

## Research article

UDC: 159.99

<https://doi.org/10.21702/rpj.2023.1.3>

# Psychological Features of Students' Experience of Limited Access to Social Networks

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Social networks are a tool for finding social contacts, emotional support, a means of self-expression and self-presentation. In the period of so called "crisis of credibility", expressed in a large amount of unverified and often contradictory information, it is very important to study the psychological characteristics of students' experience of limited access to social networks such as Instagram\* (a Meta Platforms Inc. project, which is banned in Russia). The study of informational behavior in recent years has acquired particular relevance, which has been realized in a large number of both foreign and Russian works. For the first time, an attempt was made to describe the differences in the characteristics of students' experience of limited access to social networks, depending on the actions of respondents after the restriction of access. **Methods.** The study involved 174 students aged 18 to 21 years (61 boys and 113 girls), students of 1–3 courses of the Don State Technical University. To achieve the goal of the study, the author's questionnaire was used (I. V. Abakumova, N. E. Komerova, S. V. Ryagin); test of Personal Adjustment (K. Rogers, adapted by A. K. Ositsky); questionnaire "Strategic approach to coping scale" (SACS) (S. Hobfall, adapted by N. E. Vodopyanova, E. S. Starchenkova). Mathematical methods were the statistical Mann-Whitney U-test; Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. **Results.** Coping strategies and features of socio-psychological adaptation to stressful situations change depending on the actions of respondents after restricting access to the social network Instagram\* (continuation of use using VPN applications, termination of use after a ban). Respondents who stopped using the Instagram\* social network showed a higher level of avoidance and impulsive actions, less severity of internal control, adaptability, and emotional discomfort than respondents who continued to use this social network. **Discussion.** Studies of informational behavior by both domestic and foreign authors emphasize the importance of the virtual space of social networks as a way of self-presentation, communication, getting support, self-expression, etc., which is consistent with our results that limiting access to the popular resource among young people (Instagram\*) can be perceived as a frustrating event, the loss of a "part" of life, which activates certain coping strategies and mechanisms of socio-psychological adaptation.

**Keywords:** access restriction, social network, coping strategies, socio-psychological adaptation, credibility crisis, infodemic, avoidance, maladaptation, frustration, social contact

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**Funding:** The article was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (Project 22-78-10107) "Transformation of constructive and destructive strategies of information behavior of young people in the face of growing geopolitical risks: psychological, psychophysiological and psychogenetic predictors".

**For citation:** Abakumova, I. V., Natalya E. Komerova, N. K., Ryagin, S. N. (2023). Psychological Features of Students' Experience of Limited Access to Social Networks. *Russian Psychological Journal*, 20(1), 33–49. <https://doi.org/10.21702/rpj.2023.1.3>

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## Introduction

The geopolitical tension that have arisen in recent years and is constantly growing in the modern world have become one of the stressors for young people, especially over the past year. In the period of so called "crisis of credibility", expressed in a large number of emerging multidirectional and often contradictory ("fake") information, in order to protect the population from unverified or false information, it was decided to block certain Internet resources in the territory of the Russian Federation, for example, a social network Instagram\* (hereinafter Instagram\* is a project of Meta Platforms Inc., whose activities are prohibited in Russia). It's widely known that the most active users of social networks are young people. For them, social networks act as a means of communication, obtaining information, promotion, self-presentation, shopping, and so on.

As a result of the Instagram\* ban on the territory of the Russian Federation, the student community was divided into two groups - those who continued to use social networks (using the VPN application), and those who stopped using them due to the ban.

A virtual private network (VPN) is a technology that allows you to establish a secure connection to the Internet. When connecting to the Internet via a VPN, the software creates a secure connection between the device and a remote VPN server by encrypting the user's web browsing data and hiding the IP address.

Thus, the study of the peculiarities of students' experience of limited access to social networks acquires great relevance.

