Neither anguish nor salvation: The necessity of media technology use by early adults living in Poland at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The aim of the study was to determine the significance of media technologies for early adults living in large urban Polish agglomerations and actively studying, working or operating in both areas at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploratory and qualitative research was conducted during the first weeks of the first lockdown. Internet surveys with mainly open questions were conducted with people aged 18–40, living in the biggest Polish agglomerations. The study shows that media technologies played a key role in the lives of early adults at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but were valued very ambivalently. The support functions and burdensome influence of media technologies were determined. Support functions were mainly related to home duties and interpersonal communication. Remote working and education, as well as searches for and the sharing of information were ambivalent. In the area of self-care, media technologies were burdening users. The results indicate that the adaptation of users to the new situation led to consequences of a different nature (ranging from physical, mental, to social). It was observed that there was a sudden digital intoxication and

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The aim of the research was to determine the significance of media technologies for early adults living in large urban Polish agglomerations and actively studying, working or operating in both areas at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study shows that media technologies played a key role in the lives of early adults at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but were valued very ambivalently. Support functions were mainly related to home duties and interpersonal communication. Remote working and education, as well as searches for and the sharing of information were ambivalent. In the area of self-care, media technologies were burdening users. The results indicate that the adaptation of users to the new situation led to consequences of a different nature (ranging from physical, mental, to social).
maximization of opportunities and profits from task-oriented use of technologies, which were gained at a loss to individual well-being.

**Subjects:** Media Communication; New Media; New Media; Media Effects; Media Studies

**Keywords:** media technology; pandemic; lockdown; COVID-19; digital media users; media technology functions; media technology influence

1. **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the following lockdowns imposed by governments took people around the world with surprise, in Poland just as in other countries, and soon revealed the lack of preparedness for such a scenario. Many people already began to suffer in the first weeks of the pandemic due to physical as well as mental health reasons. Some of them were affected not only by medical, social or psychological inconveniences, but also by financial and organizational ones. This has been accompanied by an express and forced digital transformation of the work and education system, as well as many other aspects of everyday life—from domestic duties to leisure activities. Certain populations, especially those of age, were more competent in coping with the novel situation due to their higher level of media literacy. Others were somewhat excluded, and also self-excluded. For some people, the beginning of the lockdown was a time of rest, reflection, catching up; for others, it was a huge burden resulting from new, sudden difficulties and responsibilities (Drozdowski et al., 2020). This crisis raised the question of how certain populations coped with this sudden situation and the role that media technologies played in this. This paper reports on a qualitative study of active early adults (i.e. in the age group of 18–40) and their perceptions of the supportive functions and burdensome influences of media technologies in everyday life during the first weeks of the lockdown. The research question was as follows: in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and an unprecedented lockdown in history, did media technologies turn out to be a supportive, aggravating or neutral tool for young, active residents of large Polish cities?

2. **State of the art**

Up until recently, there had been little research into the importance of media technologies in everyday life during a pandemic and, in particular, a general lockdown, which was a completely new experience. Research on the importance of the media in other pandemics is quite limited: its scale and effects were less significant, and the stage of development of media technologies was completely different. Research on the role of the media during the AIDS, Ebola, Zick, SARS, MERS and H1N1 influenza pandemics is incomparable, and in some cases its significance may even be the opposite. In the case of AIDS, “network citizenship serves as a contrast to the uncertainty of pandemic control in the global world” (Levina, 2016, p. 117), so in the case of COVID-19 social media appear to be a source of unlimited polyphony and chaos.

To date, research into the relationship between digital media and the COVID-19 pandemic has been carried out mainly in the institutional paradigm, and has focused on public communication and social media. The main topics of the COVID-19 pandemic were: official communication and the dispersal of information, including the infodemic (Malhotra, 2020; Olatunji et al., 2020) and related inequalities (Khilnani et al., 2020; Madianou, 2020), media trust (Kaun et al., 2020), racism (Abidin & Zeng, 2020), religious communication (Alimardani & Elswah, 2020), and location tracking (Frith & Saker, 2020). The importance of social media in the spread of information about the pandemic, prevention and the course of the disease and related risks was observed mainly by multidisciplinary teams, created, among others, by IT and epidemiology specialists (Pulido et al., 2020; Qin et al., 2020), as well as psychologists (Pennycook et al., 2020; Wiederhold, 2020), physicians (Chan et al., 2020; Malecki et al., 2020), specialists in public health (Gao et al., 2020), information management (Rao et al., 2020), and even historians (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). Media and communication studies were dominated by case studies, as well as
content, statistical and network analysis (Ferrara et al., 2020). Some of the few studies on the use of digital media during the COVID-19 pandemic concerned the social connection of older people (Moore & Hancock, 2020) or focused on everyday life in the context of digital inequalities (Nguyen et al., 2020). Researchers have so far not paid much attention to the media practices of ordinary users and their perception of media technologies in everyday pandemic life. In particular, there has been very little research focused on specific populations affected by a pandemic.

