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## Third-Grade Pupils in the World of Contemporary Media

**ABSTRACT:** The development of the digital era and new media make the world around us more functional. It makes performing many everyday activities easier and more attractive, plays an informative role, and represents an unlimited source of knowledge about the world. It has also changed the current model of mass communication.

Wide access to the internet, its global reach, and the transfer of an increasing number of activities to the digital space – especially by the youngest users – may, however, pose multiple threats.

This manuscript presents pupils' statements about contemporary media. The survey conducted explored the experiences of young participants regarding media and its multi-faceted influence, as well as the role of parents in building digital competencies. Interesting issues also included pupils' narratives regarding the positive and negative aspects of using digital media.

As shown by the survey results, children most often identify media with social networking sites and the internet, as these are the platforms they usually use. They can navigate the digital world effectively and recognize the benefits and threats it presents. They understand the rules for using electronic media, but they do not always follow them. They admit that their online activity is often limited and monitored by their parents; however, this typically concerns the amount of time spent in front of a smartphone or computer screen, rather than the safe use of internet resources.

**KEYWORDS:** digital media, social networking sites, threats, digital competencies, media education

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become an integral part of the modern world. They are already present in almost all spheres of human life. They accompany us at work, at home, while relaxing, and while shopping. Their role in the easy and quick transmission and reception of information, acquisition of knowledge, and communication is undeniable. They are also an almost unlimited source of multimedia entertainment.

However, threats posed by excessive and incompetent use of digital media are also often pointed out, such as blurring the line between actual need and necessity, or incorrectly drawing the line between what can be shown to others and what should absolutely be kept to oneself (Andrzejewska, 2014; Kaliszewska, 2007; Tanaś & Galanciak, 2015; Tomczyk, 2018).

This applies primarily to the youngest users of new technologies, as the digital world begins to enter their lives at an increasingly earlier stage of their development.

This is confirmed by the results of a study carried out in 2015 by the *Nobody's Children* Foundation, which shows that almost every second one-year-old or two-year-old child in Poland uses mobile devices (Bąk, 2015, pp. 55–82). Unfortunately, a smartphone or tablet often serves as an electronic babysitter – used to calm the child down and achieve “peace of mind”.

The virtual world opens up new, interesting perspectives for children. Thanks to new media, children can acquire knowledge, communicate without leaving home, and take advantage of the endless offer of multimedia entertainment.

According to Jadwiga Izdebska (2005, pp. 198–209), the rational use of multimedia by children can lead to many positive psychological impacts – reducing fear, tension, and anxiety, or strengthening self-esteem.

Unfortunately, as Marzena Kowaluk-Romanek notes:

“Time spent with electronic devices increases at the expense of leisure time and limits other activities that are important from the perspective of a child’s development. Children’s identity and perception of reality begin to be shaped not by contact with the object of cognition, but with its symbolic representa-

tive. The internet, films, and computer games can both influence the development of a network of values among recipients and contribute to dissonance in the sphere of values and needs” (Kowaluk-Romanek, 2019, p. 199).

The digital world is a territory filled with traps and social threats where children can easily become victims of online crime. However, they can also take on the role of perpetrators, often unaware of the serious real-world consequences of their virtual actions (Tanaś & Galanciak, 2019, p. 43).

#### PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The aim of the research was to diagnose third-grade primary school pupils’ understanding of contemporary media. The subject of exploration was the pupils’ experiences with the media and its influence, as well as the role of parents in shaping children’s digital competencies.

Due to the fact that experience itself has become an important element of analyses, the starting point was a phenomenological research perspective. “When we talk about research aimed at reaching experiences, we mean research that is *close to experience*” (Kacprzak, 2016, p. 285).

The authors were inspired to undertake this research by the *EU Kids Online 2018 Poland Research Report*, which shows that 82.5% of children and adolescents connect to the internet every day by phone. Most of them use the internet to browse social networking sites (almost three-quarters of users aged 9–17 have their own accounts, of which almost half are 9–10 years old), communicate, play games, listen to music, and watch movies.<sup>1</sup>

During the survey, answers were sought to the research problems presented below:

1. What do the surveyed pupils identify contemporary media with?
2. What positive and negative sides do they see resulting from the use of digital media?
3. What influence do parents have on their digital competencies?

#### RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Focus groups were chosen as the research method, being one of the examples of conducting a social survey in direct contact with the respondents (Babbie & Morgan, 2003, p. 330). The following definition was adopted due to a number of doubts regarding the definition of focus groups, as well as the interchangeably used terms “group interviews”, “focus group interviews” or “focused group discussions”, as described by Rosaline S. Barbour: “every group discussion can be called a focus group,

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was carried out by a research team led by Dr. Jacek Pyżalski (UAM) in 2018 on a representative group of children and youths aged 9–17 (1,249 students from 90 schools); <https://fundacja.orange.pl/aktualnosci/artkul/raport-eu-kids-online-dostepny> (accessed: November 20, 2021).

as long as the researcher actively encourages and maintains group interactions” (Barbour, 2011, p. 23).

The participants of the focus groups were 60 third-grade pupils from selected primary schools in Olsztyn. The study sample was selected based on two categories: age (9–10) and place of research. The adopted focus group research strategy allowed us to learn about the views of third-grade pupils on contemporary media.

It must be emphasized that the presented research material refers only to a narrow group of children and cannot be used for any generalizations.

The collected material was organized in accordance with the problem areas addressed and compared to the findings presented in the scientific literature. One of the important elements of focus research was the place where it was conducted. The interviews were carried out in rooms where there were no materials that could influence the content of the discussion. Any interpretations were based on the coding paradigm posited by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990), as a tool best suited for the analysis of interviews. According to Krzysztof T. Konecki:

“Theory construction takes place by giving a specific structure to data through using concepts. However, the content and structure of the theory are always related to and based on empirical data. The construction is a constant return from deduction to induction aimed to modify previous findings (reconstruct categories, modify hypotheses, and redraft theoretical schemes), if the data suggests so” (Konecki, 2015, p. 26).

Thematic coding was adopted as a form of qualitative analysis (Gibbs, 2007).

Due to the fact that the survey concerned minors, the research procedure was of particular importance. In accordance with the recommendations of the University College London Research Ethics Committee, and taking into account that the child’s well-being is a paramount value that cannot be violated by research activities, care was taken to ensure the emotional and mental safety of children during the research procedure. The survey was conducted based on the highest ethical standards (Lisek-Michalska, 2012).

The research results presented below are the result of conversations conducted with children at the turn of November and December 2022.

#### CONTEMPORARY MEDIA IN CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES

As Anna Kozłowska (2016, p. 196) aptly notes: “modern humanity would not be able to function without the media (especially the new ones) – the media creates our reality, is used in the education system, in medicine, in politics, and in everyday life.”

It is also worth recalling the words of Marshall McLuhan, who claimed that the media shape the individual and their environment. “We become what we have (...). We shape our tools, and soon our tools will shape us” (McLuhan, 2004, p. 17).

Also, new media accompanies children from the earliest stages of their lives. With their help, children learn, communicate with others, establish relationships, and have fun. Recalling Marc Prensky's term (2001, pp. 1–6) "digital natives" – they navigate the internet space freely and intuitively. For many of them, digital media is the primary source of information about the surrounding world and its patterns, including media that is questionable and unverifiable.

The above statements and findings have prompted us to try to define the concept of contemporary media among the group of the schoolchildren surveyed.

The surveyed group identified them mainly with portals where one can communicate, exchange information, meet other people, or share acquired information with others.

Only a small number of interviewees perceived the media slightly differently:

*"The media is when someone appears on TV or describes something"* (Kasia, 9 years old);

*"This is a place where you can meet bad people who would like to have your phone number or other information"* (Olek, 10 years old);

*"This is a place where there are people who can hack your account"* (Krzyś, 9 years old).

When asked about the frequency of using different forms of media, the surveyed children most often declared 2–3 hours of daily activity on the internet, depending on their free time. There were also children who emphasized that their parents allowed them to use social media only on weekends or every other day.

Among the most frequently used media, respondents indicated social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, with which they most often identify the concept of 'media'. WhatsApp, Snapchat, Messenger, video-watching websites (YouTube), and online games (Minecraft, Clash Royale, FIFA) are also very popular among children. Only a few interviewees mentioned television in the context of media, mainly referring to the cartoons they watched there.

These forms of social media are the main source of telephone contact with peers for children. They allow them to share photos, pictures, and links, as well as to create and share short – often funny – videos online (e.g., TikTok or Snapchat) and track the activity of a broad circle of friends.

TikTok is currently one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. According to a report by Sensor Tower, the application gained 62 million new users in January 2021 alone. In theory, TikTok is intended for people over 13 years of age. However, the reality shows that children are the largest group of its users.

They are usually encouraged to start their adventure with social media by their peers who already use it. The contemporary phenomenon of FOMO (*fear of missing out*) is important in this context, as it involves triggering anxiety states in children due to being offline and, consequently, not being able to participate and stay up to date in popular spaces – such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, or online games

– and being excluded from a certain group (Tomczyk, 2018, p. 143). This may lead to a deterioration in a child's mood and increased stress levels.

