

Social and Digital Transformations: The Effects of the Internet on the Younger Generation

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social media on the behavior, perceptions, and daily experiences of young people in Romania, with particular attention to patterns of use, preferred platforms, emotional effects, self-image, interpersonal communication, and educational or professional opportunities. The research is based on a descriptive quantitative design, using an online questionnaire distributed through digital channels to a snowball sample of 100 respondents aged 16–30. The questionnaire included closed and open questions structured around demographic characteristics, frequency of social media use, platform preferences, purposes of use, perceived emotional impact, and the role of digital platforms in personal and professional development. The data were analyzed mainly through descriptive statistics and interpretative discussion of respondents' answers.

The findings indicate that social media is deeply integrated into young people's daily routines. Most respondents use these platforms for recreation, communication with friends, and information, while Instagram and TikTok emerge as the most frequently used platforms. The results also show a dual impact: social media supports connectivity, access to opportunities, and personal expression, but it may also generate pressure related to self-image, social comparison, and excessive screen time. The originality of the study lies in its applied focus on Romanian youth and in its integrated analysis of behavioral, emotional, social, and developmental dimensions of social media use. Practically, the results highlight the need for digital literacy initiatives, balanced online habits, and educational strategies that help young people use social media critically, safely, and constructively.

Keywords: Internet use; social media; youth behavior; digital transformation; online socialization

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Introduction

The transformations generated by digital development are increasingly visible among young people, for whom the use of the Internet and social media has become an integral part of everyday life. In the context of the rapid expansion of information technologies, digital platforms significantly influence the behaviors, lifestyles, communication patterns, and socialization processes of adolescents and young adults. Social networks no longer represent only spaces for informal communication, but complex digital environments that affect the way young people construct their identity, access information, maintain relationships, and participate in social and educational life. This structural change reflects the continuous adaptation of the younger generation to new forms of digital interaction and highlights the need for a clearer understanding of the influence of the virtual environment on social behavior (Bodislav et al., 2020; Smahel & Wright, 2014). Social networks play an increasingly important role in the daily routines of young people, offering not only opportunities for interaction, but also spaces for expression, visibility, and self-affirmation. These platforms facilitate the exchange of information, the creation and maintenance of social relationships, and participation in discussions with personal or collective relevance. Young people use social media to communicate ideas, validate opinions, follow current events, and connect rapidly with different communities and sources of information (Velicu, 2014).

Thus, virtual environments become an important part of how young people perceive reality, define their social positioning, and develop their personal and educational trajectories (Akram, 2018; Beyens et al., 2016).

The interaction between young people and social media is therefore highly relevant, as the online space increasingly becomes a framework in which relationships are built, opinions are shaped, and personal interests are developed (Burlacu & Neagu, 2007). In a constantly changing digital reality, active participation in social networks offers young people multiple opportunities for communication, information, exploration, and social integration. At the same time, intensive use of digital platforms may also generate risks related to emotional well-being, self-image, social comparison, misinformation, and reduced balance between online and offline life (Amedie, 2015; Smits & Mogos, 2014).

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the relevant scientific literature on the effects of Internet and social media use on young people. The second section presents the research methodology, including the research design, questionnaire structure, sample, and data collection procedure. The third section discusses the main empirical results obtained from the questionnaire, focusing on social media usage patterns, platform preferences, perceived effects, and practical implications. The final section summarizes the main conclusions, limitations of the study, and possible directions for future research.

1. Review of scientific literature

The Internet and digital media profoundly shape the lives of the younger generation, and the literature clearly indicates that the social transformations induced by digital connectivity are complex and multifaceted. Recent academic research attempts to quantify the impact of Internet and social media use on adolescents' behavior, mental health, academic performance, and social development, highlighting that the effects are not unidirectional, but the result of the interaction between usage patterns, individual characteristics, and social context (Weeger & Ott-Schwenk, 2017). Widespread access to the Internet has fundamentally changed the way young people communicate and build social relationships. In an era where online interaction is the norm, social media allows adolescents not only to maintain contacts but also to explore aspects of their identity in a visible and immediate environment (Schemer et al., 2020). However, intensive use of digital platforms is associated with significant psychological risks, such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders, resulting from continuous exposure to content and constant social comparisons (Valkenburg & Peter, 2022). Recent meta-analyses indicate that excessive social media use may be a determinant of sleep disorders and poor eating habits in adolescents, which highlights the link between digital use and the physical and psychological health of young people (Dobre et al., 2024).

On the other hand, longitudinal studies suggest that the overall frequency of internet use does not have a significant negative effect on subjective well-being when other factors such as self-esteem or the quality of social relationships are controlled for (Schemer et al., 2020). This perspective contradicts simplistic arguments that the internet is inherently harmful, emphasizing the importance of context and nuanced use of the digital environment (Rădulescu et al., 2019). Research also highlights the psychological mechanisms through which the internet can influence adolescent development; Integrative theoretical models combine insights from developmental psychology with the theory of susceptibility to digital media, suggesting that the effects of social media on well-being cannot be understood without considering individual factors such as emotional regulation, personality, and social support (Nordrum & Gracia, 2023).