The first, albeit not representative, general survey conducted in Poland (Drozdowski et al., 2020) during the so-called “first wave” of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the media played a key role in changing everyday life during the lockdown: 65% of the respondents were more likely to follow current information in the media. 90% of the respondents disapproved of the spreading of false information in social media, yet 50% of the respondents felt comfortable with users gaining information via social media. Among the greatest fears were information chaos and excess information. “The media have become, in the eyes of many respondents, yet another ‘homemaker’ whose presence in private spaces is at least ambiguous” (Drozdowski et al., 2020, p. 24). The additional free time, resulting from the lockdown, was spent by 69% of respondents on phone calls with relatives (Drozdowski et al., 2020). Apart from issues concerning work, politics and health, the media were a key element of pandemic everyday life. Social media, in particular, aroused conflicting opinions: due to a lack of trust in mainstream media, they were a space for confronting information from various sources, but on the other hand, they were blamed for spreading fake news and fuelling panic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, whose scale was unprecedented in modern society, came at a time of the dynamic development of media technologies and is referred to as “the first social media pandemic” (Guynn, 2020). It broke out at a time of social media flourishing,\(^2\) with the widespread use of mobile devices and applications,\(^3\) and common access to the Internet.\(^4\) One of the aims of the study was to determine whether for early adults the media have become a support or a burden in the face of this crisis.

The period before the outbreak of the pandemic was characterised by the emergence, also in Poland, of new trends in the use of technologies based on self-limitation and regulation, such as digital disconnection (Trerè et al., 2020), digital detox (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) or digital minimalism (Newport, 2019; Skivko et al., 2020). At the time of the sudden lockdown, they collided with the pressure of the increased use of technology for educational, professional or other everyday matters (such as shopping, telemedicine, entertainment). The number of cases and activities being mediated has increased, and the opportunities for cutting media off have diminished. New mediated duties, as well as the novel perception of internet technology as an opportunity to continue one’s professional, educational and social life emerged. Due to the sudden change in conditions and the emergence of undesirable circumstances, it was expected that there would be a decline in the trends of media usage reduction. One of the aims of the study was to determine whether this happened.

The research was therefore intended to determine the significance of media technologies for active early adults, being residents of large Polish urban agglomerations at the beginning of the pandemic. Reflections on the importance of media technologies in an emergency situation and the subsequent changes to many aspects of life were analysed. Attempts were made to determine which technologies were helping and which were hindering the situation.

The study is in line with research on media influence as well as the functional approach. The presented research project focused on the individual approach, having its roots in the psychology of the Internet (Wallace, 2015), exploring the cognitive, emotional and psychomotor aspects of media technology use. The functional approach has its origins in the uses and gratifications perspective (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In the past, there were three divisions of functions: communication, entertainment and information gathering (Butler, 1995). However, with the development of the
Internet, new functions began to be formulated. One of the most appropriate typologies is the one proposed by Lifshitz et al., all applicable in the study of the role of the Internet in supporting users’ well-being (Lifshitz et al., 2018). The authors distinguish: interpersonal communication, information, task performance and leisure (Lifshitz et al., 2018). The last of the objectives of the research carried out was to further determine the topicality of the previously proposed typologies of media technology functions in the conditions of a pandemic lockdown. The typologies, stemming from the assumption that the media meet needs and desires, emphasise mainly supporting functions. Meanwhile, during the investigated period, media technologies also brought much burdensome influence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design
The research project<sup>5</sup> was exploratory and qualitative. The research was conducted on 18.03.20–17.04.20, so it started a week after the World Health Organization announced the COVID-19 pandemic and the Polish government introduced the first lockdown in the country, which was also 12 days after the first COVID-19 case was recorded in Poland. At this time, no results of social research on the importance of media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic were available.

