Social Media and Society

Sosyal Medya ve Toplum

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ABSTRACT

*Modern society is profoundly influenced by social media, which shapes individual behaviors and societal dynamics. Social media has revolutionized social communication, making it more accessible and interactive through web-based technologies. Platforms such as electronic information sites, social networks, blogs, microblogs, and forums enable individuals to connect, exchange information, and share content with vast audiences. However, these advancements are not without their drawbacks. The accessibility of electronic media has also facilitated the spreading of misinformation, misguiding large audiences, and negatively impacting the psychological well-being of young people. **Purpose:** This study examines the effects of social media on society, focusing on the spread of fake news and other negative phenomena associated with social networks. It delves into the psychological impact of social media on individuals, user behavior on platforms, and the influence of misinformation on public opinion. Additionally, it highlights the consequences of sharing personal information—such as correspondence, geolocation, and financial transactions—on social media and explores strategies to mitigate these risks. The study incorporates findings from surveys on user behavior and evaluates the influence of social media on shaping individual and collective actions. **Methodology:** The research employs observation and comparative analysis methods, supplemented by a questionnaire to test hypotheses and gather data. **Scope and sample:** The scope of the study encompasses social media in its broadest sense, with the research sample consisting of social media users. **Results:** The study reveals several key findings:i) The pervasive influence of social media on societal trends.ii) The role of social media in disseminating information, as well as its contribution to the proliferation of disinformation and information overload. iii) The cyclical processing and repetition of content that exacerbates information pollution. The conclusions offer detailed insights into these negative trends and underscore the need for measures to address the challenges posed by social media in modern society.*

ÖZET

*Modern toplum sosyal medyanın etkisi altındadır. Sosyal medya sayesinde gerçekleşen ve bireyin davranışlarını doğrudan etkileyen olaylar vardır. Sosyal medya, web tabanlı teknolojiler aracılığıyla daha erişilebilir ve etkileşimli hale getirerek sosyal iletişimin geliştirilmesi için ideal bir platformdur. Elektronik bilgi siteleri, sosyal ağlar, bloglar, mikrobloglar ve forumlar dahil olmak üzere yeni medya araçları insanların birbirleriyle iletişim kurması ve bilgi alışverişinde bulunması için fırsatlar yaratsa da bazı olumsuz yönleri de vardır. Elektronik bir ortama erişimi olan herkes artık içeriklerini daha geniş bir kitleye ulaştırabilir. Toplumda böyle bir iletişim biçimi genellikle yanlış bilginin dolaşımına, kitle kitlesinin yanlış yönlendirilmesine ve gençlerin psikolojik durumunun bozulmasına yol açar. **Amaç:** Sosyal medya ve toplum hakkındaki bu çalışmanın amacı, sosyal medyanın toplum üzerindeki etkilerini ve sosyal ağlar aracılığıyla yayılan sahte haberlerin ve diğer olumsuz durumların analizini yapmaktır. Makalede sosyal medyanın bireyin psikolojik durumu üzerindeki etkisi, kullanıcıların sosyal medya platformlarındaki davranışları, "sahte haber" sorunu ve bu zorluklarla başa çıkma yolları hakkında bilgi verilmektedir. Sosyal medya kullanıcılarının birbirleri üzerindeki etki gücü ve bu etkinin davranışlarını ne ölçüde yönlendirdiği somut gerçeklerle ortaya konmuştur. Çalışmada ayrıca sosyal medyada kişisel bilgilerin (yazışmalar, coğrafi konum, finansal işlemler) paylaşılmasının sonuçları listelenmekte ve bunu önlemenin yolları hakkında bilgi verilmektedir. Araştırma ayrıca sosyal medyadaki insanların davranışlarına ilişkin anketlerin bulgularını da içermektedir. **Metodoloji:** Araştırma sırasında gözlem ve karşılaştırmalı analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. ve hipotezleri test etmek için bir anket kullanılmıştır. **Evren ve örneklem:** Yazının kapsamı genel olarak sosyal medyayı kapsamaktadır. araştırmanın örneklemini ise sosyal medya kullanıcıları oluşturmaktadır. **Sonuç:** Araştırma sonucunda birtakım sonuçlara ulaşıldı. Bu sonuçlar arasında sosyal medyadan etkilenen toplumda ne gibi olumsuz eğilimlerin yaşandığı da yansıtılıyor. sosyal medyanın bilgi yayılımına, dezenformasyonun yayılmasına, bilgi kirliliğine, tekrarlanan bilgilerin işlenmesine etkisi sonuç bölümünde ayrıntılı olarak anlatılmıştır.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, social media has become an essential component of modern society, fundamentally transforming how people communicate and interact. A significant portion of communication now occurs online, with individuals exchanging information, sharing content, and often favoring virtual interactions over face-to-face exchanges. The digital realm, encompassing the Internet and social media, has evolved into a "virtual neighborhood" where traditional and social media frequently overlap and converge.

Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping the communication environment of contemporary society. To understand its influence, it is crucial to first explore the concept of social media. While there is no universally accepted definition, two prevalent perspectives emerge. The first suggests that a strict boundary between social media and the broader "non-social Internet" is unnecessary, as many online publications include interactive features like comments and user feedback. However, these platforms are still classified as traditional media because their content is created by trained professionals who are compensated for their work. Despite the inclusion of interactive elements, these outlets remain distinct from social media.

Researcher Paul Gillin offers a broader view, describing social media as a "multi-sense concept" encompassing a variety of online technologies designed to facilitate communication and interaction among users. According to Gillin, the defining characteristic of social media lies in its users, who are central to its creation, dissemination, and evolution (2008). This user-centric nature sets social media apart, underscoring its transformative role in modern communication.

Russian researchers emphasize that social media is fundamentally rooted in the principle of participation, where the communication process is characterized by an equal relationship between participants and media institutions. This participatory nature distinguishes social media from traditional forms of communication.

In his book "The Wealth of Networks" (2006), Harvard University professor Yochai Benkler contrasts the industrial information economy with the networked information economy. In the latter, digital technologies and the Internet empower consumers to also become producers of information. Benkler's analysis highlights the differences between social media and traditional media. Traditional media—comprising radio, television, newspapers, and cinema—originates from the pre-network era and primarily operates with one-way communication. In contrast, social media's audience is exponentially larger. For instance, popular Twitter accounts can have more than 40 million followers, and any interaction on the Internet can be viewed and engaged with by thousands in real time. Despite this potential for active engagement, the majority of social media users remain passive, although they have opportunities to provide feedback or share their own content.

Social media grants its users significantly more freedom than traditional media, particularly by allowing them broadcasting rights. This freedom is further amplified by the ability to store information in a digital environment without time or space limitations—a distinguishing feature that sets social media apart (Kırık, 2016, p. 25).

In a globalized and interconnected world, the interests and demands of large virtual audiences drive scientific and technological innovations. However, this phenomenon comes with challenges. While social media strengthens global information management and breaks traditional boundaries, it also has the potential to mislead public opinion, creating confusion, irritation, and even aggression. Excessive reliance on social media can distort societal dynamics, posing risks to both national and state interests.

The advantages of social media can be summarized as follows:

- Job creation and employment opportunities: social media facilitates the creation of various job roles, supporting economic growth.

- Accessible and affordable information: It serves as a fast and cost-effective source for accessing news and information.

- Instant information availability: social media enables users to obtain information in real-time.

- Amplifying voices and social impact: It provides a platform for people to voice their opinions globally and enhances the reach of social projects.

- Versatile communication tool: social media is a convenient means of communication, suitable for diverse contexts.

- Boosting e-commerce: Its role in the growth of electronic trading systems and online shopping is undeniable.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND USERS

Engaging with social media involves activities like creating accounts, posting comments, chatting, uploading photos and videos, reacting to content, and sharing links or customized media like game modifications. These platforms enable interactive communication and the exchange of user-generated content.

