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Finding instead of knowing: How search engines have reprogrammed thinking habits and approaches to participating in cultural life. How we have become experts at searching rather than remembering

Znaleźć zamiast wiedzieć: Jak wyszukiwarki przeprogramowały nawyki myślowe i podejście do uczestnictwa w życiu kulturalnym. O tym, jak staliśmy się ekspertami od szukania, a nie zapamiętywania

Abstract

Social media play an important role in students' lives, serving communicative and entertainment functions, as well as supporting the learning process. Students eagerly use available platforms, search for necessary information, share notes, and watch educational materials. However, the question increasingly arises whether students prefer to memorise content or to know where to find it quickly, foregoing information retention because it is readily accessible. Participation in cultural events also proves to be extremely important. Yet, more often the online format is chosen, even though in-person meetings offer experiences full of emotions and social interactions. To meet students' expectations, higher education institutions should support education by combining the virtual world with the educational process, so that technology and media support both knowledge development and the social and cultural dimensions of education.

Keywords: social media, culture, society, memory, education

Streszczenie

Media społecznościowe odgrywają istotną rolę w życiu studentów, pełniąc funkcję komunikacyjną, rozrywkową, oraz wspierają proces nauczania. Studenci chętnie korzystają z dostępnych

platform, wyszukują potrzebne informacje, dzielą się notatkami i oglądają materiały edukacyjne. Coraz częściej pojawia się jednak pytanie, czy uczniowie wolą zapamiętywać treści, czy raczej wiedzieć, gdzie je szybko odnaleźć, rezygnując z trwałego utrwalania informacji, ponieważ mają je na wyciągnięcie ręki. Niezwykle ważne okazuje się uczestnictwo w wydarzeniach kulturalnych, jednak coraz częściej wybierana jest forma online, pomimo iż spotkania na żywo oferują doświadczenia pełne emocji i interakcji społecznych. Wychodząc naprzeciw oczekiwaniom studentów, uczelnie wyższe powinny wspierać edukację, łącząc świat online z procesem edukacyjnym, tak aby technologie i media wspierały zarówno rozwój wiedzy, jak i wymiar społeczny i kulturowy studiowania.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe, kultura, społeczeństwo, zapamiętywanie, edukacja

Introduction

Contemporary society is characterised by constant dynamic change encompassing every dimension of social, professional, and educational life. In a world saturated with technology, where information is constantly being generated and becoming obsolete, understanding knowledge based solely on theory and the memorisation of specific facts is no longer the only measure of competence. The ability to analyse acquired data, select it, and apply it in a professional environment are gaining ever greater importance. It is therefore worth asking whether in the twenty-first century the most important skill is still to "know," or rather to "find."

The aim of this analysis is to attempt to answer the question of how the presence of internet search engines and social media influences the learning process, memorisation, and the classification of acquired information. The objective is not to pass a definitive judgement on their value, but to reveal their complex, ambiguous character. On the one hand, social media are enormously helpful in providing rapid access to knowledge, supporting collaboration and developing the capacity to select specific information. On the other hand, they can lead to problems with concentration, superficial assimilation of content without critical reflection, and consequently resulting in the lack of the need to permanently retain information.

It is important to draw attention to the phenomenon of a shift in emphasis from memorising to searching for information, and in order to attempt to answer whether, in the digital era, we have become experts in finding content at the cost of permanently assimilating it. It is also worth considering whether the cultural life of young people has not, to a large extent, been replaced by activity on social media. The thesis presented here is that social media and internet search engines constitute a double-edged tool: they hold significant developmental potential, yet simultaneously they can lead to a simplification of cognitive processes and encourage the taking of "shortcuts."

This paper examines the ways in which internet browsers and multimedia technologies have reprogrammed the cognitive habits of young people – specifically students at the University of Rzeszów. Young adults function in a world where the boundary between learning and online activity is extremely thin. It is also worth

directing attention to students as consumers of culture. The question arises whether contemporary youth more readily choose to participate online in cultural events that have hitherto been associated exclusively with "live" performances. For this reason, this group was selected as the subject of the present analysis. Examining their experiences and habits allows for a better understanding of whether the model of "finding instead of knowing" is an expression of convenience, a necessary adaptation to information overload, or a transformation in ways of thinking. A certain tension exists between opportunity and a real threat, since in the era of modern technologies, consumers often become specialists in searching at the expense of deep understanding, critical thinking, information retention, and cultural participation.

