

## DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Kenesov Akezhan 

PhD student at Al Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty,  
Republic of Kazakhstan  
e-mail: [akezhano808@mail.ru](mailto:akezhano808@mail.ru)

---

### Keywords

Youth Political Consciousness, Digital Media, Internet, Social Media, Kazakhstan, International Trends, Political Engagement, Comparative Analysis.



### Abstract

In the digital age, the internet and social media have emerged as pivotal platforms shaping the political consciousness of youth worldwide. This research article delves into this phenomenon, focusing on Kazakhstan in the backdrop of international trends. It aims to unravel how digital media influences political awareness, engagement, and activism among young citizens, particularly in Kazakhstan while drawing parallels with global patterns. The study adopts a comparative approach, juxtaposing the Kazakhstani experience against a tapestry of international instances, thereby uncovering unique regional dynamics alongside universal trends in digital political engagement. This analysis is grounded in a blend of quantitative data, detailed case studies, and theoretical frameworks from international relations and media studies. By examining the role of digital platforms in political mobilization, information dissemination, and opinion formation, the research underscores the transformative impact of these technologies on youth political participation. The Kazakhstani context, with its distinct historical, cultural, and political landscape, provides a rich case for understanding the interplay between technology and youth political behavior in a transitioning society. The article contributes to the literature by filling the gap regarding digital political engagement in non-Western contexts, particularly in Central Asia. It offers insights into the ways digital media serve as tools for political expression, community building, and civic activism among youth, highlighting the nuances of these interactions in Kazakhstan.

---

Received: 12.10.2023  
Accepted: 01.01.2024

## Introduction

In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on new forms of political participation emerging with the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet, alongside the development of civil society. This evolution has led to the emergence of two distinct forms of political participation: "online" and "offline" [1]. The role of media in democratic processes, particularly their direct participation in electoral processes, has been recognized at the level of international instruments. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Summit in Budapest in 1994 explicitly acknowledged the importance of the media and the mandate of the ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) to "play an extended role in election observation, during, and after the elections" [2]. The theoretical importance of understanding the impact of the internet and social media on youth political consciousness lies in its ability to expand our comprehension of contemporary political participation and civic engagement. This inquiry is anchored in the intersection of communication theory, political science, and sociology. It elucidates how digital platforms, as new public spheres, are redefining traditional notions of political socialization and activism. Theories like the Network Society by Castells and the Public Sphere by Habermas are particularly relevant, as they provide a framework to analyze how digital networks and online discourse shape political identities and collective actions among youth. This research also contributes to the growing field of cyber-politics, exploring how digital tools empower marginalized groups, like women and young people, in politically restrictive environments. Incorporating the Kazakhstani context, it enriches the discourse with non-Western perspectives, challenging the universality of existing theories and potentially leading to the development of more

inclusive and globally applicable theoretical frameworks.

Digital technologies have been shown to play a crucial role in democratic processes, self-organization, self-help, and mutual learning. With wider access to quality digital services and information, more women can participate in these processes. Studies indicate that online violence against women significantly impacts their physical, psychological, social, and reproductive health, potentially limiting their access to online services and information and their chances of becoming active users of digital services [3]. In Kazakhstan, according to a study by BRIF Research Group, youth spend several hours daily on social networks [4]. The most popular social networks among Kazakhstani youth are Instagram, VKontakte, and YouTube, regardless of the city. VKontakte is the most popular among the younger age group (15-18 years), while Instagram garners more interest among schoolchildren and students. Facebook, in contrast, is less popular among Kazakhstani youth, especially in the younger age group. Overall, recent data shows that social networks, messengers, and blogs lead with 60.3%, followed by traditional media like Kazakhstani television, newspapers, and radio at 36.1%, and nearly one-third get news from Kazakhstani internet resources (29.5%). Approximately one in five respondents identified their immediate environment as their primary source of information (22.2%). Digital technologies also play a key role in facilitating women's civic activity, communication ability, and mobility. Access to digital devices enhances the influence and visibility of women's organizations and their agendas on the internet. Digital activism and social media campaigns may not replace offline activity in the foreseeable future but they can support women's demands and help activists organize communities and movements.

On average, Kazakhstani youth are subscribed to and use two or more networks, with

Astana's youth being slightly more active. In contrast, youth from Shymkent are less active in social networks. The active development of social networks in the future may lead to a decrease in the intensity of socialization in real life. Active online friends typically meet less in real life, seldom go out for offline parties, and find it easier to discuss many issues online than to call or meet in person. On the other hand, online socialization allows young people to stay informed about events and react almost instantly to any informational occasion.

