

THE IMPACT AND POTENTIAL RISKS OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS ON YOUTH AWARENESS

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Abstract. *The rapid development of the Internet and social networks has made them an integral part of modern society, especially influencing the worldview, psychological state, and social behavior of young people. While digital platforms provide new opportunities for education, communication, and self-expression, excessive or uncontrolled use may lead to negative consequences such as psychological dependency, anxiety, decreased real-life social interaction, and susceptibility to misinformation and manipulative content. This article examines the positive and negative effects of the Internet and social media on the consciousness of youth, and analyzes the risks associated with their influence. The study highlights the importance of media literacy, mental resilience, and the role of families, educational institutions, and government policies in ensuring safe and responsible usage of digital platforms. Effective strategies for reducing online risks and enhancing digital culture among youth are also discussed.*

Keywords: *Internet, social networks, youth, media literacy, psychological impact, digital communication, information security, cyber risks.*

The Internet and social networks have become an integral part of modern society, serving not only as a medium for exchanging information but also as one of the driving forces behind economic, political, and cultural processes. In particular, the Internet has become the most important platform for young people to acquire knowledge, communicate and express themselves. Online courses, virtual libraries, and educational platforms expand opportunities for learning, while social networks make it easier to communicate with representatives of different nations

and cultures, form virtual friendships, and publicly express personal opinions and ideas.

However, these broad opportunities are accompanied by various risks. Improper or excessive use of the Internet can negatively affect young people's consciousness. These risks include wasting time unproductively, excessive attachment to virtual environments, social isolation, mental health issues, and susceptibility to information manipulation. The World Health Organization has identified excessive Internet use as one of the modern behavioral health disorders (World Health Organization, 2022). This indicates the necessity of addressing this issue seriously and protecting young people's minds from informational threats.

For this reason, the scientific study of the impact of the Internet and social networks on youth consciousness is of great theoretical and practical significance. Through thorough analysis, it becomes possible to properly direct the positive opportunities of the Internet and minimize its negative consequences.

The positive effects of the Internet and social networks are also multifaceted. Numerous studies emphasize their importance in the field of education. For instance, S. Zayniyeva (2023) notes that learning opportunities for youth have significantly expanded through the Internet. Today, online courses, digital libraries, educational platforms, and virtual training sessions create a new stage in the educational system, providing youth with access to global knowledge through platforms such as "Coursera," "Udemy," and "Khan Academy," beyond traditional school and university curricula.

Moreover, social networks serve as platforms for creative self-expression, showcasing personal achievements, cultural exchange, and international dialogue (Mamajonova, 2022). Platforms like "Instagram" and "TikTok" allow young people to present their creative works to millions of viewers, develop their skills, increase personal recognition, and even generate economic income.

According to the World Bank, the number of Internet users worldwide reached 5.3 billion in 2023, and nearly 60% of them are active on social media (World Bank, 2023). These figures clearly illustrate the global influence of the

Internet on modern life. Research also shows that participation in social networks contributes to the development of communication culture and the ability to understand different cultural environments.

However, psychological and moral risks should not be overlooked. Excessive use of social networks can lead to Internet addiction, emotional pressure, and symptoms of depression among youth. For example, F. Boymurodova and B. Norbekova (2023) found that spending too much time on social networks increases stress and anxiety levels. Similarly, research by M. Norboyeva and G. Allayarova (2023) indicates that the “FOMO” (fear of missing out) phenomenon promotes anxiety, constant self-comparison with others, and emotional discomfort among youth. According to the Pew Research Center (2022), 46% of American teenagers spend at least 5 hours daily on social media, and about 32% report mental health-related issues. These numbers confirm the harmful psychological effects of excessive social media use.

Another serious issue is information security and extremism. Social networks often serve as convenient platforms for spreading extremist messages and radical ideologies. Young people, who still lack developed critical thinking skills, can easily become targets of manipulative propaganda.

According to Cybersecurity Ventures (2022), more than 85,000 websites are attacked by hackers daily, and billions of data records are leaked. This demonstrates the scale of informational threats in the digital environment.

Parents and educational institutions play a key role in developing safe Internet use habits. According to Mizomova and Khasanova (2024), regular parental monitoring and educational discussions significantly reduce the risks associated with online activity. School and university teachers also play a crucial role in fostering informational awareness among students.

At the state level, it is important to strengthen cybersecurity strategies and expand media literacy programs. The European Union has integrated media literacy as a compulsory component of the educational curriculum. For example, in Finland, students are taught how to verify information and identify fake news (European

Commission, 2021). Such practices can serve as a model for Uzbekistan.

The Internet and social networks offer unprecedented opportunities for youth but also pose risks to their psychological, moral, and social well-being. Therefore, developing media literacy, ensuring information security, and forming a culture of conscious and responsible Internet use are essential. This approach strengthens the mental stability of young people, develops critical thinking, and encourages responsible behavior in the digital environment.

Thus, shaping proper Internet use culture has strategic importance not only for the future of youth but also for the moral and social stability, national security, and sustainable development of society as a whole.

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