The topic of informational behavior, and, in particular, the use of social networks, as well as the consequences of restricting access to social networks, has been at the peak of relevance in recent years and interest in it is realized in various areas, such as psychology, political science, sociology, and economics. So, Grebenkina A. A. (2020) explores virtual social networks, their capabilities and limitations; Emelyanov D.S. (2021) describes the features of restrictions on the right to freedom of speech in the era of social networks; Pashinina N. I. (2022) analyzes the impact on the activities of small businesses of restricting access to the social network Instagram\* in the Russian Federation and the prospects for the development of Rossgram; Serova S. A., Semishova E. P. (2022) highlight aspects of limiting the spread of false information in the media and social networks; Smirnov A. V. (2021) presents a model of a digital society in Russian reality; Ganichev N. A., Koshovets O. B. (2019) analyze the specifics of Russia's integration into the global digital transformation project; Wanqing H., Fenqing L., Solodukho A. (2022) focus on the study of smartphone addiction and cross-cultural adaptation among international Chinese students;

Shabunova A. A., Gruzdeva M. A., Kalachikova O. N. (2020) raise the issue of resolving the digital divide in modern Russia; Gaitán-Aguilar L., Hofhuis J., Bierwaczek K. & C. Carmen (2022) analyze the use of social networks, social identification and intercultural adaptation features of international students. Also, Collis A. & Eggers F. (2022) explore the impact of limiting social media use on student well-being and productivity; Haidt J. & Twenge J. (2022) analyze the relationship between social media use and mental health; Johannes N., Meier A., Reinecke L., Ehlert S., Setiawan D. N., Walasek N. et al (2021) describe the relationship between online caution and affective well-being in everyday life.

The above studies point to the importance of social networks in the life of a modern person, however, they do not fully reveal the emotional aspect of digital socialization, which, in the context of the introduction of bans on social networks, can come to the fore.

Any change in habitual lifestyle can be perceived by the individual as a stressful event and activate strategies for coping with the situation. Since social networks are today the "second" reality, the experience of limited access to them will be reflected in the behavior both on the Internet and in everyday life.

The study of coping strategies with stressful situations is considered by the authors from different angles (Kubekova, Fazlullah, 2021). So, Denisova E. G., Bykova Ya. A. (2021) analyzed the ways of co-ownership of adolescents in connection with indicators of self-regulation. Dmitrieva A. V. describes the relationship between coping strategies, social intelligence and behavioral strategies in adolescence (Dmitrieva, Sorokoumova, 2021). Kochurov M. G. (2020) highlights the relationship of coping strategies with the locus of control. Tunynina E. A. (2022), Surkova T. A (2021), Fteiha M. & Awwad N. (2020) explore the influence of emotional competence and various aspects of emotional intelligence on the coping behavior strategies choice. The influence of Internet addiction on the coping strategies of adolescents is noted (Yushko, Nurimanova, 2020). Stallman H. M., Lipson S. K., Zhou S. & Eisenberg D. (2022) analyze the coping strategies of American students.

After a period of active experience of a stressful situation, as a result, socio-psychological adaptation to new living conditions begins. The features of this period have been actively studied by the authors in recent years. For example, Ryabinkina S. A. studied the features of socio-psychological adaptation and the communicative sphere of Internet-addicted students (Ryabinkina, 2020). Skorodumova A. O. analyzed the socio-psychological adaptation of students in the initial courses of universities (Skorodumova & Eliseev, 2021).

Despite the abundance of scientific research in the field of psychology of social network users, the topic of students experiencing a unique situation of limited access to social networks is extremely relevant at the present time.

## Methods

The purpose of the study is to study the peculiarities of students' experience of limited access to social networks.

An empirical study was conducted on the basis of the Don State Technical University (DSTU, Rostov-on-Don). The study involved 174 people aged 18 to 21 years (61 boys and 113 girls), who were students of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd courses of the full-time and part-time departments of the "Psychology, Pedagogy and Defectology" and "Media Communications" faculties. In order to conduct a comparative analysis of the peculiarities of students' experience of limited access to social networks, it was decided to divide the group of respondents into two subgroups: Subgroup A

(in the amount of 102 people) included those who continued to use social networks using VPN; Subgroup B (72 people) – those who stopped using social networks.

