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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON KAZAKHSTANI YOUTH'S POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, an extensive corpus of works has been published on the impact of social media on political behavior and youth participation. Many scholars argue that social networks stimulate the activity of youth in both online and offline political life. In Kazakhstan, the young generation actively uses social media and is constantly exposed to the political content they contain. On the one hand, social media is an indispensable platform for collective discussion and youth involvement in socio-political processes. On the other hand, due to the large amount of information on social networks, most people are not selective about the reliability of the information they receive. This study aims specifically to focus on the influence of social media Instagram, Facebook and YouTube on the political behavior of the Kazakhstani "Generation Z" (those born in the digital world). The research objectives of this work are achieved through an extensive review of relevant literature, as well as through a thorough analysis of the results of online surveys ($n = 272$) of young people aged 18-21 living in Almaty. In the context of this study, political behavior will relate to how young people use social networks to send and receive political information, and how social media shape their political views, beliefs, and political activism. The results of the study showed that political content on social networks enhances the level of political awareness and understanding of the Kazakhstani "Generation Z," fosters a sense of belonging to its society and a desire to contribute to the country's sustainable democratic development. At the same time, political information on social media does not sufficiently stimulate active offline participation of youth or increase their confidence in the ability to influence political leaders and the government.

Keywords: social media, social networks, youth, Kazakhstan, political participation, political behavior, democratization.

Introduction

Internet access in Kazakhstan has expanded significantly over the past decades. With the rapid surge in the number of smartphone users and the availability of mobile Internet in Kazakhstan, social media began to play a prominent role in the people's daily lives. They began to not only supplement the traditional media, but to gradually displace them,¹ since Internet users often use smartphones to keep abreast of socio-political events in the country and the world. Today, the following social networks are prevalent in Kazakhstan: Facebook, Instagram, VKontakte, along with WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram and other media platforms, thanks to which Kazakhstan people actively read news, blogs, watch videos and participate in social and political discussions.² According to statistical data, approximately 14.6 million mobile subscribers in a country with a population of about 18 million people get access to the Internet via their mobile devices.³ In January 2020, 9,246,000 Facebook users and 8,266,000 Instagram users were registered in Kazakhstan, which amounted to 49.1% and 43.9% of the country's total



population. People between 25 and 34 are the largest group of Facebook users (3,700,000 people) and Instagram (3,400,000 people) in Kazakhstan.⁴ According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on youth policy,⁵ the category of youth refers to people between 14 and 29, but in some documents in Western countries the upper age limit for “youth” is 34-35 years.⁶ It turns out that youth is the largest group of social media users in Kazakhstan. Since young people primarily use social networks, they see numerous political messages throughout the day: information from the Instagram news feed, daily Facebook posts, political debates on YouTube, or WhatsApp messages from a friend or family member. According to researchers,⁷ political content posted on social media affects people’s political knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and political participation. That is why the purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of political content obtained from social media on the political behavior of 18 to 21-year-old youth living in Almaty, Kazakhstan (between October and December 2019). This choice of the respondent group is not accidental. First, young people born in 1998-2001 belong to “Generation Z,”⁸ which differs from the previous generation in that it grew up with gadgets in their hands and constant access to the Internet. Therefore, the study of the political behavior of this age group of young people seems to be the most interesting. Secondly, the study was conducted among young people living in the city of Almaty at the time of the survey. Among them there are university students from Almaty, and young people working (or looking for work). The survey involved both Almaty residents, and young people from other Kazakhstan regions who resided in Almaty on a permanent basis for study and/or work reasons. Almaty is one of the most attractive cities in Kazakhstan for students and working youth, as this city has more than 40 higher education institutions⁹ and a wide range of jobs: state and private companies, international and non-governmental organizations, etc.¹⁰ Moreover, compared with other cities of Kazakhstan, Almaty is distinguished not only by its developed infrastructure, but also by its rich social life and mild climate.