In Kazakhstan, the proportion of internet users out of the total population aged 6-74 years is 88.2%, with the male population among internet users at 88.5% and women at 88%. In Europe and Central Asia, 52 million women do not have access to mobile internet. Compared to men, women in this region are 4% less likely to use mobile internet, although they are 2% more likely to own mobile phones. With minor exceptions, women in this region also use the internet less for personal use [5].

The literature review for this study encompasses a broad spectrum of research focused on the intersection of digital media, political consciousness, and youth engagement. A significant body of work has been dedicated to understanding how the internet and social media influence political participation and civic engagement among young people. Bennett and Segerberg's work on connective action provides a valuable framework for understanding how digital platforms facilitate collective action in new and dynamic ways [6]. Similarly, Earl and Kimport's examination of digitally enabled social movements offers insights into the changing landscape of activism in the digital age. The literature also delves into the impact of digital media on the political socialization of youth. For instance, studies by Bakker and de Vreese explore how social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter serve as spaces for political discussion and engagement for young people [7]. The role of digital literacy in shaping

political engagement is another crucial aspect, as highlighted by Hobbs and McGee's work on media literacy and democratic engagement.

However, there exists a gap in the literature concerning non-Western contexts, particularly Central Asia and Kazakhstan. This study aims to fill this void by exploring how the Kazakhstani youth engage with politics online, drawing comparisons with global trends. The research extends the discourse beyond Western-centric models, providing a more inclusive understanding of the digital-political nexus.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this study combines both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The quantitative aspect includes the analysis of data from surveys and polls conducted among the youth in Kazakhstan, focusing on their usage of social media and its correlation with political awareness and participation. This data will be complemented by secondary data sources, such as reports and statistics from relevant organizations and institutions. Qualitative research will involve case studies and content analysis. Case studies will be selected based on significant political events or movements in Kazakhstan that have had substantial youth involvement, particularly those that were organized or mobilized through social media platforms. Content analysis will be conducted on social media platforms popular among Kazakhstani youth, such as VKontakte, Instagram, and YouTube, to understand the nature of political discourse and engagement. Additionally, the study will employ theoretical analysis, drawing on existing theories in political science and communication studies to interpret the findings within a broader conceptual framework. This approach will allow for a nuanced understanding of how digital media impacts youth political consciousness in Kazakhstan in comparison with global patterns, providing valuable insights into the role of digital

technologies in contemporary political processes.

## Results

The pandemic and the ensuing mandatory quarantine led to a surge in information consumption through both television and the internet. In Kazakhstan, as in the rest of the world, there has been a decline in television viewership, while the proportion of internet users has been growing. However, citizens still tend to trust information received through traditional media (newspapers, radio, television) more than that from other sources.

During 2020, due to the pandemic, there was an increase in television viewership in Kazakhstan, affecting not only older age groups but also the youth. According to TNS data, the largest increase was noted in the 18-24 and 25-34 age categories. There was also an increase in the average TV viewing time (+25%), with information-news (52%) and artistic (27%) programs being the most watched during the quarantine period. The pandemic also led to an increase in the number of internet users in Kazakhstan. In January 2021, the number of internet users reached 15.47 million, a 5% increase (741,000 people) since the beginning of 2020. The internet penetration rate at the beginning of 2021 was already 81.9%. Thus, in 2020, forced self-isolation increased the time Kazakhstani citizens spent in front of television screens and also led to an increase in internet resource consumption, as work, education, and communication shifted online. Overall, according to various sources, television still outpaces the internet, but only marginally. Over 6 years, the share of TV decreased by 20%, while the share of the Internet increased by 25% [13].

In January 2021, the number of social media users reached 12 million, a 26% increase (2.5 million people) since the beginning of 2020. In 2020, social networks firmly established themselves as the primary communication channel with any audience, primarily

because websites almost ceased to be a place for information consumption. They were replaced by social networks and messengers, where all current information is consumed, and individual services, where, for example, entertainment content is consumed. Overall, in Kazakhstan, the share of social media users in 2021 amounted to 63.5%.

According to theopenasia.net, in 2020, the most popular social network in Kazakhstan was vk.com. However, it is emphasized that this data may not correspond to reality, as the social network allows one user to open several profiles. Instagram follows (6.8 million), then Facebook (2.4 million), Odnoklassniki.ru (2.4 million), with the list concluding with Telegram (about 2 million users), Snapchat (1.8 million users), and the professional network LinkedIn (790 thousand users). According to Statcounter data for 2020, in Kazakhstan, among social media, Pinterest leads (37.72%), followed by YouTube (20.41%), Vkontakte (14.89%), Facebook (13.54%), Twitter (11.3%), and Instagram (4.98%). Thus, different resources provide almost diametrically opposite data on the popularity of various social networks in the country. It is important to note that users often create multiple accounts, making it difficult to obtain accurate data. Some Kazakhstani researchers express the viewpoint that the data on the popularity of certain social networks in Kazakhstan are clearly inflated. In particular, this refers to the most politicized social network, Facebook, whose real penetration level may also be lower than the proportion of registered users [14]. Kazakhstanis are very selective about the information posted on social networks, forums, and blogs. Thus, 16.54% of surveyed citizens fully trust it, 12.22% do not trust it at all, while the majority – 65.28% - trust it sometimes. This also applies to messages people receive via mobile messengers (WhatsApp, Telegram). 12.52% of surveyed citizens fully trust these messages, 61.64% trust