For safety, ethical and legal reasons, the research was conducted completely remotely using internet forms. It is important to bear in mind the specific context experienced in the first weeks of the pandemic: surprise, often shock; a sense of insecurity, which resulted in the practical impossibility of including many populations. Security reasons (e.g., belonging to high-risk populations) or digital exclusion (e.g., age populations); and the involvement of many people in the fight against the pandemic and its consequences further made the fieldwork sometimes impossible. Ethical principles were adopted so as to not involve people whose professional or personal duties, as well as their psycho-physical condition, would suffer because of their involvement in the research project and not to expose particularly vulnerable groups of respondents to additional, in their case already excessive, use of media technologies.

The announcement of the opportunity to participate in the study was disseminated through social media. The survey was completed by 56 people, 18 of whom did not meet some of the required criteria (like age, or place of living). The remaining 38 questionnaires were sent for thematic analysis.

3.2. Population and participants
Participants involved in the study were Poles aged 18–40, both studying and working, as well as simultaneously studying and carrying out paid work, living in large Polish urban agglomerations (i.e. in cities and adjacent suburban communes) with over 500,000 inhabitants.

The choice of the studied population was dictated by the complex situation in which both young workers and students (employed and unemployed) suddenly found themselves. The situation of some early adults was also particularly difficult because they had to cope with the combination of remote learning and working or with the sudden challenge of losing their livelihoods.

Moreover, people living in large cities<sup>6</sup> were under much greater pressure to comply with the lockdown rules than those living in small towns and villages due to the more intensive monitoring of compliance with the rules, for example, by the police, as well as the lack of opportunities to enjoy the benefits of nature. Living in a big city also meant a higher risk of frequent social contact because of the higher population density and thus of being infected with the virus, which intensified the fear and frustration.

At the same time, the unemployment rate of Poles aged 15–24 in 2020 increased from 13.0% in Q2 to 16.5% in Q3 (RynekPracy.org, 2020). There are 1, 230, 000 people in Poland who have student status (GUS, 2019), 82% of whom work (HR Polska, 2019). This population was referred to
as the “biggest victims of the crisis” (TEP, 2020). They were the key social category at risk of sudden change and economic collapse, with emanations of other threats, mainly of a social and psychological nature. Taking into account all negative factors, this population was chosen as the focus of the study to see how one of the more vulnerable groups in the population coped with the new and difficult situation.

At the same time, however, it was the early adults proportion of the population that were best suited to switch to online mode because of their comprehensive use of media technologies on a daily basis and their almost natural relationship with them, characterized by openness, commitment to technology and a high rate of change in their use (Fundacja Orange, 2015).

The highest level in use of new technologies, especially the Internet, as well as the most trust in technology and a high level of media literacy were recorded in the populations of young residents of large Polish cities (Fundacja Orange, 2015). Before and during the pandemic, media technologies were the natural tools and living environments for early adults. We can therefore suppose that media technologies should have been a natural source of support for them at the time of a sudden crisis and emergency.

3.3. Instruments and data collection procedures
In the early days of the pandemic, non-mediated, direct data collection was impossible. In order to capture the first stage of the pandemic one should have acted dynamically. This required the use of the aforementioned ethics protocol. Moreover, the time-consuming organization of individual interviews with many people whose daily lives had suddenly changed completely, was abandoned. The method of internet survey was chosen to reach a sufficient cohort of subjects relatively quickly and safely. It was also felt that surveys offered the opportunity to speak at any time and any place, without the pressure and necessity to additionally adapt to dynamic and difficult circumstances.

In order to give respondents the freedom of sharing their thoughts and feelings and only to direct their reflections, we decided to use mainly open questions, preceded by closed ones. Closed questions concerned e.g., the place of residence, age, gender, occupational status, health and mental status, type and purpose of the technologies used, time spent using technology and preferences for changes in this area. Open questions included the extent of support received through the use of the technology; the observed burden of using the technology; and physical as well as mental well-being. There was also a space for general reflections on the use of technology at this sudden and difficult time.