Research Methodology

This article uses a quantitative research method, namely a survey. Survey questions are either open-ended or closed-ended, some questions use the Likert scale.¹¹ The survey questions were designed to find out, first of all, whether social networks increase the level of political awareness and knowledge in youth. Secondly, they aimed to discover how social networks influence youth political behavior, attitudes and participation. In the context of this study, political behavior refers to how young people use social networks to send and receive political information, and how information received from social networks affects their political views and beliefs.

A quantitative survey was conducted using the Survio platform. The online survey involved 272 respondents born in 1998-2001. The sample of participants is representative. The selection criteria were age, gender, ethnicity, residence in the city of Almaty.

Table 1

Youth Sample (18-21 y.o.), Almaty, Kazakhstan

Respondents' Parameters	Percentage in Almaty	Number of Respondents
18 years old	23	63
Male	46.5	29
Female	53.5	34
Kazakh	53.03	33
Russian	33.16	21
Other ethnicities	13.8	9
19 years old	26.2	71
Male	46.8	33
Female	53.2	38
Kazakh	53.03	38
Russian	33.16	24
Other ethnicities	13.8	9
20 years old	26.2	71
Male	46.5	33
Female	53.5	38
Kazakh	53.03	38
Russian	33.16	23
Other ethnicities	13.8	10
21 years old	24.6	67
Male	47.7	32
Female	52.3	35
Kazakh	53.03	36
Russian	33.16	22
Other ethnicities	13.8	9
Total: 272 people		



The total number of young people in Almaty aged 14–29 years is 432,952.¹² The number of young people aged 18-21 in Almaty according to the census is 147,417.¹³ Of these, 18-year-old citizens of Almaty make up 23% of the total number of young people aged 18-21; 19-year-olds—26.2%; 20-year-olds—26.2% and 21-year-olds—24.6%. Nevertheless, although the respondents lived in the city of Almaty during the survey, it does not mean that they were born in this city, as many of them moved to Almaty from different regions of Kazakhstan temporarily for study, work or permanent residence (see Table 1).

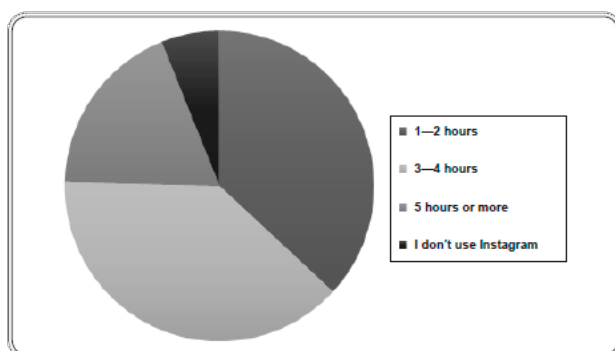
Research Results

This section, in particular, will examine whether the 18 to 21-year-old youth of Almaty are interested in politics; Do they use social networks to read the news, posts by political scientists and public figures? What social networks do they use for their political education? How many political messages on social networks per day do they receive and share? Do they participate in discussions of news? Do they consider themselves politically informed and active? A number of other issues are also addressed. Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, the three most common social networks in Kazakhstan, were selected for the purposes of this study.

To the question “How much time do you spend on Instagram per day?”, 36.9% of Almaty youth answered that they spend 1-2 hours on Instagram per day; 38.5% of youth spend 3-4 hours and 18.5% of respondents spend more than 5 hours per day. In total, 93.9% of young people use Instagram every day, and 6.1% said they did not use this online application (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1

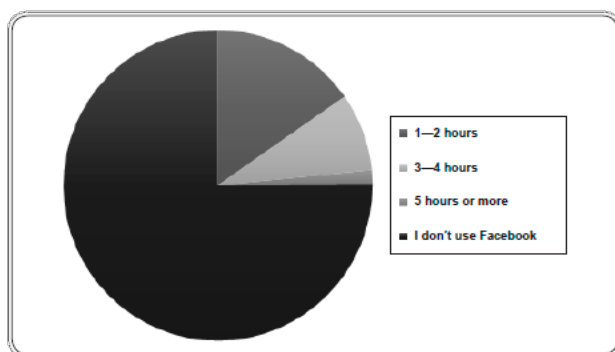
How Much Time Do You Spend On Instagram Per Day?



