

YOUTH DIGITAL PRACTICES AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

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Abstract. This study examines patterns of social media use among youth in Kazakhstan and analyzes how these digital practices relate to the evolving infrastructural conditions of political communication. The research is based on a quantitative interviews cross-sectional survey and stratified quota sampling ensured representation by gender, age, and place of residence. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, regression analysis and mediation modeling. The findings indicate youth digital engagement reflect structural shifts in communication environments. The study concludes that modern political communication requires a revision of established theoretical frameworks and greater methodological openness to cross-cultural comparison. While the study is situated within the broader field of political communication, it does not directly measure political participation or political efficacy. Instead, it focuses on socio-educational dimensions of digital engagement that indirectly shape the conditions under which political communication occurs. In this regard, social media are conceptualized as infrastructural environments structuring exposure to politically relevant content rather than as direct instruments of political mobilization.

Keywords: *social networks, youth, politics, political values, influence.*

ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ЖАСТАРДЫҢ ЦИФРЛЫҚ ТӘЖІРИБЕЛЕРІ
ЖӘНЕ СЯСИ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ: ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖЕЛІЛЕРДІ
ПАЙДАЛАНУДЫҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-БІЛІМДІК САЛДАРЫ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеуде Қазақстандағы жастар арасында әлеуметтік желілерді пайдалану үлгілері қарастырылады және осы цифрлық тәжірибелердің саяси коммуникацияның өзгермелі инфрақұрылымдық жағдайларымен қалай салыстырылатыны талданады. Зерттеу жынысы, жасы және тұрғылықты жері бойынша өкілдікті қамтамасыз ететін стратификацияланған квоталық іріктеу әдісімен жүргізілген сандық кросс-сауалнамаға негізделген. Деректер сипаттамалық Статистика, регрессиялық талдау және медиацияны модельдеу арқылы талданды. Нәтижелер жастардың цифрлық қатысуы коммуникациялық ортадағы құрылымдық өзгерістерді көрсететінін көрсетеді. Зерттеу қазіргі саяси коммуникация қалыптасқан теориялық негіздерді қайта қарауды және мәдениетаралық салыстыру үшін әдіснамалық ашықтықты қажет етеді деген қорытындыға келеді. Зерттеу саяси коммуникацияның кең ауқымында болғанымен, ол саяси қатысуды немесе саяси тиімділікті тікелей өлшемейді. Оның орнына ол саяси коммуникация орын алатын жағдайларды жанама түрде қалыптастыратын цифрлық қатысудың әлеуметтік-білім беру аспектілеріне бағытталған. Осыған байланысты әлеуметтік желілер саяси жұмылдырудың тікелей құралы ретінде емес, саяси маңызды мазмұнға қол жеткізуді құрылымдайтын инфрақұрылымдық орта ретінде қарастырылады.

Түйін сөздер: *әлеуметтік желілер, жастар, саясат, саяси құндылықтар, ықпал.*

ЦИФРОВЫЕ ПРАКТИКИ МОЛОДЕЖИ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: СОЦИАЛЬНО-ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЕ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЕЙ

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Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматриваются модели использования социальных сетей среди молодежи в Казахстане и анализируется, как эти цифровые практики соотносятся с меняющимися инфраструктурными условиями политической коммуникации. Исследование основано на количественном перекрестном опросе, проведенном методом стратифицированной квотной выборки, что обеспечило репрезентативность по полу, возрасту и месту проживания. Данные анализировались с использованием описательной статистики, регрессионного анализа и моделирования медиации. Результаты показывают, что цифровое участие молодежи отражает структурные сдвиги в коммуникационных средах. Исследование приходит к выводу, что

современная политическая коммуникация требует пересмотра устоявшихся теоретических рамок и большей методологической открытости для межкультурного сравнения. Хотя исследование находится в рамках более широкой области политической коммуникации, оно не измеряет напрямую политическое участие или политическую эффективность. Вместо этого оно сосредоточено на социально-образовательных аспектах цифрового участия, которые косвенно формируют условия, при которых происходит политическая коммуникация. В этом отношении социальные сети рассматриваются как инфраструктурные среды, структурирующие доступ к политически значимому контенту, а не как прямые инструменты политической мобилизации..

Ключевые слова: социальные сети, молодежь, политика, политические ценности, влияние.