It was possible to fill in the form in Polish or English. The questionnaires were completed by 38 people that met the requirements: 25 women and 13 men, average age 33, of whom 26 worked professionally, 9 studied and 3 both studied and worked. 17 of the respondents who were surveyed lived alone, 8 with partners, 7 with a larger family, 3 with friends. Three respondents did not declare their housing situation.

3.4. Mode of analysis
In order to better understand the specificity of the studied cohort, the types of technologies used, the amount of time spent on their use and the general condition of the respondents were first determined. The average declared time of use of media technologies and online activity was calculated, and the results were related to the declared, self-reported needs of the respondents in terms of increasing, decreasing or maintaining the level of use of media technologies. Then, all the statements of the respondents were analysed and the positively assessed functions of media technology as well as the forms of burdensome influence were categorized. The supportive functions were understood as media roles and uses which were perceived positively by users as providing them with specific benefits, gains and assistance. Burdensome influence meant those media roles and uses which were judged negatively by users as causing loss, inconvenience or suffering.
Analysis first consisted of reading and re-reading of filled and accepted survey questionnaires. Based on an interpretative thematic analysis, the main areas where respondents were using media technologies at the time were identified. In each of the areas, two categories were distinguished: supportive functions and burdensome influence. All answers were coded according to these categories and then characterized qualitatively. Finally, it was determined which spheres of life showed the respective gains and losses due to the rise of media technologies in the early stages of the pandemic.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of respondents and general findings

The media technologies used by early adults at the beginning of the pandemic included all the most popular media technologies, i.e. the Internet, smartphones, computers, tablets, as well as TV-sets (Table 1). The majority of the respondents, i.e. 19 people, considered the Internet as the most important media technology as such; 13 people pointed to a smartphone, 9 to a computer, 1 to television. Some considered two or even more technologies as equally important. What linked them, however, was their connection to the Internet.

| Table 1. The most important media technology |
|---------------------------------------------|
| Internet | Smartphone | Computer | Television |
| 19        | 13         | 9        | 1          |

The average time spent using media technologies (Table 2) was 6 hours a day, including 5.7 hours online. The range of time spent using technology ranged from half an hour to 15 hours a day, and online activity from half an hour to 12 hours a day.

| Table 2. Time spent on media technologies, including online activity |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Average time spent using media technologies | Average time spent online | Minimum time spent using media technologies | Maximum time spent using media technologies | Minimum time spent online | Maximum time spent online |
| 6 h | 5.7 h | 0.5 h | 15 h | 0.5 h | 12 h |

The majority of respondents, i.e. 21 people, stated that they would like to use less media technologies; 12 people that the current state is satisfactory for them, and only 3 that they would like to use more technologies. Two people did not specify their attitude to this issue (Table 3).

| Table 3. Preferences for changes in the state of technology use |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Use less | No change in use | Use more | Not specified |
| 21 | 12 | 3 | 2 |

The respondents most often declared a good (18) or excellent (6) physical condition and a good (14) or excellent (7) mental condition. An average physical condition was indicated by 11 people and an average mental state by 8 people; 2 people definitely felt physically weak and 8 felt mentally weak (Table 4).
Table 4. Declared physical and mental condition

| Physical condition | Mental condition |
|--------------------|------------------|
| **excellent** | **good** | **average** | **weak** | **excellent** | **good** | **average** | **weak** |
| 6 | 18 | 11 | 2 | 7 | 14 | 8 | 8 |

Five spheres where media technologies played an important role with the onset of the pandemic were identified: 1) home duties, 2) communication and relations with others, 3) obtaining and sharing information, 4) work and education, 5) self-care. The first two spheres were dominated by supportive functions; the next three showed ambivalences. The last one was characterized by a strong predominance of burdening effects on users. The last three areas received far greater attention from respondents when commenting on their situation.

4.2. Home duties
With regard to household duties such as doing the shopping and paying bills, the positive aspects were highlighted (“It is really helpful that I can shop online, especially grocery stuff”). The few negative aspects to being able to do so much online was the increase in a sense of “wasting” time or a loss of time (“Technology has taken time away from my household chores”) and the increase in expenses as the Internet has led to an increase in a willingness to buy products advertised there (“I spend too much money by using social networks”).