Social media offers a unique communication environment that reduces anxiety often experienced in face-to-face interactions. Factors such as not sharing the same physical space or not knowing one another personally can lower communication barriers, making users feel more comfortable and less apprehensive (Aktan, 2018, p. 36).

Russian researchers view social media not merely as a digital communication tool like Facebook but as a system derived from classical social structures and their interactions. Social

media functions as a community that fosters interpersonal communication and is built on three key components: concept, content, and social interaction.

German researchers Andreas Kaplan and Michael Heinlein describe social media as internet-based resources operating on Web 2.0 platforms, enabling participants to create content and exchange ideas (Social Media Research-1, 2015). Their perspective highlights a functional distinction between social media and traditional forms of communication, with social networks being one of the primary categories of social media.

American researchers typically consider social networks as one subset of social media. In contrast, Russian scholars argue that social networks inherently represent communities of individuals with shared interests within the digital space, making them a defining feature of social media. When analyzing social media, it is important to consider both its limited and general meanings. In the limited sense, attention is given to the technical forms and functionalities of social networks. In the broader context, priority shifts to their content and social functions, aligning social media closer to traditional mass media in terms of its societal impact.

In social media, users exert influence over one another, with the degree of influence closely tied to their perceived credibility and prestige. As ideas are exchanged, individual perspectives shift, shaped by those who are trusted and believed most.

However, compared to face-to-face interactions, social media communication has notable drawbacks. Critics argue that it can disrupt both the quality and efficiency of communication. The proliferation of digital tools, such as social networks and computer games, has been linked to negative psychological effects, particularly on children and young people. While live interpersonal communication fosters the development of speech, self-expression, confidence, and healthy dialogue, the rapid growth of social networks has simultaneously eroded traditional family structures and social norms. As Yıldız (2012) observed, "Many people who cannot talk face-to-face can comfortably communicate online, but they often struggle to define boundaries in their interactions" (p. 534–535).

Chinese experts emphasize the growing role of social media in business and government affairs, highlighting its broader social function. Often referred to as "new new media" or the "post-new media" era, social media is viewed as an integrated concept encompassing platforms, resources, and services. Zhang Tszen explains in "Communication in Social Media" that any site with social content can qualify as social media. Its defining traits include

sociability and interactivity, supported by key elements like user-generated content (UGC) and consumer-generated media (CGM). Built on Web 2.0 technologies, social media fosters online communities and facilitates interpersonal connections (Panteleeva and Petrova, 2015).

Social media platforms can be categorized based on functionality: some are designed for data storage, while others prioritize content sharing. For instance, YouTube acts as both a storage space for videos and a distribution platform via shared links. Similarly, platforms like Flickr and Photobucket serve as repositories for photos and videos but also enable sharing capabilities.

Today, over 88% of companies utilize social media for marketing. Businesses recognize the value of diversifying their strategies across various channels, which can be classified as follows:

1. Social networks: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn.

2. Media sharing networks: Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube.

3. Discussion forums: Reddit, Quora, Digg.

4. Bookmarking and content curation Networks: Pinterest, Flipboard.

5. Customer review platforms: Yelp, Zomato, TripAdvisor.

6. Publishing networks: WordPress, Tumblr, Medium.

7. Social shopping networks: Polyvore, Etsy, Fancy.

8. Hobby-based networks: Goodreads, Houzz, Last.fm (Popov, Semyachkov, and Fayruzova, 2019, p. 13).

These platforms highlight the adaptability of social media for diverse purposes, from fostering communication and collaboration to advancing marketing efforts and content creation.

3. THE THREAT POSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FAKE NEWS PROBLEM

The issue of trust in the media has become a central focus of academic research. In the context of mass communication, creating a reliable image for media organizations and earning the trust of the target audience are essential. Audiences, whether readers, listeners, or viewers—prefer content from sources they deem trustworthy. Professional journalists traditionally uphold principles of accuracy and objectivity. However, the advent of digital technology has empowered individuals with internet access to create and share content

widely. Unfortunately, democratization of information dissemination has also fueled the spread of inaccurate and misleading content, particularly on social media platforms.