To describe and analyze the features of students' experience of limited access to social networks, methods were chosen that reflect coping strategies for dealing with stressful situations, features of socio-psychological adaptation: test of Personal Adjustment (K. Rogers, adapted by A. K. Osinsky); questionnaire "Strategic approach to coping scale" (SACS) (S. Hobfall, adapted by N. E. Vodopyanova, E. S. Starchenkova). To assess the significance of differences, the statistical Mann–Whitney U-test was used; to identify the presence of relationships between variables – Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

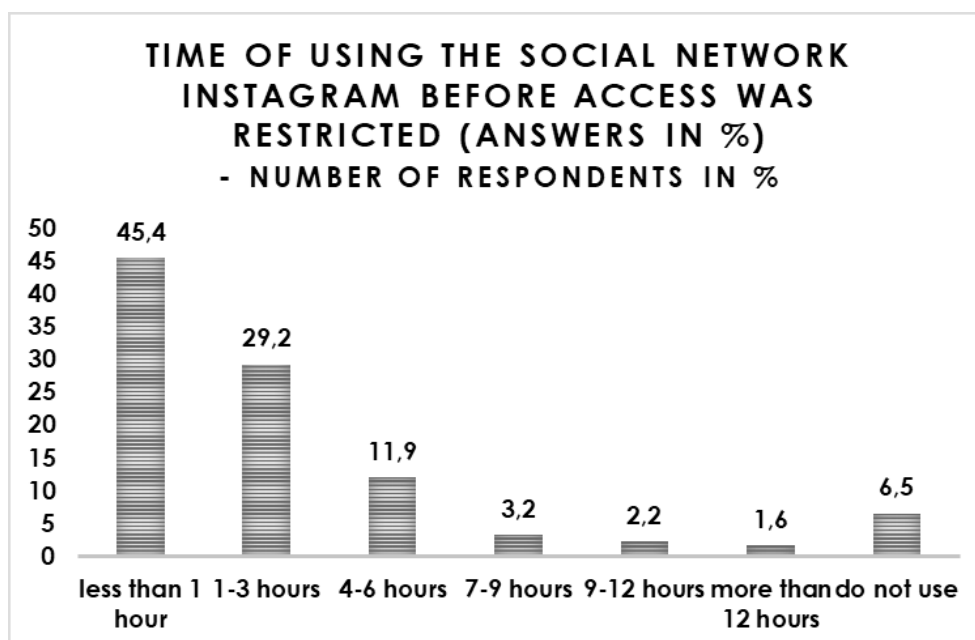
The study was conducted from August to September 2022. All respondents agreed to participate in the study, were informed about its objectives and notified of further use and publication of the results.

## Results

Data on the statistics of the use of the social network were obtained from the author's questionnaire (I. V. Abakumova, N. E. Komerova, S. V. Ryagin). According to our questionnaire survey, more than 93% of respondents used this social network at least once a day from a few minutes to 12 hours. The survey data are shown in Fig. 1.