Thanks to social media, children maintain traditional social contacts, also outside the network (e.g., with friends or classmates); they are also members of groups that exist only on the internet (users of social media forums, online gamer clans, YouTube fan groups, etc.).

Among the content that arouses the greatest interest on social media, the surveyed children most often mentioned internet memes (pictures or short videos combined with attractive text) and all kinds of short videos – including those about animals, sports (mainly football), or music.

Statements regarding social networking sites prompted the authors to ask how the surveyed children became users of social networks. In their regulations, many social networking sites allow account creation only for users above 13 years of age.

The respondents confirmed that using the above websites is against the rules for their age; however, many of them admitted that they had no problems creating and using a user account:

*“I log in to my account with my grandmother's details, enter her phone number and date of birth, and I have access” (Patryk, 9 years);*

*“My mother doesn't let me, but I recently learned the code, and I don't tell her that I know it and enter it” (Ania, 10 years old);*

*“At first, I had an account on my grandmother's phone. My friends helped me, and my friend who knew all about phones transferred it to my phone” (Maks, 9 years old);*

*“I used a different name but entered my dad's date of birth, and it worked” (Nina, 9 years old).*

Some pupils pointed out that they were unable to use social networking sites, frequently due to parental controls installed on their phones. Some of them also admitted that they could log in and use such an account only in the presence of their parents or from their parents' phones.

It is also interesting that most of the surveyed children have their own accounts on selected websites and actively use them. They post their videos there, presenting various skills while waiting for so-called “likes”, emoticons (hearts or smileys), or comments indicating the popularity of a given material. Some children even mentioned receiving 900 likes or 200 hearts.

By sharing their own photos, pictures, and videos, children have the opportunity to feel creative and show their skills in creating digital content. They will be appreciated through likes, hearts, and sharing with other internet users – which is important to them as creators. However, the trend of placing and collecting likes under photos and posts may cause emotional dependence in children and affect their self-esteem.

### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF USING DIGITAL MEDIA

The ubiquity of the media makes it a high-class tool that supports human intellectual activity (Juszczak, 2000). It can be a carrier of positive values but also a source of certain threats – especially for the youngest, unaware recipients.

A few years ago, Krystyna Szafraniec had already pointed out in her report *Youth 2011* that:

“Young people do not fully realize how great and yet undiscovered possibilities lie in new media, nor how much they may be a trap and a mirage for them. They just go into it and use it in the way that turns out to be possible, interesting, and fun. They do it without guides or mentors, with the consent of adults, but without their participation. Online, they practice pure socialization under their own supervision” (Szafraniec, 2011, p. 254).

A very important issue in the interviews conducted with the pupils was to check their knowledge about the positive and negative aspects of using the media.

Children saw the positive sides of using new media, primarily in their cognitive function:

*“I watch smart things there, from which I learn about the planet, nature, and other cultures”* (Ola, 10 years old);

*“I come to a new city and I see interesting things worth seeing”* (Ania, 9 years old);

*“From the game FIFA, I know the squads of the most famous football clubs in the world. I then use some of the settings on the pitch”* (Leon, 9 years old);

*“There are videos which can show you how to solve a Rubik’s Cube or install a game”* (Jan, 10 years old).

Many of them admitted that they acquire knowledge and skills by using online tutorials (instructional videos) and films in which various products, games, and gadgets are tested. Among the advantages of the aforementioned media, the surveyed children also mentioned the speed and ease of communication:

*“I started a group with only football players. When I go to the pitch, I write on this group, and immediately everyone sees it and can join me”* (Leon, 9 years old).

– presentation of certain positive attitudes:

*“Videos like these on TikTok, where someone saves a little kitten or helps others”* (Maja, 9 years old).

– or for entertainment:

*“I like watching ‘Try Not to Laugh’ on YouTube because it makes me feel better”*  
(Maciek, 10 years old).

However, the surveyed pupils much more often focused on the negative sides of social media in their statements. In addition to cyberbullying, they mainly pointed out vulgarisms and offensive, aggressive comments:

*“For example, I think that swearing by Team X, for example, and showing things that are 18+ is bad”* (Eryk, 9 years old);

*“There is a toxic community on Facebook that hates other people and makes them feel bad”* (Ola, 9 years old);

*“There was a video on the internet of girls fighting...and others were watching it, recording it, and laughing”* (Filip, 10 years old).