A similar question about Facebook produced interesting results. 75.1% of respondents said that they did not use this social network at all, with only about 25% of young people using it. Of these, 15.3% said that they spend 1-2 hours on Facebook, 8.1% of respondents spend 3-4 hours, and 1.5% said they spend more than 5 hours on Facebook per day (see Diagram 2).

Diagram 2

How Much Time Do You Spend On Facebook Per Day?



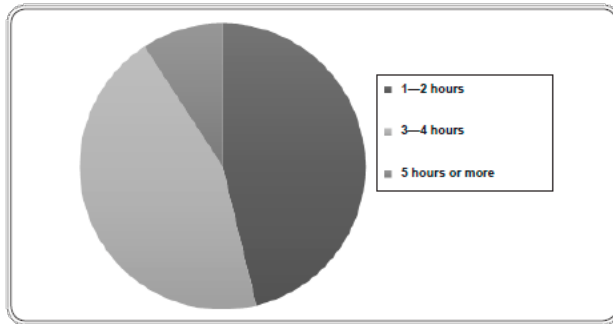
However, there was not a single answer among the respondents that stated that they did not use YouTube. All the young people participating in the survey use YouTube, one of the most popular platforms for free video viewing on a daily basis.

To the question “How much time do you spend on YouTube per day?” 46.2% of respondents stated they spend 1-2 hours, 44.6% 3-4 hours, 9.2% more than 5 hours (see Diagram 3) daily on the platform.

Diagram 3



How Much Time Do You Spend On YouTube Per Day?



Let us examine the results of the survey and Likert scale investigation in relation to the number of youth receiving and sharing political information.

About 80% of the respondents agreed with the statement “I get political information from Instagram,” 47.7% of them fully agree and 32.3% somewhat agree with it. 17% of youth disagree, 3% of the respondents selected a neutral answer.

- 18.5% of the respondents agreed and about 77% did not agree with the statement “I get political information from Facebook.”

53% of the respondents agreed with the statement “I obtain political information from YouTube,” of which 29% completely agree, and 24% somewhat agree. About 40% of young people did not concur that they received political information from YouTube. 7% preferred to remain neutral to this statement (see Table 2).

Table 2

Likert Scale Survey Results (%)

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree, Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree
I obtain political information from Instagram	47.7	32.3	3	4.7	12.3
	Agree: 80			Disagree: 17	
I obtain political information from Facebook	7.7	10.8	4.6	12.3	64.6
	Agree: 18.5			Disagree: 76.9	
I obtain political information from YouTube	29	24	7	17	23
	Agree: 53			Disagree: 40	
I share political posts/messages on Instagram	17	20	3	11	49
	Agree: 37			Disagree: 60	
I share political posts/messages on Facebook	3	6	4.6	0	86.4
	Agree: 9			Disagree: 86.4	

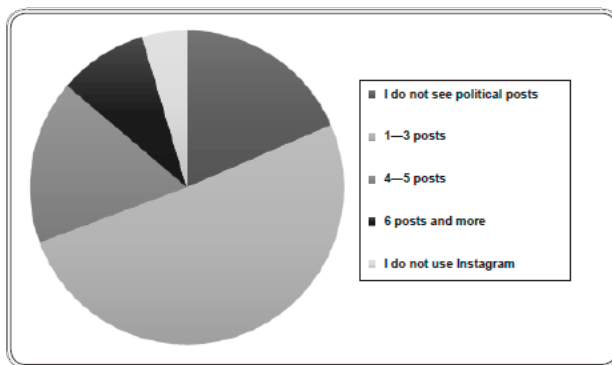
Next, let us consider the results of the survey regarding the number of political messages young people receive per day.

To the question of “Approximately how many political posts do you see on Instagram per day?” over half of the respondents (50.8%) answered that they saw 1-3 political posts per day. 16.9% of young people see more than 4-5 posts of a political nature per day and 9.2% see 6 posts and more. 18.5% of young people who use Instagram said they did not see political information. 4.6% of respondents do not use this application (see Diagram 4).

Diagram 4

Approximately How Many Political Posts Do You See On Instagram Per Day?