Introduction

Social media platforms have become central infrastructures of communication, influencing social, economic, educational, cultural, and political spheres [1]. For young people, these tools provide a platform for sharing ideas, creating digital identities, and accessing global information, thereby empowering them. For youth, social media serve as spaces for identity construction, information exchange, and peer interaction, while simultaneously exposing users to risks related to misinformation and digital overuse. The relevance of this study is determined by the growing impact of social media on youth in Kazakhstan within the context of rapid digital transformation, as these platforms simultaneously create new developmental opportunities and intensify social educational and informational risks. The study aims to analyze the transformation of political communication in the context of digitalization, with particular attention to the role of social networks in shaping socio-digital and informational attitudes among young people. It is important to clarify that the present study does not aim to directly assess political participation or political behavior. Rather, it adopts an infrastructural perspective, examining how everyday digital practices and levels of digital literacy create the underlying conditions that may influence political communication emerges indirectly through socio-educational and informational environments.

The study sets the following research objectives: to identify socio-cultural, technological, and economic problems associated with the use of social media (this includes cybersecurity issues, unequal access, and the potentially harmful effects of foreign or inappropriate content on local values); to identify the opportunities provided by social media, in particular, for education, job creation places and the promotion of local culture, with the aim of encouraging responsible and useful practices for the youth of the region. The following research questions were posed for this analysis: What are the primary motivations for social media use among youth in Kazakhstan? What are the socio-educational implications are associated with these patterns of use? How does digital literacy mediate perceived academic impact?

Additionally, this study employs a mixed approach based on a thorough review of the literature. This method allows for the synthesis of diverse data to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture. The sources will include recent empirical

studies on the impact of digital technologies in Central Asian countries. The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand the role of social networks in a local context characterized by unique challenges. In Kazakhstan, where access to traditional educational and economic resources remains limited, social networks represent both a development lever and a source of new risks [2].

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine patterns of social media use and their perceived academic and socio-digital implications among youth in Kazakhstan. A stratified quota sampling strategy was used to ensure proportional representation by gender, age group, and place of residence. Inclusion criteria included between 15-35 years, permanent residence in Kazakhstan, active use of at least one social networking platform and informed consent to participate. The final sample consisted of N=500 respondents aged 15-35 years, corresponding to the official definition of youth in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Table 1. Sample Structure (N=500)

Variable	Category	n	%
Place of Residence	Urban	350	70%
	Rural	150	30%
Gender	Female	260	52%
	Male	240	48%
Age groups	15-19 years	110	22%
	20-24 years	140	28%
	25-29 years	135	27%
	30-35 years	115	23%
	Total	500	100%

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 48 items, divided into five sections:

1. Demographic characteristics
2. Patterns of social media use (frequency, platforms, time spent)
3. Motivation for use (based on Uses and Gratifications theory)
4. Perceived socio-cultural and educational impact
5. Perceived risks (addiction, misinformation, mental health).

Time spent on social media was measured as self-reported average daily usage in hours. Perceived academic impact was measured using a composite scale of Likert-type five-point scales 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. The perceived academic impact scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha=0.81$), while the digital literacy index showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha=0.84$).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and included: descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages), cross-tabulations, chi-square tests for categorical associations, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA for age-group comparisons, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression analysis to identify predictors of perceived impact. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level (two-tailed tests).

The study complied with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For respondents under 18 years of age, parental consent procedures were implemented. Data were anonymized and analyzed in aggregate form. The study does not include direct measures of political participation or political efficacy. Instead, it focuses on socio-digital and educational indicators, reflecting an infrastructural approach in which emphasis is placed on the conditions shaping exposure to political content rather than on explicit political behavior

urvey did not directly measure political participation or political efficacy; rather, it focused on broader digital engagement patterns and perceived socio-educational outcomes. The study deliberately focuses on socio-digital and educational indicators rather than direct political variables. The design reflects an infrastructural approach to political communication, where emphasis is placed on the conditions and environments that shape exposure to political content, rather than on explicit measures of political engagement.

Literature Review

Recent studies emphasize that digital media have transformed the nature of political communication by expanding the range of actors, channels, and interaction formats. According to Oparaugo (2021), political communication in the digital age involves not only traditional media institutions, but also social media platforms that enable direct interaction between political actors and citizens. These platforms facilitate the production, dissemination and interpretation of political messages in more decentralized and interactive ways, thereby reshaping the structure of public discourse [1]. At the same time, the diversification and fragmentation of media environments have led to more personalized and algorithmically curated information exposure. These transformations have significantly influenced political campaigns, media strategies and patterns of citizen engagement (Owen, 2017) [2]. Such changes highlight the shift from traditional mass communication models toward complex digital ecosystems, where social media function as infrastructural environments shaping both informational flows and public discourse [3].