**Figure 1**

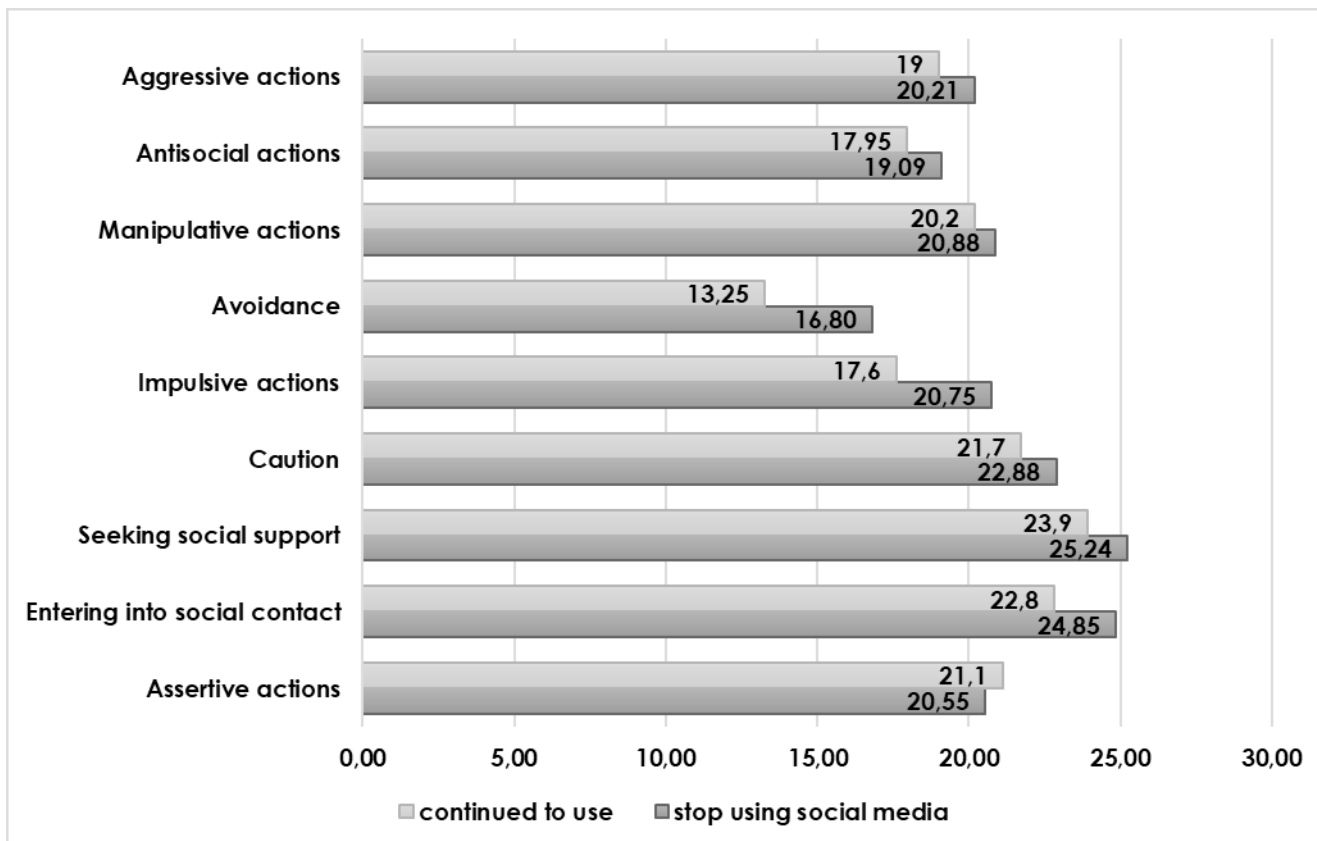
*Social network usage statistics by time during the day among respondents*



As a result of the study using questionnaire "Strategic approach to coping scale", the data presented in fig. 2.

**Figure 2**

*Average values of indicators of strategies for coping with stressful situations (among subgroups), in points*



As can be seen, in Subgroup A ("continued to use"), almost all types of coping strategies are expressed somewhat less intensively than in Subgroup B. So, for the entire sample, the leading coping strategies are: the search for social support (Subgroup A – 23.9 and Subgroup B – 25.24 points), entering into social contact (Subgroup A – 22.8 and Subgroup B – 24.85) and cautious actions (Subgroup A – 21.7 and Subgroup B – 22.88).

Consequently, the Subgroups express the importance of interpersonal communication, the need for interaction and support from others (family, friends, colleagues), the search for approval and the exchange of useful information, however, in Subgroup B, the indicators are on the border with high, and in Subgroup A, they are within average values. It should be noted that these coping strategies are generally typical for this age category of respondents, since this is a period of establishing new social contacts, searching for "love" and friendships, personal self-determination, and active social interaction.

However, it is worth noting the scales with the largest difference in mean values - these are "avoidance" and "impulsive actions". In Subgroup B, the average values on the scale "Avoidance" (16.8 points) are statistically significantly higher (at  $p < 0.05$ ) than in Subgroup A (13.25 points),

which indicates a tendency to refuse to solve problems, ignoring them among those who have stopped using social networks. On the Impulsive Actions scale, Subgroup B had an average of 20.75 points, while Subgroup A had an average of 17.6 points, which also demonstrates statistically significant differences at  $p < 0.05$ . These results allow us to state a greater propensity for impulsive actions, following intuitive impulses in Subgroup B, who decided to stop using social networks.

The statistical analysis of data according to questionnaire "Strategic approach to coping scale" using the U-Mann-Whitney criterion are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