4.3. Interpersonal communication and relations
In the area of interpersonal communication and relations, the key possibility of maintaining contact, despite physical distance from family members, friends and acquaintances, was emphasized (“It’s a way to connect with the world while not leaving the house”). Among the advantages were also the extension of conversations and the use of video calls, which were underestimated and had not previously been used to such an extent and scope (“I can afford longer video chats than before the pandemic”).

4.4. Obtaining and sharing information
The key function of media technologies in the initial period of the pandemic was to obtain and make available information about its spread, disease symptoms, treatment, lockdown rules, etc. (“Technology helps me ‘peek’ at how other countries handle the emergency”). Respondents appreciated the possibility of verifying information from various sources, as well as the speed of access to it (“I filter the news. I turn on scientific websites to dispel media myths”).

Despite satisfaction with access to data, the respondents did strongly emphasise the negative aspects of this accessibility. These mainly included the excess of news and information chaos including the publication of many messages with pessimistic overtones (“It is only bad news everywhere”), the provision of extremely opposing information for which the truthfulness or falsity could not be determined (“Too much information. I don't know which is true”), and the sowing of panic, hate speech and internet quarrels. There was also a feeling of information overload (“I wanted to constantly monitor the number of people infected, which caused me tension and irritation”).

4.5. Work and education
In the sphere of work and education: it was indicated that technology made it actually possible to continue to work or study thanks to the remote mode. Respondents stressed that what was key for them was that they could continue to learn and work or do both without leaving home.

At the same time media technology was blamed for the decline of users’ productivity, which was due to problems of concentration, greater distraction and a strong sense of time wasted. They complained about the high fatigue resulting from the amount of time spent in front of
screens (“I feel miserable, mentally exhausted from remote work”). The respondents were affected by the blurring of time and space boundaries between their professional and personal lives (“Access to technology, in theory making it easier to work remotely, makes it hard to draw the line between what is work and what is free time”). They suffered from new difficulties due to working or learning from home, having problems with resting and relaxing resulting from performing their duties and spending their free time in such a hybrid space (“I still cannot maintain the work-life balance because the private room is used for different purposes, particularly, a desk for work is right next to the bed”). They also stressed the problems of time management when the boundaries between working and non-working periods had blurred (“My home used to be a place to relax and meet my loved ones (…). Now my home is a place for work and I painfully have to agree to this”).

4.6. Self-care
The use of media technologies for physical well-being has been sporadically indicated. Technology was sporadically used to obtain mental support. More often it was treated as a tool for an “escape to the outside”, giving the feeling of contact with external space. Technologies were used for passive rest and entertainment (e.g., watching films, reading funny content) (“I improve my mood by catching up on movies that I didn’t have time for before”). Some people directly referred to technology as a tool for “filling the time”.

Nevertheless, the area of self-care has proved to be the most vulnerable to the negative consequences of using media technologies. The respondents perceived the negative impact of technology on their physical health: problems with their sight, back (“I had to sit in front of a screen for 3 hours and it was not pleasant especially for my back!”), general physical condition, and decline in strength and energy (“I feel tired from the constant studying in front of a monitor”).

They admitted to their own neglect of self-care, especially physical movement resulting from spending time mainly in front of screens (“How do you feel physically? Neglected. I’ve drastically reduced my movement from a previously high level of activity”).

Technology caused more tension and irritation and increased stress. Feelings of senselessness (“Media technology just stole time and probably my brain cells”), unproductivity (“I want to stay away from social media and do more things that are meaningful”) and irrelevance of the actions taken through technology (“Technology consumes time that could be spent on something more constructive”), were declared. Respondents talked about the feeling of a cessation of developing and having to work on their own. These included physical and mental discomfort, pain and other ailments in the body and negative mental and emotional states: from loss (“I have lost count of days”), anxiety (“Media technologies disturb my mental peace, introduce fear”), to depressive states (“I feel depressed by the current situation”). There were also admissions of media technology addiction (“Addiction to technology in the simplest of everyday activities is frightening”).

5. Discussion
Studied respondents varied in terms of gender, age (albeit in the designated range of 18–40 years) and activity (studying, working, working and studying simultaneously). Differentiation also included daily time spent using technology (from half an hour to 15 hours). Both those wishing to use less, more or still as much technology, were studied. Different current physical and mental conditions (from weak, through medium, to good and excellent) were also a differentiating factor.

The respondents indicated both the supportive functions and burdensome influence of media technologies. However, they both dominated in different areas.