They also drew attention to data privacy, anonymity online, and cyber-related fraud:

*“You should never give your data, passwords, or send your photos”* (Marysia, 9 years old);

*“If I don’t know someone, I delete their messages and don’t reply”* (Julka, 9 years old);

*“There are links where they can get information about us and take money from our account”* (Kuba, 9 years old);

*“A game that introduces a virus. You download the link and it infects the computer, and the entire processor is damaged”* (Hubert, 9 years old).

The increased availability of modern technologies and irresponsibly used digital media increases the scale of online threats that may adversely affect the proper development and functioning of children. The excessive use of the internet may have, among other things, negative consequences for their somatic, mental, social, and spiritual health. It may also be associated with the following categories of threats: contact with dangerous content, contact with dangerous people, peer violence (cyberviolence), and internet addiction (Barlińska, 2009, pp. 35–36).

It is not uncommon for those who publish content on social networking sites to use all available methods to attract the attention of users. Shocking graphics, scandalous titles, or insulting and harassing others are intended to attract as many followers as possible and increase the reach of their content. Gaining the interest of others is so important that some may resort to unethical – or even illegal – actions.

#### PARENTS’ INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN’S DIGITAL COMPETENCIES

A key element of upbringing is the participation of parents in the process of organizing the child’s rational use of modern media (Izdebska, 2004, p. 383).

It is extremely important that parents actively participate in modeling the quality of the relationship between the child and different types of media. "A young internet user should be made aware [by their parents] about both its harmful impact and the educational values from the first contact with it" (Hacek, 2012, pp. 77–78).

However, only a few respondents indicated that they talked to their parents about using various forms media or functioning in a virtual space. This is also confirmed by the results of the previously mentioned *EU Kids Online 2018 Report*, which shows that over 40% of children have never or almost never received advice from their parents on how to use the internet safely.

The surveyed third-graders emphasized that the knowledge provided to them by their parents was rather limited to tips on how long to spend on social media:

*"My parents usually say how long I can play or talk"* (Krystian, 10 years old);  
*"If I spend too long on the phone, my mother yells and tells me to put it down"* (Pola, 9 years old).

However, there were individual statements indicating parents' interest in the virtual space. They mainly concerned warnings against strangers or publishing an image:

*"They (parents) warn me not to message strangers because they may encourage me to do various bad things"* (Gucio, 9 years old);  
*"My parents ask me not to post photos, mainly of myself and my family"* (Maja, 9 years old);  
*"Sometimes we talk to prevent me from clicking on some things"* (Janek, 9 years old).

The respondents admit that, despite warnings, they sometimes do not listen to their parents:

*"I once talked to a girl from TikTok who had the same dog as me; I asked her if she lived in Olsztyn"* (Magda, 9 years old);  
*"There is a game where you spin a wheel and you can win a character, jewels, or tokens. I did this once and they took 100 PLN from my mother's account"* (Tymek, 9 years old);  
*"I posted a video of myself on TikTok, but my friend told me to delete it or they would ban me"* (Janek, 9 years old).

The study's participants believe that they navigate the virtual world efficiently and are proficient in using technological solutions. They exchange photos, videos, and music there. They can install new applications and play online games with others (including Minecraft, Brawl Stars, etc.):

*“I installed this free application and I can listen to music for free – even with my phone turned off”* (Gabryisia, 9 years old);

*“In an application called CapCut, I can edit videos myself, add music to them, and share them”* (Leon, 9 years old);

*“In Roblox, if you enter your friends, you can play together. We used to play like that against another team or against bots”* (Olek, 9 years old).

Although the surveyed children admitted that they had no problems using digital devices fluently, they also indicated difficulties with selecting information, verifying and evaluating content, and choosing sources. This seems to be a concerning signal because it is in the area of social media that the uncontrolled spread of so-called “fake news” (i.e., false information) occurs:

*“Sometimes when I watch videos that others post, I wonder if it was real”* (Olaf, 9 years old);

*“When there was the coronavirus, they probably lied a lot in the media and people were afraid”* (Kasia, 9 years old);

*“I have an older brother, and if I don’t know if it’s true, I ask him”* (Kuba, 9 years old).

This may be due to the fact that it is much more difficult for children to distinguish truth from fiction when compared to adults, especially when it is depicted in realistic-looking photos or videos. Most children are not yet aware of material manipulation techniques or the possibilities offered by editing tools. That is why it is so important for parents to play an active role in this area and to teach children that not all content found on the internet is true and that many people deliberately create false information.

## SUMMARY

We live in a world where computers, tablets, and smartphones have become permanent elements of our everyday life. This has been aptly described by Piotr Czerski, author of the famous manifesto *We, Children of the Internet*: “For us, the network is not something external to reality, but its equal element: an invisible but constantly present layer interpenetrating with physical space. We do not use the internet, we live in it and with it” (Czerski, 2012, p. 150).