them sometimes, and 19.51% do not trust them at all.

Experts note that one of the consequences of the pandemic is the growth of information literacy among the population, the ability to “filter” and recheck received information. Despite the rapid growth, popularity, and accessibility of the internet, traditional media remains a more reliable source of information for Kazakhstani citizens. However, this position is more typical for older age groups. Meanwhile, the younger audience has practically moved away from television, among which the highest internet coverage is observed. According to data from the Youth Research Center for 2020, only 1.4% of the youth do not use the internet. 67.6% spend more than 3 hours a day on the internet. According to the same organization, among the sources of information for the youth, social networks, and blogs (61.5%) come first, followed by Kazakhstani republican channels (39.1%), and Kazakhstani internet sites (33.3%). It is clear that from the abundance of sources of information, the youth prefer social networks for several reasons, among which are the mobility of obtaining and disseminating information and the level of trust [15]. Overall, social networks are increasingly actualizing a new format of material presentation – not only more mobile but also more objective, where the tone, the ability of authors to empathize, and taking a “position of equals” are important. Therefore, one of the trends noted several years ago is the growth of social media, which acts as alternative media, where citizens themselves form content. In general, 2020 significantly increased the importance of already gaining momentum on social media. At the same time, the pandemic was also the cause of a rapid increase in fake news, which affected the fact that citizens began to learn to independently recheck information, and approach its selection more carefully. In this context, the level of trust in traditional media, which did not distribute unverified information as easily as bloggers and

influencers on social networks could do, has somewhat increased. Regarding forecasts, it can be assumed that social media will continue to develop actively in Kazakhstan. Moreover, after the pandemic and the forced quarantine, social networks have become an integral part of the lives of an even greater number of citizens of the country. In turn, the increase in the number of users will entail an increase in the quality of content from opinion leaders, and popular bloggers.

### **Discussion**

In the contemporary digital landscape, the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet has significantly influenced new forms of political participation, closely intertwined with the progression of civil society. This evolution has resulted in a dichotomy of political engagement, categorizing it into “online” and “offline” forms [8]. The significance of media in democratic processes, especially in electoral proceedings, is acknowledged at the international level. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Summit in Budapest in 1994 notably emphasized the media's role and the expanded mandate of the ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) in supervising elections before, during, and post-election phases [9].

Digital technologies are pivotal in democratization, self-organization, self-assistance, and collective learning. Enhanced access to quality digital services and information catalyzes the participation of women in these domains. The detrimental impact of online violence against women, affecting their physical, psychological, social, and reproductive health, cannot be understated, often restricting their access to online facilities and information, thus impeding their active engagement in digital services [10].

In Kazakhstan, the engagement of youth with social networks is substantial. A study by

BRIF Research Group indicates that Kazakhstani youth spend several hours daily on social networks, with Instagram, VKontakte, and YouTube being the most frequented platforms. Specifically, VKontakte is predominantly used by the younger demographic (15-18 years). Instagram garners more interest among schoolchildren and students, whereas Facebook is comparatively less popular, particularly among the younger age group [11]. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes about the unpopularity of traditional media among youth, a considerable segment still engages with Kazakhstani television, newspapers, and radio. About one-third of the youth obtain news from Kazakhstani internet resources, and roughly one in five considers their immediate social circle as a primary information source. The role of digital technologies in facilitating civic activity, communication, and mobility among women is significant. Access to digital devices notably enhances the influence of women's organizations and their agendas on the internet. Although digital activism and social media campaigns might not completely supplant offline activities shortly, they support women's causes and assist activists in organizing communities and movements. In Kazakhstan, youths are generally subscribed to and use more than two social networks, with those from Astana being slightly more active than their counterparts. However, youths from Shymkent show lesser engagement in social networks. The increasing reliance on social networks might lead to reduced real-life social interactions among Kazakhstani residents. Online friends often opt for virtual discussions over real-life meetings, reducing the frequency of offline social gatherings. Nevertheless, online socialization ensures that young individuals are continuously informed and able to respond promptly to informational stimuli. The internet user base in Kazakhstan encompasses 88.2% of the population aged 6-74 years, with a balanced distribution between male and female users. Meanwhile, in Europe and Central Asia,