The structure of new media, which facilitates the rapid circulation of disinformation, plays a significant role in the rise of fake news. Compounding this issue is the willingness of users to believe and share unverified information, increasing its reach and impact. Combating disinformation requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, including news organizations, social media platforms, policymakers, and, most importantly, users themselves (Akyüz, Birol, Kazaz, 2021).

Social media introduces numerous risks that extend to individuals, social groups, states, and societies. These risks include the spread of fake news, which can influence public opinion, manipulate internal and external policies, and dramatize events. Unlike traditional media, social media is not bound by moral or legal responsibilities, enabling the unchecked dissemination of false, slanderous, or biased information. In some instances, it has even become a carrier of a "moral epidemic." For example, the rise of "death groups" on platforms like VKontakte, which promote suicide, highlights the potential harm of social media. Similarly, fascist propaganda, neo-fascist ideologies, and terrorist activities proliferate through these channels, further exacerbating societal threats.

Research underscores the dangers of social media, with studies indicating that 90% of terrorism-related activities online occur through these platforms due to their ability to reach millions of users instantly. Key negative impacts include:

- Increased intrusion into private lives.

- Amplification of betrayal and trust issues.

- Growth of dual identities and personas.

- A tendency to say things online that would not be said in person.

- Formation of "fake heroes" or social media influencers based on popularity.

- Decreased face-to-face communication, leading to loneliness and social media addiction.

Inappropriate content, such as aggression, violence, sexual imagery, cyberbullying, and invasive advertising, further compounds these risks (Dukin, 2015, p. 123).

In response to these threats, several countries have restricted or banned access to social media platforms. For example:

- China and Vietnam: Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and even Google and Wikipedia are banned.

- Iran and Russia: Access to Telegram, TikTok, and Instagram is restricted. In 2018, Russia mandated Telegram to release user messages.

- Middle Eastern Nations: The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia ban platforms like Skype, Snapchat, and WhatsApp.

- Other Nations: Countries including Turkey, Sudan, Syria, and Pakistan have intermittently banned YouTube and other platforms.

In September 2022, Azerbaijan temporarily restricted TikTok, citing concerns over the dissemination of military secrets and misinformation during the Armenia-Azerbaijan border conflict.

Social media and mobile applications frequently manipulate user data, collecting personal information for various purposes. Platforms like WhatsApp openly admit to sharing user data—including correspondence, geolocation, and financial transactions—with Facebook. Such data includes:

- Call logs and frequent contacts.

- User and contact phone numbers.

- IP addresses and locations.

- Online payment details and activity.

Even WhatsApp's statement about sharing user data with Facebook caused millions of users to abandon the platform. Data transfers to Facebook have been ongoing since 2016. This practice raises significant concerns under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which prohibits the collection of user information without explicit consent. Over the years, numerous scandals have highlighted the misuse of personal data. One infamous case involved Cambridge Analytica, which harvested the personal data of 87 million Facebook users to influence political campaigns, including the U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum. As a result, Facebook faced a $5 billion fine (BBC, 2018). Similarly, in 2013, it

was revealed that ONAVO, a free VPN service acquired by Facebook, collected data on users' browsing habits and app usage (Panteleeva and Petrova, 2017, p. 243).

The Chinese app TikTok, banned in several countries, also raises privacy concerns. It collects extensive user data, including names, addresses, passwords, installed applications, internet activity, and even precise location data every 30 seconds (Nazarenko, 2018, p. 71).

The impact of social media on children demands special attention. Internet safety for children aged 9–11 and teenagers revolves around identifying and managing risks, as well as protecting data and privacy. But does banning social media for these age groups provide a solution?

Social media is deeply integrated into apps, games, websites, and even educational platforms, making it difficult to enforce bans effectively. Prohibiting access may only increase a child's curiosity and lead them to use social media outside parental supervision. Instead of outright bans, parents can take the opportunity to educate their children about managing risks, safeguarding their privacy, and behaving respectfully online. This approach helps equip young users with the skills to navigate social media responsibly while mitigating potential harm.