Theoretical framework

In the contemporary world, where the answers to almost any question can be found within seconds, educational priorities are shifting. Decreasing attention is paid to memorising facts, while the ability to navigate diverse knowledge sources and use them effectively has become increasingly important. Young people should not only be able to assimilate content but also to navigate independently within the digital data environment. Network technology provides access to similar knowledge resources regardless of place of residence, material resources, or individual limitations, thus ensuring equal opportunities to participate in the transfer of knowledge.[1]

Students spend majority of their time in the digital space, which serves them as a source of entertainment, planning, information retrieval, following cultural events, and even meeting new people. When a young person is asked a question, their natural reaction is no longer to try to recall the answer from memory, but to use a ready found answer from the internet. Increasingly, we remember not the content itself, but the way of finding it. This phenomenon also applies to the use of free time through participation in cultural life, which is undergoing a process of mediatisation. These facts reveal a change in access to knowledge and the cognitive habits that accompany it.[2]

Aleksandra Powierska points out that social media are not merely a communication space – they constitute an environment in which young users construct their identity, build relationships, and shape cultural preferences. The algorithms of online platforms determine which content is exposed, thereby influencing what becomes "knowledge" for a given user.[3]

[1] M. Shanmugasundaram, A. Tamilarasu, *The impact of digital technology, social media, and artificial intelligence on cognitive functions*, Tamil Nadu 2023, pp. 2–3.

[2] D. Mroczkowska, *Czas wolny jako kategoria społecznie i kulturowo zmienna. Przeobrażenia w czasowej organizacji oraz doświadczania czasu wolnego*, Toruń 2014, p. 90.

[3] A. Powierska, *W sieci mediów społecznościowych*, Kraków 2024, pp. 17–20.

According to Mustafa Suleyman, limiting the harmful social changes caused by technology requires an appropriate pace of development, one that gives society the space and time to understand it.[4] One of the most important elements of an individual's competence set is a creative disposition, understood as a readiness to generate new ideas, perceive alternatives, and respond rapidly to encountered problems.[5] Creativity does not function independently, since its inseparable element is information, which constitutes the fundamental building block of every learning process. Through access to information and correctly chosen tools, we are able to process and modify our cognitive processes.[6]

Magdalena Wasylewicz indicates that social media in the lives of contemporary adolescents and young adults fulfil not only a communicative function but also an identity-forming one – they influence self-esteem, the shaping of peer relationships, and ways of perceiving reality.[7]

The development of digital technologies, and in particular internet search engines and multimedia tools, exerts an enormous influence on the functioning of the educational environment. Students operate in a space where access to knowledge is immediate, and effective searching and critical evaluation of acquired information have become key skills. The question therefore arises whether frequent use of internet browsers promotes the development of creativity and positively influences understanding of content, or whether it creates easier data-acquisition channels focused on superficial processing without reflection.

There is no doubt that internet browsers have become the primary source of knowledge. The educational system should not only accept their use but also consciously integrate media into the teaching process. A university that underestimates the influence of digital technologies on students' thinking and their organisation of free time may encounter difficulties in communication and knowledge transmission. On the other hand, the labour market increasingly indicates that access to information is not sufficient. Employers do not expect educated people to possess encyclopaedic knowledge, but rather the ability to deal with problems, combine data, and create new solutions. The cause of a persistent skills mismatch may be that we are able to search for information quickly, but are not always able to understand it thoroughly, assimilate it, and use it in a creative way.[8]

Reflections on how internet browsers have changed our cognitive habits thus become not merely an analysis of technological progress, but a question about the

[4] M. Suleyman, M. Bhaskar, *Nadchodząca fala. Sztuczna inteligencja, władza i najważniejszy dylemat ludzkości XXI wieku*, Kraków 2024, s. 169.

[5] Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework*, Luxembourg 2007, pp. 3–8.

[6] M. Laskowska, *Nowe media w służbie człowieka. Zarys problematyki w kontekście etyki i aksjologii mediów*, "Teologia Praktyczna" 2012, Vol. 13, p. 126.