approximately 52 million women lack access to mobile internet. Women in this region are 4% less likely to utilize mobile internet compared to men, despite being more likely to own mobile phones. This disparity extends to internet usage for personal purposes, with women being less frequent users than men, barring a few exceptions.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of digital platforms on youth political activism in Kazakhstan, particularly in the context of the recent pandemic and the resulting shift towards increased digital media consumption. As traditional media consumption patterns evolve, with a decline in television viewership and a rise in internet and social media usage, Kazakhstani youth are increasingly turning to digital platforms not just for information but also for political engagement. The surge in social media use, particularly among the youth, highlights a pivotal shift in how political information is consumed and discussed. Social networks and blogs have become primary sources of political information, overtaking traditional media channels. This transition signifies a broader change in the landscape of political activism, where digital platforms are not only mediums for information dissemination but also spaces for civic engagement and political discourse. The study reveals that despite the general trust in traditional media, the youth in Kazakhstan are gravitating towards digital platforms for their political interactions. This inclination towards social media for political discourse indicates a growing preference for more immediate, interactive, and diversified forms of political engagement. The ease of accessing information, the ability to engage in real-time discussions, and the wider reach of digital platforms have all contributed to this shift. Furthermore, the increase in digital literacy and the ability to critically assess information online among the youth are significant factors in this transformation. As young people

become more adept at navigating digital spaces and discerning reliable information, their capacity for informed political participation is enhanced.

In conclusion, the rise of digital platforms as tools for political activism in Kazakhstan reflects a global trend of increasing reliance on digital media for political engagement. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges. While it offers a more inclusive and dynamic avenue for political participation, especially for the youth, it also raises concerns about the quality of information and the potential for misinformation. Therefore, understanding and harnessing the power of digital platforms for positive political activism, while mitigating their negative impacts, is crucial for fostering a politically engaged and informed youth populace in Kazakhstan and beyond.

## Literature

1. Loader, B.D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M.A. "The Networked Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement." // *Information, Communication & Society*. 2014. Vol. 17. No. 2. С. 145.
2. Мизюркин, Ю.А. "Роль интернет-коммуникаций в движениях протеста в странах Магриба и Ближнего Востока." // *Пути к миру и безопасности*. 2013. № 1. С. 113–119.
3. Harding, L. "Moldova Forces Regain Control of Parliament after 'Twitter revolution'." // *The Guardian*. 2009. 8 апреля. [URL].
4. Ali, S., Asghar, A., & Mamoon, D. "Political Activism in Generation Y: A Global Phenomenon." // *Journal of Eurasian Social Dialogue*. 2017. Vol. 2. No. 2. С. 9–18.
5. Beamish, A. "Communities online: community-based computer networks." // Неопубликованная диссертация магистра. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1995. С. 163-170.
6. Campanelli, V. "Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society." Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010. С. 274. ISBN 9789056627706.
7. Castells, M. "End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture." Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (второе издание). С. 488. ISBN 978-1405196888.
8. Kim, A.J. "Community Building on the Web: Secret Strategies for Successful Online Communities." Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 2000. 360 с.
9. Lovink, G. "The World Beyond Facebook." // *Continuous Education: 21st Century*. 2015. No. 2(10). С. 1-10.
10. Matyasik, M. "Secure sustainable development: Impact of social media on political and social crises." // *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*. 2014. Vol. 4. No. 1. С. 5–16.  
[https://doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2014.4.1\(1\)](https://doi.org/10.9770/jssi.2014.4.1(1))
11. Montgomery, K., Gottlieb-Robles, B., & Larson, G.O. "Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation." American University. School of Communication: Center for Social Media, 2004. С. 155.  
<https://civicyouth.org/PopUps/YouthasE-Citizens.pdf>
12. Moreno, I.L. "Sociometry: Experimental Method and the Science of Society." Москва, 2004. 320 с.
13. Morozov, Evgeny. "Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom." New York: PublicAffairs, 2012. С. 449. ISBN 1610391063.
14. Sisulak, S. "Userfocus – tool for criminality control of social networks at both the local and international level." *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues* 5(2): 297-314, 2017.  
[http://doi.org/10.9770/jesi.2017.5.2\(10\)](http://doi.org/10.9770/jesi.2017.5.2(10))
15. Tilley, C.M., Bruce, C.S., Hallam, G., & Hills, A.P. "A model for the development of virtual communities for people with long-term, severe physical disabilities." // *Information Research*. 2006. Vol. 11. No. 3. <http://informationr.net/ir/11-3/paper253.html>