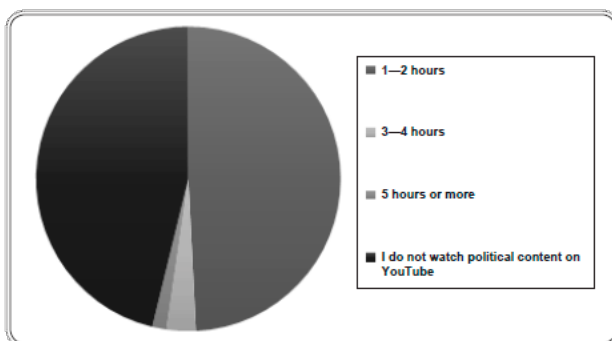




To the question “How much time do you devote to political content on YouTube per day?”, 49.2% of young people responded that they spend 1-2 hours per day watching political videos; 3.1% of respondents spend more than 3-4 hours, and 1.5% spend more than 5 hours per day. 46.2% of young respondents are not interested in political content on YouTube (see Diagram 5).

Diagram 5

How Much Time Do You Devote to Political Content On YouTube Per Day?



Only 9% of the youth answered affirmatively to “I share political posts/messages on Facebook.” 86.4% of respondents said they did not share political posts on Facebook. 17% fully agreed and 20% somewhat agreed with the statement “I share political posts/messages on Instagram.” In total, 37% of young people share political information compared to 60% of young people who do not share political posts on Instagram (see Table 2).

Young people have a sense of belonging to their country, because according to the results of the quantitative survey, the vast majority of respondents aged 18-21 demonstrate their interest in what is happening in the country (94%) and in politics (75.3%) (see Table 3).

Approximately 66% of young people aged 18-21 years agreed with the statement “I actively read news on social media and websites.” Just over half of the respondents (50.7%) actively read posts by political scientists, public figures and bloggers on social media (see Table 3).

Table 3

Likert Scale Survey Results (%)

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree, Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree
I am interested in what is going on in Kazakhstan	55.4	38.5	1.5	3	1.6%
	Agree: 93.9			Disagree: 4.6	
I am interested in politics	33.8	41.5	10.8	7.7	6.2
	Agree: 75.3			Disagree: 13.9	
I actively read news on social media and websites	38.5	27.6	9.2	7.7	17
	Agree: 66.1			Disagree: 24.7	
I actively read posts by political scientists, public figures and bloggers on social media	29.2	21.5	12.3	4.6	32.4
	Agree: 50.7			Disagree: 37	
I consider myself politically well-informed	27.7	33.8	13.8	15.4	9.3
	Agree: 61.5			Disagree: 24.7	
I consider myself politically active	9.2	32.3	17	20	21.5
	Agree: 41.5			Disagree: 41.5	

In addition, the majority of young people feel politically informed with the help of social media—this is the answer of 61.5% of



respondents, as opposed to 24.7% who consider themselves to be politically uninformed. In particular, 27.7% of the Almaty youth fully agree with the statement “I consider myself politically informed,” and 33.8% somewhat agree with it. 15.4% of young people tend to somewhat disagree with this statement. 9.2% of young people believe that they are not politically informed (see Table 3).

- 41.5% of young people agreed with the assertion “I consider myself politically active,” the same number of respondents identified themselves as politically passive, and 17% chose a neutral answer (see Table 3). Many studies have demonstrated that a high level of political efficacy is positively correlated with a high level of political participation, and that a low level of political efficacy explains the low level of political participation.¹⁴ Accordingly, it is advisable to examine the level of political efficacy among the youth in Almaty, in other words, the faith in their power to influence the actions of their country's government and political leaders.

The level of political efficacy among the majority of 18-21-year-old Almaty youth remains very low. Thus, only 25.7% of young people agreed with the statement “My vote/opinion is important for the state.” An impressive number—62.6% of youth believe that their vote and opinion is not important for the state. About 12% of the respondents decided to abstain and demonstrated a neutral position.