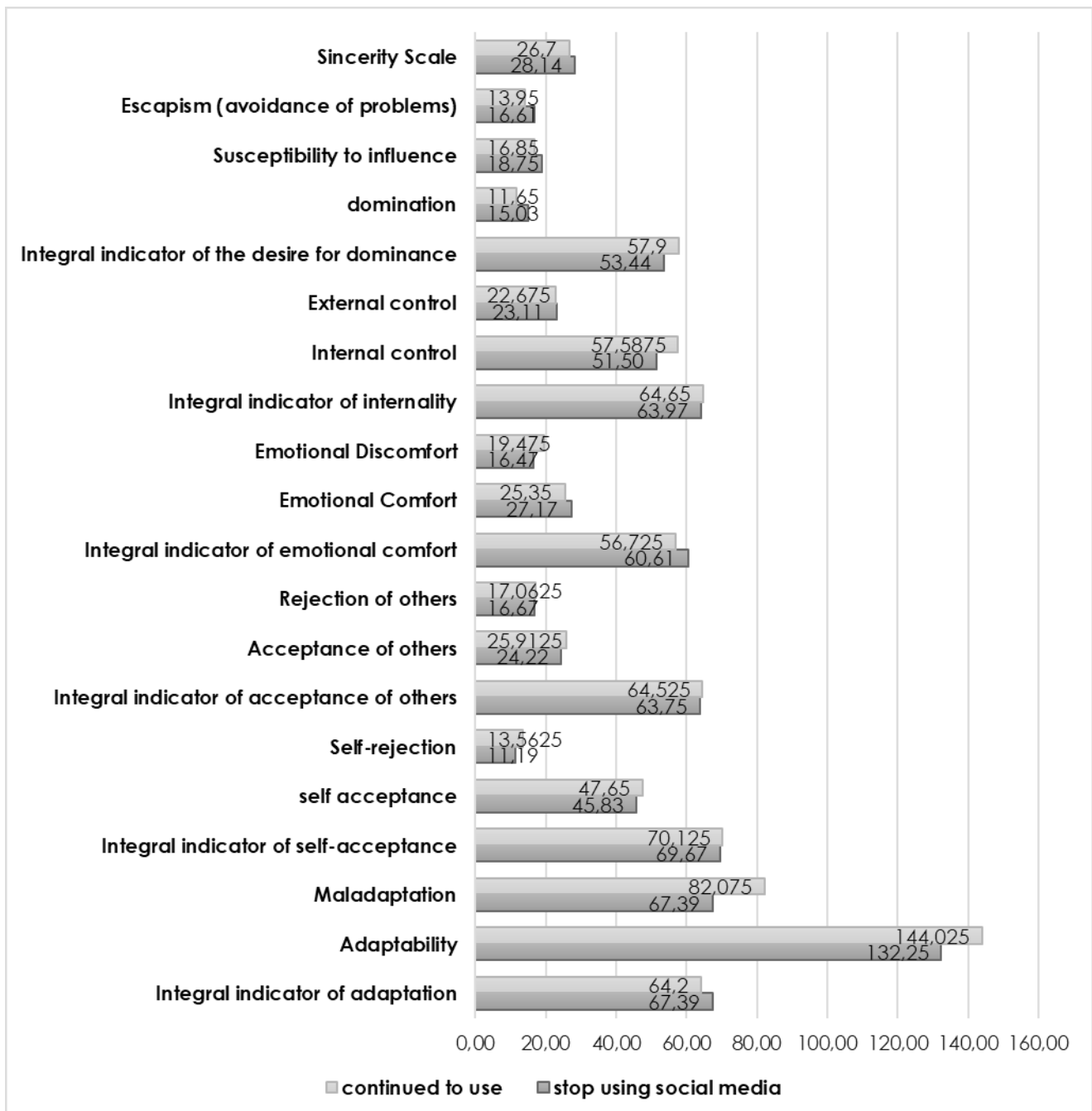
*Results of statistical analysis of data using the U-Mann-Whitney test*

Scale	Mean value Subgroup 1	Mean value Subgroup2	Rank_1	Rank_2	U	p_value
Assertive actions	20.545	21.125	61.712	55.056	1380	0.704
Entering into social contact	24.848	22.825	61.621	55.094	1443	0.435
Seeking social support	25.242	23.988	60.045	55.744	1468.5	0.347
Caution	22.879	21.712	66.53	53.069	1251	0.661
Impulsive actions	20.758	17.613	67.955	52.481	1681.5	0.022
Avoidance	16.818	13.25	54.909	57.862	1634.5	0.046
Manipulative actions	20.879	20.275	61.5	55.144	1420.5	0.525
Antisocial actions	19.091	17.95	60.727	55.462	1472.5	0.334
Aggressive actions	20.212	19.012	58.818	56.25	1475.5	0.325

The results of the study according to test of Personal Adjustment are presented in fig. 3.

