daughter against unwanted content and vulgar posts and photos published by others. The interview was attended by parents who were unable to answer whether their children had a Facebook account, since they had never asked their children about that and had not talked with them about this topic.

The conducted research also covered a statistical analysis of selected variables concerning Facebook profiles belonging to the examined children aged 10–12 (Table 4). Using Pearson's r correlation, assuming $p < 0.05$, it was examined whether there is a statistically important correlation between the variables. The obtained results indicate that a positive correlation exists between all variables, and thus the value of one variable increases along with the value of another variable. The correlation coefficients occur within the range of a weak correlation to a nearly complete correlation (Guilford, 1964).

The largest coefficient value occurs between the "Number of all »likes« left on Facebook under the photos of the examined children" and the "Number of all »likes« left on Facebook under the posts of the examined children". We can observe a nearly complete correlation in this case, which indicates the following relationship: the examined children, who obtain a lot of "likes" under their photos, also obtain a lot of "likes" under their posts. Another nearly complete correlation can be observed in the case of the following variables: "Number of photos posted by the user, which include the user" and "Number of all »likes« under the user's

Table 4. Pearson's r correlation between variables related to Facebook profiles belonging to children aged 10–12, $p < 0.05$, $N=113$

	Number of photos posted by the user	Number of photos posted by the user, which include the user	Number of all "likes" under the user's posts	Period of the profile's functioning in months	Number of all "likes" under the user's photos
Number of friends	0.247347	0.434746	0.553044	0.371667	0.575075
Number of photos posted by the user	-	0.753011	0.650170	0.294312	0.648129
Number of photos posted by the user, which include the user	-	-	0.948246	0.252100	0.918117
Number of all "likes" under the user's posts	-	-	-	0.230072	0.980232
Period of the profile's functioning in months	-	-	-	-	0.230360

Source: the author's own studies.

posts". We can assume that the number of photos with the user contributes to the increase in the number of "likes" left under the Facebook user's posts. This relation is not by any means obvious, since we can encounter a situation in which a child posts a lot of photos on his or her Facebook account and publishes many posts, which do not receive many "likes" due to low popularity of the child among the Internet friends. A very high correlation can be also observed in the case of the following variables: "Number of photos posted by the user, which include the user" and "Number of all »likes« under the user's photos". This correlation indicates that Facebook friends mainly leave "likes" under photos which include the owner of a given profile. According to the research, children aged 10–12 mainly post photos including their faces, which is indicated by another observed "high correlation" between the "Number of all photos" and the "Number of photos with the profile owner's face". In addition, the "Number of photos posted by the surveyed on Face-

book” positively correlates with the “Number of obtained »likes« under posts and under those photos”. The more the photos and posts, the more the “likes” obtained. The statistical analysis indicated that the “Number of Facebook friends” correlates with the “Number of obtained »likes« under the user’s photos and posts” – it is a high correlation. On the other hand, the “Number of friends” shows an average correlation with the “Number of photos” with the user and the “Period of the profile’s functioning”. A weak correlation can be observed between: – “Number of friends” and “Number of photos posted on Facebook”; – “Number of photos, including photos showing the user” and “Period of the profile’s functioning”; – “Number of obtained »likes«” and “Period of the profile’s functioning”; – “Number of obtained »likes« under photos” and “Period of the profile’s functioning”.

Conclusions

The conducted research allowed for describing the reality related to the use of social media by children aged 10–12, despite the commonly prevailing prohibition. This situation creates many problems, which are consciously ignored by Facebook administrators, and also by parents and teachers. Especially the latter should have a high level of competence concerning the children’s participation in the cyberspace (Juszczuk, Kim, 2015). The essence of the problem involves positive benefits gained by children under 13 years of age when using social media, which they are not allowed to use. Let us not forget that the examined children aged 10–12 use Facebook because it results from their natural need to build social interactions with their peers. This thesis is consistent with the “use and benefits theory”, the assumptions of which are based on the positive aspect of using the media in order to search for information, build the person’s own identity and social relations and fulfil their needs related to spending free time. Therefore, steps should be taken which would allow for resolving the legal conflict related to the use of Facebook by children under 13, as well as for development of an educational programme, the main objective of which would be for 10–12-year-old users to gain competences concerning the proper use of the social media. Such a programme should be included in the obligatory educational content implemented in Polish schools.

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