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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

Abstract: *The article examines the mechanisms through which social media influence young people and their role in the formation of public opinion, with particular attention to Kazakhstan. The study is based on a review of classical and recent research, a secondary analysis of international survey data for 2024–2025 and an analysis of the Kazakh law on online platforms. It is shown that social media have become the main source of news for a large share of young people, and four mechanisms of influence are identified: algorithmic agenda-setting, the replacement of journalists by influencers, emotional and visual framing, and the formation of homogeneous communities. These mechanisms expand civic participation but also accelerate the spread of false information and polarisation. The author concludes that regulation should be complemented by media literacy education, platform transparency and professional journalism adapted to social video formats.*

Keywords: *social media, public opinion, youth, algorithms, influencers, media literacy, Kazakhstan.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifteen years social media have turned from a means of private communication into one of the central institutions of the public sphere. For young people, who grew up with smartphones, platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Telegram are not an addition to traditional media but the environment in which they learn about events, discuss them and form their attitudes. According to the Pew Research Center, 46 % of American teenagers aged 13–17 say they are online “almost constantly”, and about three quarters visit YouTube every day [17]. Kazakhstan shows a comparable level of digital saturation: by October 2025 the country had 19.5 million internet users (93.4 % of the population) and 16.9 million social media user identities, equivalent to 80.8 % of the population [9].

The relevance of the topic is determined by the fact that the mechanisms through which public opinion is formed have changed. The classical theories of the twentieth century described a public sphere organised around newspapers, radio and television, in which professional editors selected the topics of public discussion. J. Habermas viewed the public sphere as a space of rational debate between citizens [7]; M. McCombs and D. Shaw showed that the media do not so much tell people what to think as what to think about [11]; E. Noelle-Neumann demonstrated that people who perceive their opinion to be in the minority tend to fall silent, which strengthens the apparently dominant view [13]. On social media these processes continue, but the role of the editor is increasingly performed by recommendation algorithms and by the users themselves.

Researchers assess the consequences of this shift differently. One group of studies emphasises the risks: the faster spread of false news compared with true

news [19], the formation of “filter bubbles” [15] and echo chambers [5], and the growth of political polarisation [10]. Another body of work concerns the psychological well-being of adolescents. J. Haidt links the rise of anxiety and depression among young people to the transition to a “phone-based childhood” [8], whereas C. Odgers and the authors of an umbrella review led by P. Valkenburg argue that the available evidence shows small and heterogeneous effects and does not prove a direct causal link [14; 18]. A third group of researchers points to the positive potential of social media: meta-analyses by S. Boulianne and Y. Theocharis show a positive association between digital media use and young people’s civic and political engagement [3], and d. boyd describes networked publics as a space where teenagers acquire social and communicative competences [4]. Russian-language research on the “digital generation” likewise stresses that the outcome depends on digital competence rather than on time spent online [2].

Thus, the question is not whether social media influence young people, but through which mechanisms this influence is exercised and how it is reflected in public opinion. The **aim** of this article is to identify these mechanisms and to assess the role of social media in the formation of public opinion among young people. The **objectives** are: 1) to summarise the theoretical approaches to the study of public opinion in the digital environment; 2) to analyse current data on the use of social media by young people as a source of information; 3) to identify the main mechanisms of influence and their positive and negative effects; 4) to consider the regulatory response in Kazakhstan and to formulate recommendations.

METHODS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE RESEARCH

The study is theoretical and analytical and was carried out in three stages.

At the first stage, a review of the scientific literature was conducted. Classical works on the theory of public opinion and mass communication (J.

Habermas, M. McCombs and D. Shaw, E. Noelle-Neumann) were analysed together with recent publications on algorithmic communication, polarisation, disinformation and the mental health of young people indexed in international databases. Preference was given to systematic reviews and meta-analyses published in 2020–2024.

At the second stage, a secondary analysis of open statistical and survey data was performed. The following sources were used: the report “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024” of the Pew Research Center (online survey of 1,391 American teenagers aged 13–17, conducted 18 September – 10 October 2024) [17]; the report “Teens, Social Media and Mental Health” of the same centre, based on that survey [6]; the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025, based on an online survey of almost 100,000 respondents in 48 markets [12]; and the report “Digital 2026: Kazakhstan” prepared by DataReportal [9]. The indicators were compared and summarised in a table. Since these sources use different samples and age groups, the data were used to identify trends rather than for direct statistical comparison.