We conducted an online survey via Google Forms among 2,530 school students in Azerbaijan to explore their purposes for using the internet. The survey included participants from the capital city Baku, as well as students from Shamakhi, Ismayilli, Guba and Agdash. While the majority of respondents (62%) described the internet as a source of new knowledge, the remaining students identified it as a means for leisure (26%) or entertainment (12%).

Why do Azerbaijani school students use the internet? Survey results

■ Source of new knowledge   ■ Means of leisure   ■ Entertainment   ■
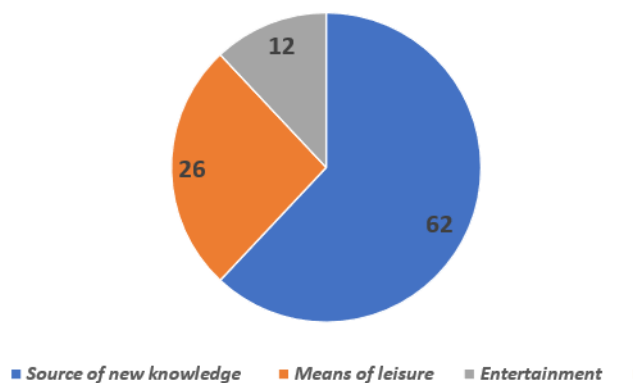
The survey results indicate that the significant amount of time schoolchildren spend in the online space leaves them vulnerable to negative phenomena such as fake news, cyber threats and hate speech. To protect them from these risks, teaching media and information literacy emerges as a crucial necessity. In an era of rapidly advancing technology, isolating schoolchildren from the digital world is far from an effective solution. Equipping adolescents with knowledge in the field of media is essential to ensure their proper use of the internet and ability to benefit from social media responsibly.

4. IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON MENTAL STATE

Social networks have a profound negative impact on mental health, often distorting values and idealizing societal norms. These influences can leave lasting impressions, particularly on teenagers and young people during critical stages of personality development. Internet addiction among children has become a growing concern for both parents and experts addressing child-related issues. Parents who once proudly introduced their children to the Internet at an early age often find themselves seeking psychological help to address problems caused by excessive online exposure. Harmful content on social media, which negatively affects children's mental well-being, is a major contributing factor.

There is no universally effective solution to this widespread issue. While some experts suggest fostering a healthy interest in media among children, complete protection from the Internet's dangers is unrealistic. In today's world, where social media overshadows traditional media, children and young people spend increasing amounts of time online. This overexposure has been linked to feelings of loneliness and depression. Research from the University of Pennsylvania indicates that 25% of individuals who spend an hour daily on social media exhibit symptoms of depression, with the risk decreasing as screen time is reduced.

Mesut Kayan, a renowned Turkish psychiatrist, highlights the severity of social media addiction, describing it as a "serious disease." He notes that it significantly reduces individuals' ability to learn, create, work, and spend quality time with their families. Addiction to social media disrupts mental stability, increases stress, sets harmful examples for children, and weakens family relationships. To mitigate these effects and maintain psychological stability, Kayan recommends limiting social media use to no more than 30 minutes a day (Social Media Research-1, 2015).

The continuous advancement of technology has significantly contributed to social media addiction. Maintaining an uninterrupted connection with the external world through smartphones has become an indispensable part of daily life for many individuals. This dependency has led to psychological reliance on mobile devices, which satisfy the need for constant communication. Today, ensuring the phone is on hand before leaving the house has become a top priority for most people.

Social media enables users to access information anytime, anywhere. While it offers boundless opportunities for information exchange, it has also fostered a type of communication that is standardized, minimal in emotional expression, and predominantly result-oriented. Turkish psychologist Petek Halman observes that individuals who cannot find fulfillment in their immediate social environments turn to social media accounts to meet their need for connection and validation. Social media often serves as a refuge from negative experiences, creating a sense of comfort. However, this reliance can lead to a perpetual desire to stay online, with disconnecting often evoking feelings of failure. Halman notes the extreme reactions of individuals during power outages or phone battery depletion as examples of this dependency (Dukin, 2015, p. 124).