There are many ways in which the political efficacy of citizens can be manifested: through social media, the media, protests and rallies, free elections, etc.¹⁵ Approximately 60% of young people question the effectiveness of the methods described in the statement “If I publicly express my opinion (in a blog post, an interview on TV or social networks, with a banner in my hands), the government will take it into account.” Despite this, 23.1% of respondents believe that public statements somehow affect the authorities' decisions. At the same time, half of young people agree that government officials have become more concerned with what the young people think, and it is the result of active online citizen participation. And if each of them had the opportunity to directly influence the decision of the authorities, then more than 90% of the youth responded that they would take advantage of this opportunity (see Table 4).

Table 4

Likert Scale Survey Results (%)

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree, Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree
When I read political news, I understand almost everything I read	40.2	34.3	7.4	12.1	6
	Agree: 74.5			Disagree: 18.1	
I often discuss politics with my family, friends, fellow students and colleagues	29.2	41.5	12.3	13.8	3.2
	Agree: 70.7			Disagree: 17	
My vote/opinion is important for the state	13.8	11.9	11.9	32.8	29.8
	Agree: 25.7			Disagree: 62.6	
If I publicly express my opinion (in a blog post, TV or social media interview, with a banner in my hands), the government will take it into account	4.6	18.5	17	24.6	35.3
	Agree: 23.1			Disagree: 59.9	
Internet helps people like me participate more in politics online	39.3	36.4	12	6	6.3
	Agree: 75.7			Disagree: 12.3	
State authorities began to take opinions of people like me into account because of people's active online participation	13.8	37	18	16	15.2
	Agree: 50.8			Disagree: 31.2	
If I could directly affect decisions made by authorities, I would take advantage of this opportunity	69.2	21.5	4.6	3.2	1.5%
	Agree: 90.7			Disagree: 4.7	

Conclusion

Several interesting results emerged as we summarize the analysis of the data collected from the Likert scale part of the study and the survey results.

First of all, it concerns the support from social media: 66.1% of young people aged 18-21 are interested in news on social networks and websites; about half of young people (50.7%) read the posts by political scientists, public figures and bloggers; 70.7% of young people discuss political news they have read on social networks with their family, friends and acquaintances. Moreover, 74.5% of young people have no difficulty comprehending the text when reading political news.



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Secondly, 18 to 21-year-old youth primarily obtains political news through Instagram and YouTube, while Facebook is practically ignored. In particular, it turned out that about 94% of youth use Instagram daily, and 80% of youth receive political information. Despite the fact that 100% of the respondents stated that they use YouTube every day, only half (53%) of young people obtain political information on YouTube daily. It is worth noting that the purpose of this study was not to analyze all common social media in Kazakhstan, therefore, the three above-mentioned platforms were selected among all existing options.

Thirdly, in our opinion, there is a relationship between the time spent on social networks and the level of political literacy and awareness. For example, the majority of young people (61.5%) are politically informed through social networks. Consequently, the more time young people spend on social media, the more political information they receive, thus becoming more politicized. It is also worth noting that young people are a source of information for their environment, as they share the information received on social networks through Instagram with friends and acquaintances and discuss it.

17% of the respondents remained neutral to the statement “I consider myself politically active,” while the remaining 83% of respondents split up into two equal groups: 41.5% consider themselves politically active, and 41.5%—politically passive. There is an ambiguous understanding of political activity by youth. However, most respondents feel involved in politics, at least online, with the help of social media. So, 75.7% of young people agreed and 12.3% did not agree with the statement “Internet helps people like me participate more in politics online.” At the same time, the level of political efficacy among the majority of 18 to 21-year-old youth in Almaty remains very low. An impressive number of young people believe that their vote and opinion are not important for the state.

In general, it can be concluded that social networking platforms contribute to increasing youth political awareness, as well as political collective discussion. Although the political activity of young people on social media may not translate into real political activity, the political content consumed by young people on social networks still has a positive impact on their interest in politics, the desire to participate in the country's social and political life and online interaction with civic activists. With the help of social networks, young people feel engaged in politics, and, to some extent, politically active; involved in their society and feel like one with the country. The fact that 93.9% of respondents said they were interested in what was happening in the country and 75.3% were interested in politics testifies to that. Processes of mobilization of citizens and democratic consolidation can be accelerated in Kazakhstan with the help of social media.



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