The supportive functions concerned mainly the area of household duties and interpersonal communication. Such activities as shopping, dealing with official matters, etc. seemed to gain
from technological mediation. The gains from being able to communicate and maintain relations at a distance with non-residents were stressed very often.

Remote work and education had their advantages and disadvantages. The key position was the fact that technology makes them possible at all, and that was considered a great gain. In the above-mentioned areas, media technologies were treated as primarily task-based and instrumental, as tools for doing what was necessary. Appreciating the possibilities offered by technology in these areas, one became less focused on one’s own needs, but rather on those of others. Thus, the supportive functions were oriented towards the tasks assigned by the external environment to the individual: by other people, including loved ones, and above all, by institutions and organizations managing work and education. Users tried to complete their assigned tasks, achieve goals and, above all, to maintain the continuity of these activities in lockdown conditions. However, in personal terms, a lot was lost: time, efficiency, productivity, peace, daily comfort resulting from the possibility of separating the time and place of work from non-work.

The burdensome influence was primarily about self-care, so the negative consequences of technology usage were directed internally. This area suffered most and was made up of a long list of negatives. Negative states were not sufficiently compensated for by the supportive functions of technology. Rather, technologies served the declared “escape”—whether into the unreal world (of movies or a series) or even into the very real world, but not materially accessible due to lockdown—into virtual, public places.

Activities in the area of acquiring and disseminating information, and partly work and education can be treated as mixed: they meet the objectives and needs of both the user and the social environment. This sphere was evaluated as ambivalent. At the same time, a lot was gained and a lot was lost in these areas. The price of accessing information quickly and comprehensively was paid by the stress and the time taken to select and confront information sources and deal with untruth and manipulation. Learning and working from home took a heavy toll on mental and physical life.

The burdensome influences of the media technologies dominated and were indicated regardless of the declared physical and mental state, housing and family conditions, gender or age. Implementation of the principles of limiting technology, which is part of the practice of disconnection, digital detox or digital minimalism, proved to be practically impossible for respondents, and some even regretted this. The situation from this period can rather be described as sudden digital intoxication and the maximization of opportunities and profits from the task-oriented use of technologies, which were bought at a loss to the individual, personal level.

The fact that people between the ages of 18 and 40 at the time of the pandemic outbreak had high technological and media literacy did not lead to them adopting the new situation with positivity and hope. Rather, it was accompanied by anxiety, fatigue and general overload. The exceptions to this were the belief that, thanks to the availability, knowledge and, thus far, comprehensive use of technology, they would survive a lockdown and a pandemic in better physical or mental condition than others. Fear for the future, uncertainty and waiting for an undefined return to normality prevailed. Although technology did not turn out to be just anguish, neither was it a salvation. It turned out to be an unpleasant necessity, in which an attempt was made to see the knotty positives.

When comparing the functions of media technology, mainly internet technology, in a pandemic and in the pre-pandemic period, most of the general categories of technology functions have been maintained. Information, communication and the performance of tasks which, in the time of the pandemic, are clearly divided into paid work, education and household duties, proved to be crucial. Some categories of functions have been given a broader spectrum. The self-care category has proved to be the most capacious. It covered many more subcategories, such as: getting help,
taking care of one's physical condition, improving mood. During a pandemic, entertainment, which was mainly a form of rest and "escapism", should be treated as part of self-care.

In a situation of sudden change, danger, uncertainty and many new difficulties that the lockdown brought with it, users were left with no choice but to take advantage of the opportunities and functions available to them. Technology facilitated or even enabled them to continue living, while at the same time incubating frustration, further difficulties, challenges and real suffering, both physical and mental. As a group highly susceptible economically, socially and psychologically, early adults from large Polish cities also became threatened by the effects of the growing importance of media technologies in their lives.

6. Limitations and Conclusions
One of the limitations of the research project was its scale and its reduction to the population of early adults from large Polish urban agglomerations. Certainly, taking into account other demographic groups: age, locations, etc. would have made it possible to obtain richer results and allow for greater comparison with each other. A survey of the entire Polish population would have given a more complete picture, although carrying out social research at the time, entailed considerable difficulties. Then, it was important to respond dynamically to the conditions and to strive to grasp the extraordinary situation immediately—as much as was possible and ethical under the circumstances.