Youth is a socio-demographic category characterized by the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is often defined by biological, psychological, and social criteria, including age, but its meaning varies depending on the cultural and geographical context. Nevertheless, they play a central role in the socio-economic dynamics of the region due to their rapid adoption of new technologies [4]. On the other hand, social networks are digital platforms that allow people to create profiles, communicate with other users, and share various content. These platforms are divided into several categories:

General social networks: Facebook, used for maintaining personal and professional connections; WhatsApp, focused on instant messaging. Social networks based on sharing visual content: Instagram and TikTok, popular among young people for sharing photos and videos.

Professional social networks: LinkedIn is beginning to transform into a platform for professional communication [5]. Opportunities: Social networks provide opportunities for personal development, learning, entrepreneurship, and social mobilization [6]. They also contribute to the promotion of local culture and the development of digital skills among young people. The theory of consumer satisfaction, developed in the 1940s and refined by Blumler and Katz in the 1970s,

explores why people choose specific media resources and how these choices satisfy their specific needs [7]. In the context of social media, this theory identifies several motivations:

- Social needs: Maintaining relationships and developing a network of friends [8].
- Information needs: Searching for news and educational content [9].
- Self-expression needs: Creating and sharing content to assert one's identity [10].
- Entertainment: Watching videos, memes, and other entertaining content [11].

Among Kazakhstan's youth, social media particularly meets the needs for communication and entertainment, while also filling the gaps in traditional media for access to information. However, the instant gratification offered by these platforms can also lead to addiction or compulsive behavior, particularly among young people who lack a structured educational system.

Results

Main reasons for using social networks. The results indicate that communication (40%) and entertainment (30%) remain dominant motivations, while educational (15%) and entrepreneurial (10%) uses are less prevalent. Regression analysis revealed time spent on social media significantly predicts perceived negative academic impact ($\beta=0.41$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, digital literacy level negatively correlates with misinformation susceptibility ($r=-0.36$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher digital competence reduces vulnerability to misleading content. In addition, urban respondents demonstrate significantly higher diversification of platform usage compared to rural youth ($p < 0.05$). These findings confirm the dualistic character of social media influence, combining developmental opportunities with measurable risks. The detailed regression model is presented in Table II.

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Negative Academic Impact

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p-value
Time spent on social media	0.47	0.06	0.41	7.83	<0.001
Digital literacy level	-0.28	0.08	-0.22	-3.50	0.001
Urban residence (dummy)	0.15	0.07	0.09	2.14	0.033
Gender (male=1)	0.08	0.06	0.06	1.28	0.201

Model summary:

$R^2 = 0.32$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.30$

$F(4,495) = 58,21$, $p < 0.001$

Note: B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. Statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis examining the Role of Digital Literacy

Path	B	SE	t	P-value
Time spent → Digital Literacy (a)	-0.31	0.07	-4.43	<0.001
Digital Literacy → Academic impact (b)	-0.26	0.08	-3.25	0.001
Direct effect	0.39	0.06	6.50	<0.001
Total effect	0.47	0.06	7.83	0.001
Indirect effect (a*b)	0.08	-	-	95% CI [0.03, 0.14]

Note: Indirect effect estimated using bootstrap procedure (95% confidence interval). The confidence interval does not include zero, indicating statistical significance.

The mediation analysis results presented in Table III indicate that digital literacy significantly mediates the relationship between time spent on social; media and perceived academic impact. The indirect effect is statistically significant, as the confidence interval does not include zero. This suggests that part of the negative impact of social media use operates through reduced levels of digital literacy.

The results indicate a statistically significant effect of time spent on social media on perceived negative academic impact through digital literacy (95% bootstrap confidence interval does not include zero).

Specifically:

Greater time spent on social media is associated with lower levels of digital literacy (path a).

Higher digital literacy is associated with lower perceived academic disruption (path b). The direct effect remains significant, suggesting partial mediation. In this study, mediation analysis is applied to examine the indirect effect of digital literacy, and the concept of moderation is not used in order to avoid conceptual ambiguity.

Discussion

The present findings reveal a structurally dual pattern of social media engagement among youth in Kazakhstan. Communication and entertainment dominate usage motivations, whereas educational and entrepreneurial applications remain comparatively underdeveloped. This distribution reflects not only individual preferences but also the broader architecture of platform design, which algorithmically prioritizes emotionally engaging and rapidly consumable content.