A defining feature of social media is its ability to let users craft their own profiles, using images, photos, or locations to portray themselves in diverse ways. This process occurs without external oversight, public scrutiny, or content regulation. Consequently, individuals can obscure unflattering truths while highlighting their strengths, creating an idealized version of themselves. This pursuit of online validation often devolves into a "race" to gain followers. However, the disparity between a curated online persona and real-life identity can lead to profound depression. As the gap between "who we are" and "who we portray ourselves to be" widens, the psychological toll grows.

5. CONCLUSION

Research by the HUMEL Psychology Center indicates that social media impacts an individual's psychological state in both positive and negative ways.

Social media provides access to essential information, facilitates communication within one's social circle, and supports information exchange, all of which can positively influence mental well-being.

Modern society is heavily influenced by social media, which generates phenomena directly impacting individual behavior. Key examples include:

1. Information overload: Social media creates an illusion of increased knowledge through the proliferation of repetitive "copy of copy" content. Rather than actively seeking information, users are inundated by an overwhelming abundance of targeted content, altering how information is consumed.

2. Event virtualization: Social media audiences often fail to question the objectivity of news or verify its factual accuracy. This leads to the widespread acceptance of "factoids" (unverified or baseless information) over factual reporting, blurring the line between virtual events and reality.

3. Fantasy of authorship: Social media's technological capabilities allow anyone to publish content for a global audience. With over 2.5 billion internet users, nearly anyone can assume the role of an "author." While this democratization fosters self-expression and self-affirmation, it also introduces risks of misinformation and unqualified content creation.

The downsides of excessive social media use include a loss of temporal awareness, leading to physical and mental imbalances. Virtual communication often supplants face-to-face interactions, diminishing social skills and leaving little time for real-life connections. Furthermore, the quality of communication deteriorates as grammatical norms are ignored, language becomes oversimplified, vocabulary becomes fragmented, and emotions are replaced by symbols and emojis. These changes negatively affect the depth and quality of real-world interactions.

Social media's dual role as a tool for connection and a source of psychological stress highlights the importance of balance and mindful usage. The pervasive negative effects of social media stem from its tendency to encourage virtual communication over real-world interactions. This shift to virtualization triggers several adverse reactions across four key areas:

1. Deterioration of real communication: As real-world interactions decline, individuals experience psychological gaps, reduced trust, diminished emotional fulfillment, and deteriorating communication skills. Over time, this leads to increased loneliness and isolation.

2. Anonymity and aggression: Social media removes traditional social boundaries, enabling users to hide behind fake identities. This anonymity allows individuals to

express aggression without accountability, fostering a "fake ego" and toxic online behavior.

3. Discomfort in the real world: Overreliance on virtual environments for socialization makes individuals more comfortable online than in real-life situations. This often results in anxiety and psychological disorders when faced with real-world interactions.

4. Impact on thought and productivity: Social media addiction disrupts goal-setting and time management, causing individuals to focus on immediate gratification rather than future aspirations. This hinders personal and professional growth.

These factors collectively undermine vibrant communication, self-confidence, and mental health, all of which are critical for overall well-being. Social media addiction has become so widespread that it is now classified as a disease in Finland and nine other countries. This addiction paralyzes productivity, reduces trust, erodes personal responsibility, and eventually leads to depression, stress, personality disorders, and even physical health problems. Experts recommend limiting daily social media usage to 60–90 minutes to avoid such pathological effects.

Despite its challenges, user-centered social media offers significant benefits. It diversifies resources, accelerates information dissemination, and transforms ordinary users into active participants in the creation and sharing of content. Unlike traditional media, where professional journalists curate news, social media empowers users to shape the narrative. This shift aligns with the preferences of the younger generation, which increasingly favors new media over traditional outlets.

However, the ease of access to news on social media presents risks. Many users lack the theoretical knowledge to prepare accurate news or verify facts, leading to the unchecked spread of misinformation. To address these challenges, societies are exploring strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of new media. Media and information literacy have emerged as crucial tools in equipping users with the skills needed to navigate and critically assess the digital landscape.

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