**Figure 3**

*Average values of indicators of socio-psychological adaptation (among subgroups)*



As can be seen from the results obtained, Subgroup A (144 points) score on the Adaptability scale is higher than that of Subgroup B (132 points), which indicates greater flexibility of those

who have decided to continue using social networks. The Adaptability scale reflects a state that implies a productive movement towards the tasks of self-actualization, the successful satisfaction of one's basic needs. Thus, the respondents of Subgroup A decided to continue using social networks, as it is one of their leading needs at this stage of life. However, the integral indicator of adaptability is higher in total in subgroup B, which is explained, in our opinion, by the fact that students chose avoidance as a way of coping with this stressor, which helped relieve tension that caused a feeling of maladjustment in Subgroup B.

The results on the scale "Integral indicator of emotional comfort" are higher in Subgroup B, since the termination of communication in social networks was the result that was supposed to be blocked. This is also confirmed by the data on the "emotional discomfort" scale, according to which Subgroup A (19.475) scores higher than Subgroup B (16.47), that is, it can be assumed that the decision to continue using social networks, despite the ban, caused increased emotional stress. These differences are statistically significant according to Whitney's U-mann test (at  $p < 0.05$ ). Statistical analysis data are presented in Table. 2.

**Table 2**

Results of statistical analysis by U-Mann-Whitney test

Scale	Mean_1	Mean_2	Rank_1	Rank_2	U	p_value
Integral indicator of adaptation	67.389	64.2	59.306	58.138	1619	0.285
Adaptability	132.25	144.025	54.778	60.175	1224	0.197
Maladaptation	67.389	82.075	60.597	57.556	1133.5	0.067
Integral indicator of self-acceptance	69.667	70.125	56.111	59.575	1535	0.571
Self-acceptance	45.833	47.65	53.431	60.781	1365.5	0.656
Self-rejection	11.194	13.562	55.181	59.994	1189.5	0.134
Integral indicator of acceptance of others	63.75	64.525	48.694	62.913	1521	0.629
Acceptance of others	24.222	25.913	58.653	58.431	1279.5	0.337
Rejection of others	16.667	17.062	49.083	62.737	1269	0.307
Integral indicator of emotional comfort	60.611	56.725	58.194	58.638	1631	0.254
Emotional Comfort	27.167	25.35	63.806	56.112	1429	0.948



Scale	Mean_1	Mean_2	Rank_1	Rank_2	U	p_value
Emotional Discomfort	16.472	19.475	53.75	60.638	1101	0.043
Integral indicator of internality	63.972	64.65	54.042	60.506	1445.5	0.974
Internal control	51.5	57.587	60.75	57.487	1087	0.035
External control	23.111	22.675	51.542	61.631	1320.5	0.476
Integral indicator of desire to dominate	53.444	57.9	56.431	59.431	1257.5	0.276
Domination	15.028	11.65	61.139	57.312	1354	0.607
Susceptibility to influence	18.75	16.85	49.986	62.331	1515.5	0.652
Escapism	16.611	13.95	52.5	61.2	1306	0.423

A statistically significant result is the data on the "Internal Control" scale, in Subgroup A (57.58 points) the result is higher than in Subgroup B (51.50 points). It can be argued that those who decide to continue using social networks after the restriction have a more pronounced position on independent decision-making, confidence in personal control of ongoing events, and an active life position.

Let's analyze the results of Spearman's correlation analysis presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Correlation analysis according to Spearman in Subgroup A (those who continued to use Instagram\*)

Scales	Assertive actions	Impulsive actions	Manipulative actions	Asocial actions	Aggressive actions
Integral indicator of adaptability	0.291**	-0.266*			-0.249*
Maladaptation	-0.399***	0.233*			0.302**
Self-rejection	-0.268*				0.275*
Integral indicator acceptance of others					-0.27*