At the third stage, the content of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 10 July 2023 No. 18-VIII “On Online Platforms and Online Advertising” was analysed in order to assess how the state responds to the risks of the digital information environment [1]. General scientific methods of analysis, synthesis, comparison and generalisation were used throughout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social media as the main gateway to information for young people. The secondary analysis confirms that social media have become the primary channel through which young people encounter information about public life. The main indicators are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Indicators of young people's use of social media as a source of information

Indicator	Value	Source
Social media user identities in Kazakhstan, October 2025 (share of the total population)	16.9 million (80.8 %)	[9]
Internet users in Kazakhstan, October 2025 (share of the total population)	19.5 million (93.4 %)	[9]
American teenagers aged 13–17 who are online "almost constantly", 2024	46 %	[17]
American teenagers visiting YouTube daily / TikTok daily, 2024	73 % / 57 %	[17]
People aged 18–24 naming social or video networks as their main source of news (48 markets), 2025	44 %	[12]
Weekly consumption of news in social video formats (all markets), 2020 → 2025	52 % → 65 %	[12]
Weekly use of AI chatbots for news among people under 25 / all respondents, 2025	15 % / 7 %	[12]
Respondents concerned about distinguishing what is real and fake online, 2025	58 %	[12]
Teenagers who believe social media have a mostly negative effect on people their age, 2022 → 2024	32 % → 48 %	[6]
Teenagers who believe social media have a mostly negative effect on them personally, 2024	14 %	[6]

Note: compiled by the author on the basis of [6; 9; 12; 17]. Data of the Pew Research Center refer to the United States; data of the Reuters Institute refer to 48 markets.

The data in Table 1 show three tendencies. First, access to social media among young people is almost universal, and in Kazakhstan the number of social media user identities continues to grow. Second, news consumption is shifting from text to short video and from editorial brands to individual creators: the share of people who receive news through social video has risen from 52 % to 65 % in five years, and among those aged 18–24 social or video networks are the main source of news for 44 % [12]. Third, young people are themselves becoming more critical of the platforms: the share of teenagers who consider the effect of social media on their peers to be mostly negative increased from 32 % to 48 % in two years, although only 14 % say the same about themselves [6]. This gap between the assessment of "others" and of oneself is consistent with the well-known third-

person effect and shows that awareness of risks does not automatically change behaviour.

2. Mechanisms through which social media shape the opinions of young people. The analysis allows four interrelated mechanisms to be distinguished.

Algorithmic agenda-setting. In traditional media the agenda was set by editors; on social media the selection of topics is performed by recommendation algorithms that optimise for engagement. As a result, the agenda of each user becomes individual, and content that provokes strong reactions receives an advantage. The classical agenda-setting effect described by M. McCombs and D. Shaw [11] is therefore preserved, but its source becomes less visible and less accountable. Young people who scroll a personalised feed rarely know why they see particular content and what remains outside their view.

Substitution of journalists by bloggers and influencers. Young audiences increasingly trust individual creators who address them in a personal, informal tone. Such figures act as modern "opinion leaders" whose authority is based on closeness to the audience and on the number of subscribers rather than on professional standards. This lowers the barrier to participation in public discussion, but at the same time blurs the line between information, opinion and advertising. It is no coincidence that the Kazakh law on online platforms introduces the concept of an "influencer (blogger)" and the obligation to label sponsored content [1].

Emotional and visual framing. Short videos, memes and images convey not only facts but also an emotional attitude towards them. S. Vosoughi, D. Roy and S. Aral showed, on data from Twitter, that false news spread farther, faster and more broadly than true news, largely because they are more novel and evoke stronger emotions such as surprise and disgust [19]. In social video formats, where the decision to continue watching is made in seconds, this effect is intensified. For young people this means that impressions of an event are often formed before they have access to verified facts.