Regarding academic performance, digital use has nuanced effects: excessive consumption of social media, video games, or streaming can decrease the time dedicated to study, but the Internet used constructively can stimulate engagement in educational activities without negatively affecting academic performance (Valkenburg & Peter, 2022).

Recent studies highlight the importance of the type of use: digital activities oriented towards learning have positive or neutral effects, while passive consumption oriented towards entertainment or social comparison can have adverse effect (Livingstone et al., 2011). The literature also addresses online risks, such as exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, body image pressure, and constant concern for social validation, all of which can contribute to the emergence of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Platform algorithms and the spiral effect of personalized content can amplify these risks, making adolescents more vulnerable to digital stress. However, there are also clear benefits: social media and online communication provide opportunities for social support, emotional development, and access to communities of common interests, essential for adolescents who might otherwise feel isolated (Dixon, 2023).

Furthermore, research on digital privacy and security decisions shows that young people adopt sophisticated strategies to negotiate the risks and benefits of online connectivity, often prioritizing social connection even over security risks, reflecting a “privacy calculus” in their digital behaviors (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Overall, the literature suggests that the use of digital media is not inherently good or bad; the effects depend on technological features, individual factors, and social context (Burlacu et al., 2025). There is strong evidence that excessive use of digital platforms can negatively affect mental health, sleep, and social behavior, but the internet also offers significant opportunities for learning, communication, and social support when used actively and constructively. This ambivalence emphasizes the need for educational and social policies that promote digital literacy, resilience, and responsible use of technologies to maximize benefits and minimize adverse effects on the younger generation (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Karnegari et al., 2021; Nordrum & Gracia, 2023).

2. Research methodology

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative research design, based on the use of an online questionnaire. The methodological choice is appropriate because the research aims to identify general patterns in young people’s use of social media, their preferred platforms, the purposes for which they use these platforms, and their perceptions regarding the social, emotional, educational, and professional effects of digital interaction. The research does not apply a mixed-methods design in the strict methodological sense, as it does not include interviews, focus groups, methodological triangulation, correlation analysis, or regression models. Instead, the empirical analysis is based mainly on descriptive statistics, supported by the interpretation of the answers collected through the questionnaire.

The research was conducted in order to analyze how young people in Romania use social media and how these platforms influence different aspects of their daily lives, including communication, information access, self-image, emotional state, interpersonal relationships, and personal or professional development. The main objective of the study was to identify the frequency and purposes of social media use among young people. The secondary objectives were to determine the most frequently used platforms, to examine the perceived emotional and social effects of social media, and to assess the extent to which digital platforms contribute to access to educational, career, volunteering, or event-related opportunities.

The empirical research was based on a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions, designed and distributed online through Google Forms and social media channels. The decision to use an online questionnaire was justified by the research topic itself, as the target population is highly familiar with digital communication tools and online platforms. This method also allowed for rapid dissemination of the survey and facilitated access to respondents who actively use social media.

The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were used to collect data that could be analyzed quantitatively, especially through frequencies and percentages. The questionnaire was structured around four main categories of information. The first category included demographic data, such as age, gender, educational level, and occupational status. The second category focused on digital behavior, including time spent daily on social media, frequently used platforms, and the main purposes of use. The third category addressed the perceived emotional and social impact of social media, including its influence on mood, self-image, social comparison, and interpersonal relationships. The fourth category examined the educational and professional relevance of digital platforms, especially the extent to which young people use social media to obtain information, discover opportunities, or support personal and professional development.

The target population consisted of young people aged 16–30, as this group is particularly active in the digital environment and is directly exposed to the social and behavioral effects of online platforms. The sample included 100 respondents, selected through the snowball sampling method. This non-probabilistic sampling technique was chosen because it enabled the questionnaire to be distributed efficiently through respondents’ social networks. Although the method does not ensure statistical representativeness for the entire population of young people in Romania, it is suitable for exploratory and descriptive research focused on identifying tendencies, perceptions, and usage patterns.

Data collection was carried out online during [March–April 2026]. Participation was voluntary, and respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously. The online format ensured accessibility and encouraged participation, while also being consistent with the digital nature of the research topic. However, the use of online distribution may have favored respondents who are already active users of social media, which represents a limitation of the study.

This methodological framework allows for a coherent analysis of the role of social media in young people’s lives, while remaining consistent with the actual data collection and analysis procedures used in the study.

The results provide useful insights into how young people interact with digital platforms and how these platforms influence their communication habits, emotional experiences, access to information, and personal or professional development.