Scales	Assertive actions	Impulsive actions	Manipulative actions	Asocial actions	Aggressive actions
Rejection of others	-0.271*		0.25*	0.228*	0.322**
Integral indicator of emotional comfort	0.258*				
Emotional Discomfort	-0.347**				0.329**
Integral indicator of internality		-0.322**			
Internal control					0.257*
External control	-0.358**	0.306**			0.279*
Integral indicator of desire to dominate	0.388***				
Susceptibility to influence	-0.396***				
Escapism	-0.361**	0.229*			0.399***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Thus, the strategies of coping with stressful situations and the characteristics of the socio-psychological adaptation of respondents who continued to use the Instagram\* social network have a number of interrelations. Thus, the "Maladaptation" indicator has an inverse relationship (-0.399\*\*\*) with the "Assertive actions" scale, and a direct relationship with the "Aggressive actions" scale (0.302\*\*), which indicates that the more confident one feels and leads the respondent, the higher the level of adaptation to various life difficulties and the lower the level of aggressiveness. The scale "Emotional discomfort" has an inverse correlation with the scale "Assertive actions" (-0.347\*\*) and a direct relationship with the scale "Aggressive actions" (0.329\*\*). It can be said that the higher the level of emotional well-being, the more confidently the respondent acts and the less aggressive actions he performs. Interestingly, the integral indicator of internality (-0.322\*\*) has an inverse relationship with the "Impulsive actions" scale, which suggests that the more the respondent believes in the influence of external circumstances on his life, the more he is ready to commit impulsive actions ("External control" – "Impulsive actions": 0.306\*\*).

For a comparative analysis of the features of experiencing limited access to social networks between subgroups A and B, we consider the results in Subgroup B, obtained using the Spearman correlation coefficient (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*The results of Spearman's correlation analysis in Subgroup B (those who stopped using the social network Instagram\*)*

Scale	Asser- tive ac- tions	Ente- ring into social con- tact	Cau- tion	Impul- sive ac- tions	Avoi- dance	Mani- pulative actions	Anti- social actions	Aggresive actions
Integral indicator of adaptability	0.654***	0.373*		0.361*				
Adaptability	0.491**	0.387*		0.342*				
Maladap- tation	-0.448**				0.504**			0.397*
Integral indicator of self- acceptance	0.626***	0.346*		0.338*		0.352*	0.368*	
Self acceptance	0.566***	0.383*					0.345*	
Self-rejection	-0.396*				0.335*			
Integral indicator of acceptance of others	0.537***	0.398*		0.522**			0.367*	
Acceptance of others		0.351*		0.372*				
Integral indicator of emotional comfort	0.664***							

Scale	Asser- tive ac- tions	Ente- ring into social con- tact	Cau- tion	Impul- sive ac- tions	Avoi- dance	Mani- pulative actions	Anti- social actions	Aggresive actions
Emotional Comfort	0.345*	0.436**	0.471**	0.517**		0.373*	0.529***	0.409*
Emotional Discomfort	-0.461**				0.494**			0.388*
Integral indicator of internality	0.621***							
External control	-0.39*				0.534***			0.411*
Integral indicator of dominance	0.44**							
Domination				0.41*		0.346*		
Susceptibility to influence	-0.514**				0.543***			0.358*
Escapism					0.549***			0.503**

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

As can be seen from the presented data, the level of avoidance is in a strong direct relationship with "External control" (0.534\*\*\*), "Maladjustment" (0.504\*\*), "Emotional discomfort" (0.494\*\*), "Susceptibility to influence" (0.543\*\*\*), "Escapism" (0.549\*\*\*), that is, the higher the level of avoidance, the more the respondents of Subgroup B believe in the influence of external circumstances on the events of their lives, the more they are prone to maladaptive forms of emotional response, avoiding problem solving and conformism.

Let us pay attention to the inverse relationships that appeared between the scales "Assertive actions" and "Maladjustment" (-0.448\*\*), "Self-rejection" (-0.396\*), "Emotional discomfort" (-0.461\*\*), "External control" (-0.39\*), "Susceptibility to influence" (-0.514\*\*), characteristically reflecting that the higher the level of confidence, the lower the indicators of self-rejection, conformism, emotional deprivation and belief that external circumstances determine the course of life.

Coping strategy "Entering into social contact" has a positive relationship with the scales "Adaptability" (0.387\*), "Self-acceptance" (0.383\*), "Acceptance of others" (0.351\*), "Emotional comfort" (0.436\*\*).

## Discussion

Comparing the data obtained with the studies of other scientists, we note the conclusions of some of them.

