



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN AND URGENT ISSUES IN THEIR PROTECTION

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Abstract

In recent years, digital technologies have rapidly developed, and social networks have become an integral part of the lives of school-aged children. This article analyzes the impact of social networks on children's mental health, including risks such as online bullying, social isolation, and the emergence of psychological problems. The article emphasizes the importance of cooperation among all sectors of society to ensure the safe use of social networks.

Keywords: Social networks, children's mental health, cyberbullying, digital literacy, online safety, parental control, educational institutions.

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of digital technologies has introduced new forms of information exchange, communication, and entertainment across the globe. The widespread use of the Internet and the penetration of mobile devices into nearly every household have led social media platforms to become an integral part of people's daily lives—particularly that of children and adolescents. Uzbekistan has not remained isolated from this global trend. Among school-aged children, there has been a significant increase in the use of platforms such as Telegram, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.



These platforms are no longer merely sources of information; they are becoming spaces for self-expression, social interaction, leisure activities, and even identity formation.

While the widespread use of social media brings about various opportunities, it also reveals a number of negative factors affecting the psychological and social development of children. As such, this phenomenon requires serious psychological and pedagogical examination beyond its technological conveniences.

The importance of safeguarding the mental health of young people has been highlighted in several national policy documents. Notably, the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ–3907, dated August 14, 2018, titled **“On measures to raise the system of spiritual, moral, and physical education of youth to a qualitatively new level”**, underlines the significance of nurturing a morally rich, intellectually capable, and well-rounded younger generation as a national development priority.

In light of this, analyzing the psychological impacts of the increasingly dominant role of social media in the lives of children and adolescents has become a critical task. In an era of rapidly evolving information technologies, the creation of a healthy digital environment that directly influences the consciousness of young users—and the development of systemic measures to prevent adverse outcomes—has become a responsibility not only of educators and psychologists, but of society as a whole.

Social media has indeed expanded children’s access to information, communication, and self-expression. However, these opportunities are accompanied by a range of risks:

Many school-aged children in Uzbekistan spend most of their free time on TikTok, Instagram, or Telegram channels and groups, leading to excessive attachment to the virtual world. This may result in a reduced interest in real-life interactions, social isolation, and an increased sense of loneliness.

Content created by influencers and celebrities that portrays idealized lifestyles fosters a tendency among children and adolescents to compare themselves to others. This often leads to distorted self-evaluation, diminished self-worth, and in severe cases, the emergence of depressive symptoms and even suicidal ideation.

One of the most serious social issues emerging on digital platforms is **cyberbullying**, which significantly affects young users. Cyberbullying not only reduces their sense of safety but also causes psychological stress and anxiety, undermines self-esteem,



and damages the quality of social relationships. These effects can severely hinder personal development. Therefore, educational institutions and social bodies must focus on effective mechanisms for identifying, preventing, and addressing cyberbullying.

In the context of Uzbekistan, family values play a pivotal role in shaping children's upbringing. As such, parents and educational institutions bear significant responsibility in ensuring the safe and informed use of social media by children. However, many parents lack the necessary digital literacy and skills to effectively monitor their children's online activities. This creates vulnerabilities in protecting children from online threats.

In this regard, school psychologists and educators must take an active role in fostering children's digital literacy. They should not only work to shield students from harmful content but also equip them with essential knowledge about online safety, critical media awareness, and responsible Internet use. These efforts are crucial for increasing digital culture among youth and ensuring effective protection from negative online phenomena such as cyberbullying.

The government of Uzbekistan has adopted a number of important legal and strategic documents aimed at protecting children. These include the Law "On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child", the National Information Security Strategy, and the State Program on Strengthening Youth Health for 2022–2026. These legal frameworks establish strong foundations for protecting children from harmful effects on social media and ensuring their safety in digital spaces. However, the effective implementation of these policies in practice remains a pressing and critical issue.

Creating conditions for real enforcement—through inclusive approaches and efficient monitoring systems—is essential to enhance children's online safety. Furthermore, establishing robust cooperation between state educational institutions and families is a key mechanism in ensuring cybersecurity for the younger generation.

In today's digital age, where social media has become an inseparable part of children's lives, safeguarding their mental health is a vital and shared responsibility. Children are increasingly exposed to various streams of online information that directly or indirectly affect their psychological state, personal development, and social behavior.

Specifically, exposure to harmful content, misinformation, cyberbullying, and idealized portrayals of life may lead to a decline in self-confidence, indifference



toward real-life experiences, increased anxiety, and symptoms of depression. Combating these negative tendencies requires not only protecting children from harmful digital content but also enhancing their digital literacy and cultivating critical thinking skills.

Moreover, parents and educators must acquire sufficient knowledge of modern information technologies and digital platforms, establish open and trusting communication with children, and be able to guide their online behavior in a healthy manner. Organizing specialized training, workshops, and educational programs is a practical and necessary step in this direction.

Most importantly, in the absence of effective, continuous, and systematic collaboration among key societal institutions—namely, government agencies, family structures, and educational organizations—the mental well-being, cognitive resilience, and social integration of the younger generation may be seriously compromised. This tri-sectoral partnership plays a crucial role in creating a comprehensive support system that addresses the psychological, emotional, and behavioral challenges children and adolescents face in the digital age.

The dynamic and often unregulated nature of the online environment exposes minors to a wide array of risks, ranging from cyberbullying and misinformation to exposure to harmful and inappropriate content. Without a coordinated response strategy involving all stakeholders, efforts to shield young users from such dangers may remain fragmented and insufficient. Government institutions are responsible for developing regulatory frameworks and policies that ensure digital platforms are held accountable for protecting underage users. At the same time, educational institutions must integrate digital literacy, online ethics, and emotional intelligence into the curriculum to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate virtual spaces safely and responsibly.

Equally significant is the role of the family as the child's first line of defense and emotional support system. Parents and caregivers need to be empowered through awareness programs and technological training to effectively supervise and guide their children's digital behavior. A home environment characterized by open communication and trust enhances a child's ability to share their online experiences, thus enabling timely intervention in the face of psychological distress or online threats.



Hence, in today's complex digital ecosystem, ensuring the online safety of children and adolescents should no longer be viewed as an isolated task but rather as a fundamental pillar of national development strategies. Comprehensive, inter-institutional collaboration is not only desirable but essential to creating a resilient generation that is mentally sound, socially adaptable, and prepared to face the multifaceted challenges of the digital world. The digital safety and psychological well-being of young people must be prioritized as an integral part of building a healthy, forward-looking, and sustainable society.

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