[7] M. Wasylewicz, *Media społecznościowe w życiu współczesnego nastolatka*, "HUMANITAS Pedagogika i Psychologia" 2024, No. 1(29), p. 125.

[8] M. Laskowska, *Nowe media*…, pp. 128–130.

future of contemporary education. Are we teaching people to think, or merely to search efficiently for information? The answers are crucial for the future role of learning and for whether "searching" will entirely replace "knowing."

Research methodology

The research was conducted using a diagnostic survey method with a questionnaire instrument, with the aim of analysing the influence of social media and internet search engines on the cognitive habits, learning strategies, memorisation practices, and participation in cultural life of students at the University of Rzeszów. Respondents' answers allow for the collection of opinions, attitudes, and declared behaviours. The primary objective of the study was to determine how social media and internet search engines influence cognitive habits, learning strategies, and cultural participation among students at the University of Rzeszów.

To explore this topic in depth, it was necessary to answer the following research questions:

1. How frequently, and for what purposes, do students use social media?
2. Do social media influence the way students learn and memorise information?
3. Do students perceive social media as a support or a distraction in the learning process?
4. In what ways do social media affect students' participation in culture (online and offline)?
5. How do students assess the role of higher education institutions in the context of the growing importance of social media in education?

A researcher who wishes to conduct specific research must choose a location that is appropriate for analysing and resolving the research problems contained in their topic.[9] In accordance with this principle, the study was conducted among 54 students at the University of Rzeszów, representing various fields of study (including administration, law, psychology, economics, computer science, pedagogy, nursing, and physical education). Women and men constituted approximately equal proportions of respondents. Age was recorded in the following brackets: 18–20 years, 21–23 years, 24–26 years, and above 26 years of age. The largest category of respondents was fourth-year students. Equal-sized groups were recorded among full-time and part-time students. In terms of place of residence, students from cities with populations exceeding 150,000 were predominant.

An original questionnaire was employed, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions included single-choice and multiple-choice questions, as well as five-point Likert scale items. The open-ended questions allowed

[9] M. Łobocki, *Metody i techniki badań pedagogicznych*, Kraków 2009, pp. 86.

respondents to freely express their opinions on changes in approaches to acquiring knowledge, the influence of media on cultural participation, and their expectations of the university in the context of the growing role of social media. The study was conducted as an anonymous electronic survey.

Analysis of research findings

The group of respondents answered both closed and open-ended questions. It was noted, with some surprise, that the open-ended questions attracted considerable interest, as they were very rarely left unanswered. The conclusions that emerged may serve as a valuable source of information for further analysis of issues related to media in education, taking into account the specific needs and attitudes of respondents towards mass culture.

Social media exert a significant influence on shaping the attitudes and views of the younger generation. The question of the amount of time devoted to social media use therefore proved particularly important. The largest group of respondents consisted of students who spend between two and four hours per day on social media – 57.4%. Close behind were students spending between four and six hours per day – 25.9%, followed by those spending one to two hours per day – 13%. The smallest group were students who spend less than one hour on social media – 3.7%. The most frequently used platforms in students' free time were: Instagram – 64.8%, YouTube – 63%, TikTok – 61.1%, Facebook – 27.8%, and X (Twitter) – 1.9%. A significant majority of students – 51.9% – stated that they sometimes use media in the educational process.

Social media and online communicators greatly facilitate the exchange of notes and collaboration between students, which can increase the effectiveness of learning. The most frequently chosen platform for educational purposes was YouTube – 55.6%, followed by TikTok – 44.4%, Instagram – 29.6%, Facebook (student groups) – 29.6%; podcasts were also indicated – 14.8%, as well as IT systems – 1.9%, and Google Scholar – 1.9%.

The next question concerned access to information and ways of learning and memorising it, using a scale where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated full agreement. A decisive majority – 75.9% – chose the answer that social media indicate where to find needed information; a further 14.8% of students stated that social media help them memorise information. The remaining students most frequently pointed to various types of graphics that facilitate memorising facts presented through images, mind maps, etc. When asked whether social media serve as a distraction during study, 50% of students indicated that they do divert attention from learning. In students' assessment, their ability to concentrate had deteriorated compared to the period before intensive social media use – this opinion was expressed by 70.4% of respondents.