The subject of the research (i.e., contemporary media in the experiences of third-grade primary school pupils) consisted of various categories: children’s knowledge about the media, opportunities offered by and threats posed by the media, as well as the opinions of the third-grade pupils on the role their parents play in media education.

The analysis of conversations with children has shown that they identify the media mainly with social networking sites and the internet itself. Interestingly, most

of them do not respect age restrictions and have accounts on various social media platforms, despite the respective regulations.

They use digital media almost every day. For them, these forms of media are mainly a source of entertainment and a way to communicate with others. They also largely determine how they spend their free time. The surveyed children admit that they know the rules for using digital media but do not always manage to follow them.

Research participants are able to indicate the benefits and threats resulting from consuming/using different forms of media and are able to navigate efficiently in the digital world. However, they have problems distinguishing real information from false information and choosing reliable sources.

Unfortunately, to the surprise of the survey's authors, the respondents emphasized in their statements that parents rarely talk to them about surfing and functioning in the virtual world. Their role is most often limited to controlling the amount of time spent in front of a smartphone or computer screen.

## DISCUSSION

Preparing a child to function in the world of digital media should begin with learning how to use the media safely and responsibly. The parents' role is to teach their children to selectively and critically consume content, as well as to skillfully co-create it, and to make them aware of the risks and consequences of using social networking sites.

As Ján Hacek (2012, p. 376) admits:

“Family media education is considered a type of relationship between parents and children that goes beyond the system of orders and prohibitions. It expands the parental function, among other things, by motivating parents to look for an appropriate style of communication with their children, or by mobilizing them to discreetly control the internet activity of their children.”

Parents should act as guides in areas where the child is not fully ready to act independently, but they should also intervene in the child's online activities and the amount of time spent online. This can include setting limits on digital media use, utilizing security settings on devices or parental control tools, and, in extreme cases, monitoring (whether overtly or not) the child's internet activity.

It is worth noting that children also observe and imitate the behavior of adults, who are often completely unaware of the consequences of their actions on the internet. That is why it is so important to build digital competencies and make conscious choices not only among children, but – above all – among their legal guardians, parents, and teachers.

In the virtual world, children have a greater chance to express themselves – showing themselves to others as avatars, their unreal representatives of a reality that does

not exist. For many young people, this created, unreal world may seem easier and friendlier.

The role of parents should, therefore, be to support children in striving to achieve a balance between the educational and social values of the media and their adverse impact(s). They should also provide children with alternatives to the digital reality in the form of offline activities (such as sports and cultural pursuits) in order to prevent them from dreaming about this created, unreal world and feeling the need to stay in it for longer.

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### UCZNIOWIE KLAS TRZECICH W ŚWIECIE WSPÓŁCZESNYCH MEDIÓW

**ABSTRAKT:** Rozwój ery cyfrowej i nowych mediów sprawia, że otaczający nas świat staje się bardziej funkcjonalny. Ułatwia i uatrakcyjnia wykonywanie wielu codziennych czynności, pełni rolę informacyjną i stanowi nieograniczone źródło wiedzy o świecie. Zmieniły również dotychczasowy model komunikacji masowej. Szeroki dostęp do Internetu, jego globalny zasięg oraz przenoszenie coraz większej liczby aktywności do przestrzeni cyfrowej - zwłaszcza przez najmłodszych użytkowników - może jednak nieść ze sobą wiele zagrożeń.

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje wypowiedzi uczniów na temat współczesnych mediów. Przeprowadzone badanie dotyczyło doświadczeń młodych uczestników w zakresie mediów i ich wieloaspektowego oddziaływania, a także roli rodziców w budowaniu kompetencji cyfrowych. Interesującym zagadnieniem były również narracje uczniów dotyczące pozytywnych i negatywnych aspektów korzystania z mediów cyfrowych. Jak pokazują wyniki ankiety, dzieci najczęściej utożsamiają media z portalami społecznościowymi i Internetem, ponieważ są to platformy, z których zwykle korzystają. Potrafią skutecznie poruszać się po cyfrowym świecie i dostrzegać związane z nim korzyści i zagrożenia. Rozumieją zasady korzystania z mediów elektronicznych, ale nie zawsze ich przestrzegają. Przyznają, że ich aktywność w sieci jest często ograniczana i monitorowana przez rodziców, jednak zazwyczaj dotyczy to ilości czasu spędzanego przed ekranem smartfona lub komputera, a nie bezpiecznego korzystania z zasobów internetowych.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** media cyfrowe, portale społecznościowe, zagrożenia, kompetencje cyfrowe, edukacja medialna