Moreover, in the field work, “research fatigue” was particularly evident (Patel et al., 2020). This refers to a great fatigue with the situation and burden of internet or screen activity, which was often indicated by the respondents. Participation in the study would be too much of a challenge and a highly probable interruption for many potential candidates. This made researchers think about how to safely conduct research on the use of media technologies in a lockdown environment without risking the health of participants, and causing a burden of overuse of the Internet or screen devices on interviewees and interviewers. It may have been appropriate to consider telephone interviews or a return to handwritten survey forms, but in this case, the need for the quarantining of documents and the increased time and cost of analysing the results should be taken into account.

At the same time, it is worth stressing that participation in the surveys was confessional for some respondents. The participants gave vent to their emotions and fears and shared their thoughts. For some of them, participation in the study was a kind of para-therapeutic activity. They realised their frustrations relating to the use of media technologies, which—as they pointed out—they would like to change.

The basic functions of the media have remained constant. The spectrum of their subfunctions and some aspects of their practical implementation have changed. In some cases, we observed an over-valuation, such as a new appreciation of video calls. The negative influence on the condition and well-being of the individual was intensified. Instrumental, rather externally oriented functions were positively evaluated.

Answering the posed question, media technologies played a key role in the lives of early adults at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but were valued very ambivalently. The initial conditions, i.e. access, preparation, high competences and trust in technologies, did not cause young users to deal with the situation in a balanced and comfortable way. The ideals and goals of disconnection, digital detox or digital minimalism were almost completely absent. There was no self-limiting, even though the majority of respondents saw such a need.

The paradoxes that characterize the use of various tools and facilities did not change at the beginning of the pandemic, although they took on a clearer shape. What may be able to help, can also do harm in large quantities. People wanted to be able to work and learn, but at the same time
they felt they were losing time and becoming inefficient. They felt reproach for the low quality of their own activity and unproductivity. For some respondents, having a lot of free time and spending it online (even up to 12 hours a day) did not improve their condition at all. The longing for direct contact, the possibility to go outside safely, which was almost synonymous with freedom and an end to the ongoing state, were desired.

The results indicate that the adaptation of users to the new situation brought costs of a different nature (from physical, mental, to social). The fear of eye diseases and vision impairment was confirmed (Wong et al., 2021). In addition, the risk of obesity, even called “covibesity” (Khan & Moverley Smith, 2020), as well as mental disorders and diseases has increased (Xiong et al., 2020).

Some of the consequences are not yet known. This is an area of necessary research, to ensure that society is better able to cope with the situation. It should lead to conclusions that ensure media users are better prepared in the event of a repeat of similar emergencies and disruptions, not only pandemics but also other disasters. In view of the strong burdensome influence and the still unknown and unpredictable consequences of the sudden technological transformation and mediatization of everyday life, it is essential to introduce counter-measures: research, education and support programmes in many areas and dimensions of the presence of technology in pandemic and post-pandemic everyday life. This requires the cooperation of specialists from many academic fields, practitioners and users themselves, who are faced with the challenge of implementing redefined principles, practices and tools so as to balance the burdensome influence of media technologies with their supportive functions.

Citation information
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Notes
1. The definition of early adulthood depends on the socio-cultural context, but it is most often associated with the achievement of personal and economic independence and the assumption of professional and family responsibilities, which occurs from the late teens to the late thirties (Segal, 1996).
2. Active social network penetration in Poland is 50% (Statista Research Department, 2019).
3. 74.8% of Poles have a smartphone (Urzad Komunikacji Elektronicznej, 2019).
4. Over 70% of Polish individual customers have it, of which over 90% have access to the Internet on their phones (Urzad Komunikacji Elektronicznej, 2019).
5. The study did not require approval from an institutional ethics committee. The study was remote and did not involve any risky interventions. All the subjects have provided appropriate informed consent. The survey questionnaire contained all the necessary information about the purpose, scope and use of the data, emphasising the voluntary anonymous, unpaid and withdrawable nature of the consent at each stage of the study.
6. In Poland 60% of the population lives in cities (Statistics Poland, 2018), and approximately 12% live in five of the biggest cities (more than 500,000 inhabitants) (Statistics Poland, 2015).
7. In Poland, 94.3% of people aged 20–39 use the Internet (Batorski et al., 2015, p. 23).

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