Respondents believe that, depending on the content creator, educational materials presented on social media can be either thorough and in-depth or superficial. Short learning formats, such as "reels," shorts, and TikTok videos, prove to be highly useful for assimilating information. Content presented in this way is typically short, dynamic, and visually attractive. This form of presenting a given topic promotes focused attention, while the combination of image, sound, and text engages multiple senses, which positively influences the memorisation of information. Platform algorithms frequently repeat similar content, thereby reinforcing retention on a given subject.

In the subsequent open-ended question, students were given the opportunity to express their opinions on how social media have changed their approach to acquiring knowledge. The answers were varied. Most frequently, however, attention was drawn to the fact that social media help to acquire specific knowledge in a short time. Students do not invest great effort in searching for information, as a consequence of which they become more passive. Many mentioned the easy and free access to information, as well as the risk of information overload and inaccuracies.

Respondents indicate that it is *much quicker and more pleasurable to watch a fifteen-to-twenty-second video than to attend a lecture in which the lecturer speaks monotonously for two hours on a given topic*. They also mention the importance of verifying found information. Students admit that they prefer to reach for a definition available in a browser rather than search for it in books, and they appreciate the fact that so much information of interest to them is readily at hand.

There is a group of students who maintain that social media have changed nothing in their approach to acquiring knowledge. When asked whether social media serve as a source of information about cultural events taking place in Rzeszów and its surroundings, the majority – 59.3% – responded that media do provide such information. They were then asked about algorithms and whether they genuinely suggest events of interest to respondents; 53.7% agreed with this statement.

As the study reveals, content on social media significantly influences participation in cultural events that take place "live." It is nevertheless a source of concern that the majority of surveyed students – 40.7% – more frequently consume cultural content online rather than offline. Respondents largely consider that social media broaden their cultural horizons. Students' opinions on whether media inspire participation in culture or rather replace real experiences varied considerably. Some believe that internet portals present the course of given events but are unable to convey the emotions that accompany attending them in person. The topic of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) was also raised. Some students fear that a given event will pass them by, while others are pleased that they can participate online without any effort.[10]

[10] *Młodzież w infosferze*, ed. M. Wojtkowiak, Warszawa 2024, p. 76.

The majority of respondents – 40% – consider that, in today's world, the ability to quickly find information on a given subject is more important than memorising it. They agree that social media represent both an opportunity and a threat in equal measure. Everything, however, depends on the way in which they are used. As research gathered in the monograph edited by Monika Wojtkowiak shows, youth functioning in the infosphere increasingly experience difficulties with concentration and critical evaluation of content, which constitutes a significant challenge for contemporary education.

In the final open-ended question, students were asked to present their opinions on how the university should respond to the growing importance of social media in the educational process. A significant majority highlighted the need for training to make the best possible use of the potential of media in learning. Many answers indicate that students value attempts to teach critical thinking and responsible use of available information. Respondents would like the university to use social media as an educational tool for: publishing short materials, summarising lectures, and presenting interesting facts that would encourage students to deepen their knowledge on a given subject.

Conclusions

Social media play an extremely important role in the lives of all students, since they have become not only a communication tool but also a form of entertainment and a support in the learning process. As the research shows, students eagerly use a variety of platforms that help enrich the educational process. They willingly search for information on given topics, use educational sections, exchange notes, and watch videos in their areas of interest.

Through social media, learning takes on a more dynamic character, adapted to the everyday needs of students. Respondents themselves note that the use of social media requires the development of critical thinking, and consequently the ability to select found content, assess it in terms of credibility, and consciously receive information. In the context of data overload, such competences are of utmost importance for the educational process to proceed in an effective and responsible manner. Students are very willing to participate in cultural events available in Rzeszów – these include author meetings, various concerts, and lectures. They more frequently choose the online format, however, which is more convenient but comes with limitations. Remote participation in certain events does not allow for the full experience of the emotions that accompany live performances. Offline events will never be able to fully replace direct contact with others and the impressions provided by real participation in cultural life.

Thanks to the dynamic development of new technologies, higher education institutions should meet the expectations of younger generations regarding the use

of social media as tools for learning and the promotion of knowledge. Universities should maintain a balance between the online world and direct contact with students, so that technological development and media support education rather than limit its social and cultural dimensions.

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