The predominance of entertainment-oriented use aligns with global scholarship on attention economy dynamics, where algorithmic personalization reshapes patterns of information exposure and cognitive engagement. However, in contexts such as Kazakhstan – where access to traditional educational resources may be uneven – this imbalance acquires particular significance. The limited proportion of respondents using social media for educational and professional purposes suggests that digital environments are not yet fully integrated into structured learning trajectories.

The regression analysis demonstrates that time spent on social media is the strongest predictor of perceived negative academic impact. Importantly, mediation analysis indicates that digital literacy partially mediates this relationship. This finding support theoretical approaches within digital well-being research emphasizing that the consequences of social media exposure are not uniform but contingent upon

users' evaluative and critical capacities. In this respect, digital literacy operates as a mediating socio-cognitive mechanism, reducing vulnerability to distraction and misinformation.

The persistence of a statistically significant direct effect, even after accounting for digital literacy, suggests that structural characteristics of platforms – such as continuous content flow, algorithmic reinforcement mechanisms and short-form visual stimuli – may independently influence academic concentration. This observation corresponds with international studies highlighting the behavioral effects of fragmented attention and compulsive scrolling patterns.

Urban-rural differences in platform diversification further indicate that infrastructural factors shape digital engagement patterns. Youth residing in urban areas demonstrate broader platform use, likely reflecting higher connectivity quality, greater exposure to digital ecosystems, and stronger integration into hybrid educational and professional networks. These findings resonate with regional research on digital inequality in Central Asia, where infrastructural asymmetries continue to influence online participation [12].

The coexistence of reported negative academic effects and positive educational outcomes underscores the ambivalent character of social media; platforms operate as multifunctional environments whose impact depends on usage patterns, competencies and contextual constraints.

Content preference data further reinforce this interpretation. While entertainment remains dominant, the notable presence of educational and informational consumption indicates latent development potential. The underrepresentation of educational content may reflect algorithmic prioritization structures and limited institutional integration of digital resources into formal learning systems [13].

Technological constraints – including high internet costs and connectivity limitations – continue to condition digital engagement. These structural barriers may restrict equitable access to high-quality educational content, thereby reinforcing existing socio-economic disparities [13].

Taken together the Kazakhstani case contributes to ongoing international debates on youth digital practices by illustrating how global platforms logics interact with region-specific infrastructural and socio-cultural conditions. These findings highlight an important conceptual distinction between direct political behavior and the underlying conditions that shape political communication. While the study does not measure political participation explicitly, it demonstrates how digital literacy structure the ways in which individuals encounter and interpret socially and politically relevant information. This suggests that socio-educational factors play a foundational role in the formation of contemporary communication processes.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that youth social media engagement in Kazakhstan remains predominantly oriented toward communication and entertainment, while educational, entrepreneurial and culturally productive uses are comparatively underdeveloped. This imbalance reflects broader platform dynamics characterized by algorithmic prioritization of engaging, fast-consumption content. At the same time, the results indicate that digital literacy functions as a protective factor mitigating adverse academic consequences associated with prolonged social media use.

The analysis suggests that contemporary political communication increasingly unfolds within digital infrastructures structured by platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and emerging networks like Thereads. These environments shape exposure to politically relevant content not through explicit mobilization mechanisms, but through mediated patterns of information circulation, algorithmic filtering and platform logic. As such, the transformation of political communication appears to be infrastructural rather than purely behavior.

Despite development opportunities, several structural constraints remain evident including technological inequalities, limited integration of digital tools into formal education and uneven levels of digital literacy. These factors condition how young people encounter, interpret and circulate socially and politically relevant information.

Strengthening digital literacy education, integrating social media into structured learning strategies and improving digital infrastructure – particularly in rural areas – may enhance the productive and socially constructive use of platforms, including emerging environments such as Thereads and short-form video ecosystems (e.g. TikTok and Instagram Reels). Rather than positioning social media as inherently beneficial or harmful, the findings underscore their multifunctional and context-dependent character. The results should therefore be interpreted within a socio-educational framework rather than direct indicators of political engagement. The study contributes to understanding how digital environments shape the preconditions of political communication, rather than its explicit manifestations.

Overall, the Kazakhstani case illustrates how youth digital practices intersect with the evolving infrastructural foundations of political communication in transitional societies. Future research may expand this framework by directly examining political participation variables and longitudinal changes in mediated political engagement.

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