U. Turkcapar, M. Atasoy, K. Bolat write: "... social media is not a virtual and false world, they continue to exist as another face of reality and create another space of reality, consisting of a mixture of virtual and real. Thus, one can talk about life with two centers, online and offline, each with its own real content and rules" (Turkcapar, Atasoy, & Bolat, 2022, p. 82). These findings emphasize the importance of using social networks for a modern person, confirming that the virtual world is not just a "fake" space, but a second, parallel reality.

Temnikova L.B., Vandisheva A.V. state that "a new type of online interaction marked a fundamentally different situation, when group communication configurations replaced traditional linear communications. In online communication, users, as in everyday offline life, devote more time to private, everyday interests and hobbies than to socially significant issues" (Temnikova & Vandisheva, 2022, p. 274).

The study of how social networks help to cope with stressful situations has been carried out by various scientists in recent years. L. N. Wolfers, R. Festl & S. Utz (2020) state that there are relationships between nomophobia and stress levels in the current moment, but not over time. J. Brailovskaia, E. Rohmann, H.-W. Bierhoff, H. Schillack, J. Margraf (2019) found that direct social support (offline) helps protect mental health, while online support increases the need for social networks and the development of Internet addictions.

The conclusions of the above scientists indicate the relevance of the Internet virtual space in human communication, respectively, the loss of an account or the restriction of access to a social network can be perceived as a stressful event, and sometimes as a traumatic one, as the loss of a part of life, an "alternative" personality. The use of social networks satisfies the needs for affective experiences, which can have a different vector of direction. Consequently, the restriction of access to social networks may be accompanied by frustration, loss of "significant" support, increased stress levels, and as a result, activation of coping strategies and processes of socio-psychological adaptation to new conditions, depending on the psychological characteristics of the individual.

## Conclusion

1. Restriction of access to social networks activates certain coping strategies for coping with stressful situations, depending on the psychological characteristics of the individual.

2. Methods of socio-psychological adaptation in groups with different attitudes towards restricting access to social networks have differences.

3. The situation of restricting access to Instagram\* caused certain frustrating experiences, which found expression in the implementation of coping strategies: seeking social support, entering into social contact, careful actions, avoidance, and others.

4. Peculiarities of students' experience of limited access to the social network Instagram\* are characterized by different severity of strategies for coping with stress and ways of social and psychological adaptation.

Thus, the experience of limited access to social networks of students depending on the actions after the ban on the use of Instagram \* has its own psychological differences, which are manifested in the ways of coping with stressful situations and the characteristics of socio-psychological adaptation. The entire sample of students aged 18 to 21 is characterized by the following coping strategies: seeking social support, entering into social contact and cautious actions, which indicates a focus on interpersonal interaction that is characteristic of this age. However, the subgroup of those who decided to continue using the social network Instagram\*, by passing the restrictions, is characterized by a less pronounced level of avoidance (avoidance from solving problems) and a less severity of impulsive actions. The obtained data are statistically reliable, which allows us to state the fact of the activation of certain coping strategies in connection with the experience of limited access to social networks.

Socio-psychological adaptation in subgroups of respondents has interesting differences. The subgroup of respondents who decided to stop using the Instagram\* social network banned in the Russian Federation has higher indicators in terms of the level of emotional comfort, that is, the cessation of communication in social networks was not so significant for them. However, in the subgroup of respondents who decided to continue using the social network, the level of emotional discomfort is statistically significantly higher, which suggests that the decision to continue using the social network despite the ban caused some emotional stress. They also have a statistically significantly higher level of internal control, which indicates an active position in relation to their lives and decision-making. An analysis of the relationship between coping strategies and the specifics of socio-psychological adaptation made it possible to identify significant direct and inverse relationships between indicators.

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Received: February 6, 2023

Revision received: March 22, 2023

Accepted: March 25, 2023

### Authors' Contributions

**Irina Vladimirovna Abakumova** made the conceptualization, methodology, project administration, final approval of the version of the article for publication.

**Natalya Evgenievna Komerova** made the research, data analysis, description of the results and statistical processing of data.

**Sergey Nikolaevich Ryagin** made the interpretation of the results, statistical processing of the results, formulation of the study's conclusions.

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Irina V. Abakumova, Natalya E. Komerova, Sergey N. Ryagin  
Psychological features of students' experience of limited access to social networks  
**RUSSIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNAL**, 2023, Vol. 20, No. 1, 33–49. doi: 10.21702/rpj.2023.1.3

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

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### **Conflict of Interest Information**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.