Formation of homogeneous communities. Users tend to subscribe to like-minded people, and algorithms reinforce this choice. M. Cinelli and co-authors, having compared several platforms, found that the segregation of users into homogeneous clusters and the dominance of ideologically close content are more pronounced on platforms with feed algorithms based on engagement [5]. In such an environment the “spiral of silence” described by E. Noelle-Neumann [13] can work at the level of a local community: a young person perceives the opinion of their own group as the majority opinion and either joins it or refrains from expressing disagreement. At the same time, the systematic review by E. Kubin and C. von Sikorski notes that the link between social media and polarisation depends on the context and is not universal [10], so the echo chamber should be considered a risk rather than an inevitable outcome.

3. Positive and negative effects for public opinion. The mechanisms described above have an ambivalent character. On the positive side, social media give young people a voice in public discussion that they did not have in the era of mass media, make it easier to organise volunteer and civic initiatives, and provide access to diverse sources of information and to support networks. The meta-analysis by S. Boulianne and Y. Theocharis demonstrates a positive association between digital media use and young people’s political participation [3]. According to the Pew Research Center, a significant share of teenagers say that social media help them feel more connected to friends, and 34 % at least sometimes find information about mental health there [6].

On the negative side, the same mechanisms make young audiences vulnerable to disinformation, manipulation and hidden advertising. More than half of respondents worldwide (58 %) are concerned about their ability to distinguish between real and fake content online [12]. The rapid spread of AI chatbots and generated content as sources of news – already used weekly by 15 % of people under 25 [12] – creates new difficulties for verifying information. In addition, the debate on the effect of social media on the mental health of

adolescents continues: the U.S. Surgeon General has called for precautionary measures [16], J. Haidt argues for strict limits on smartphone use in childhood [8], while C. Odgers and P. Valkenburg with co-authors warn that the evidence of harm is mixed and that the effects differ greatly between individuals [14; 18]. For the purposes of this study, it is important that psychological vulnerability – anxiety, the need for approval, fear of missing out – also increases susceptibility to the opinions of the group and to emotional content.

4. Regulatory response in Kazakhstan. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Online Platforms and Online Advertising", which entered into force in September 2023, is an attempt to adapt the legal framework to the new information environment [1]. The law defines the concepts of an online platform, an influencer (blogger), sponsored content and false information, establishes the obligation to label online advertising, regulates the procedure for handling user complaints and the removal of false information, and sets requirements for the presence of platform representatives in the country. From the point of view of the formation of public opinion, the most significant provisions are those that increase the transparency of advertising by bloggers and give users tools to respond to false information. At the same time, legal measures alone cannot solve the problem: their effectiveness depends on enforcement practice, the observance of freedom of expression and, above all, the ability of young people to evaluate information critically.

Based on the analysis, the following directions for reducing the risks and strengthening the positive potential of social media can be proposed: the inclusion of media and information literacy, including the recognition of generated content and hidden advertising, in school and university curricula; increasing the transparency of recommendation algorithms and giving users the option of non-personalised feeds; the presence of professional journalism in the formats that young people actually use – short video, podcasts and messenger channels; and the involvement of young people themselves as producers of high-quality content,

which turns them from objects of influence into active participants in public discussion.

CONCLUSION

Social media have become the main environment in which young people receive information and form their attitudes towards public life. In Kazakhstan four in five residents have social media accounts, and internationally almost half of young adults name social and video networks as their main source of news.

The influence of social media on the formation of public opinion among young people is exercised through four mechanisms: algorithmic agenda-setting, the replacement of professional journalists by bloggers and influencers, emotional and visual framing of information, and the formation of homogeneous communities. These mechanisms do not cancel the classical theories of public opinion but transfer them to a new, less transparent and more personalised environment.

The consequences of this influence are ambivalent. Social media expand civic participation and give young people a voice, but they also accelerate the spread of false information, hidden advertising and polarisation, and the scientific debate on their effect on mental health remains open. Kazakhstan has responded with the Law “On Online Platforms and Online Advertising”, but regulation must be complemented by systematic media literacy education, greater platform transparency and the adaptation of professional journalism to the formats that young audiences prefer. Further research should include empirical surveys of Kazakhstani students to assess how these mechanisms work in the national context.

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