3. Results and discussion

In a context where digital space has become a central element in the daily lives of young people, technology companies that provide the infrastructure for online communication and interaction are acquiring a defining role in shaping modern social reality. Among these actors, Meta Platforms Inc. stands out for its profound influence on the way young people communicate, get informed, express their identity and participate in digital culture. Meta, the parent company of widely used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger, has significantly reconfigured the way young generations interact in the virtual environment. Its rebranding in 2021 marked the transition from a social network with traditional functions, to a complex ecosystem that integrates emerging technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and the metaverse – a virtual space where users can interact in an immersive and personalized way. Meta also actively contributes to supporting the digital economy of creators, offering young people the opportunity to monetize their content, build their personal brands and access professional opportunities in areas such as digital marketing, influencer marketing or creative entrepreneurship. This component transforms Meta platforms from simple social networks into genuine tools for personal and professional development. The majority of respondents fall into the 18–21 age group, representing 67% of the total number of respondents. This is natural, given that the research topic mainly targets young people active in the university environment, who are in the midst of a process of personal and professional development. In second place is the 22–25 age group, with a percentage of 27%, which shows that young people in their final years of studies or at the beginning of their careers are also well represented in the sample. The age groups under 18 and 26–30 have a low share, 3% each. This confirms that the target audience of the research is mainly students or recent graduates who actively use social networks.

The majority of the participants in the questionnaire (83%) are university students, which was expected, given the channel through which the form was distributed, but also the chosen topic, which is particularly relevant for young people active in the digital environment. A percentage of 10% of the respondents is still in high school, which offers an interesting perspective on how the new generations interact with social networks from their formative years. Also, 7% are following a master's program, thus contributing to a more mature and perhaps more analytical view of the topic addressed. The figure below highlights that the majority of respondents (44%) spend between 3 and 5 hours per day on social media, which confirms the trend of intensive use of the online environment among young people. This category is closely followed by those who spend between 1 and 3 hours daily (39%), suggesting that a large part of respondents use these platforms constantly, but to a moderate extent. Also, 15% of participants declare that they spend more than 5 hours per day on social networks, which may indicate a high level of addiction or significant involvement in digital activities. In contrast, only 2% of respondents use these platforms less than an hour per day, which shows that users with low consumption are a minority (Figure no. 1).

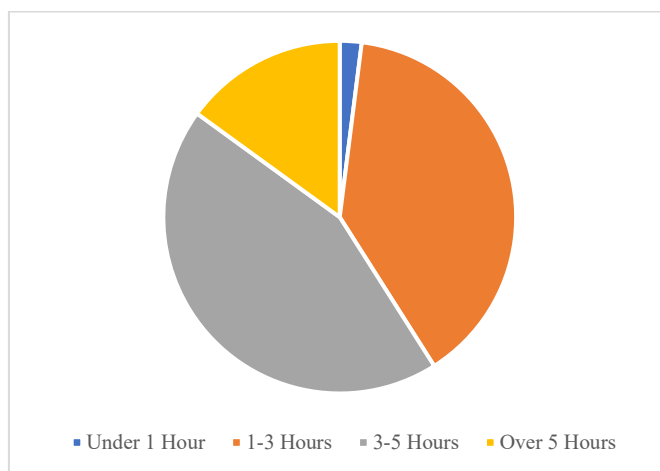


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by hours spent daily on social networks

According to the data obtained in figure 2, Instagram (77%) and Tik-Tok (74%) are the most popular platforms among respondents, which is not surprising given the current preferences of the younger generation for visual, dynamic and short content. These applications are used daily by a large number of users and

have become not only sources of entertainment, but also media for personal expression and socialization. In third place is YouTube (53%), which confirms that although long-form video content is still appreciated, it is accessed less frequently than the short formats promoted on Tik-Tok or Instagram.

In contrast, Facebook (23%) and Snapchat (17%) register lower percentages, reflecting a decrease in popularity among young people. Facebook seems to be perceived more as a traditional platform or intended for communication with family, and Snapchat, although popular in the past, is less preferred today (Figure no. 2).

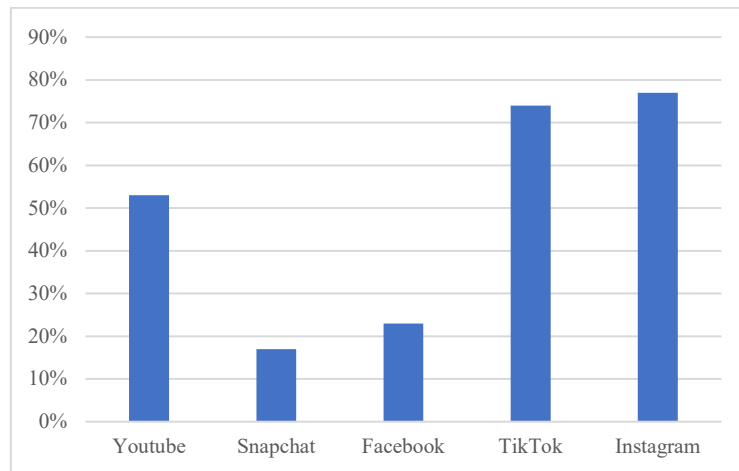


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents on the most frequently used platforms

Analyzing the participants' responses in Figure 3, it is observed that the most common reasons for using social networks are recreation and entertainment (73%) and communication with friends (68%). This confirms the main role of digital platforms as spaces for socializing and relaxing, especially among young people who constantly access these environments in search of a break or a quick social connection.

Also, information is a relevant purpose for 43% of respondents, which shows that social networks are no longer just channels for informal interaction, but also function as quick sources of news and current events. However, this type of information requires a high degree of discernment, as not all sources are verified or objective (Figure no. 3).

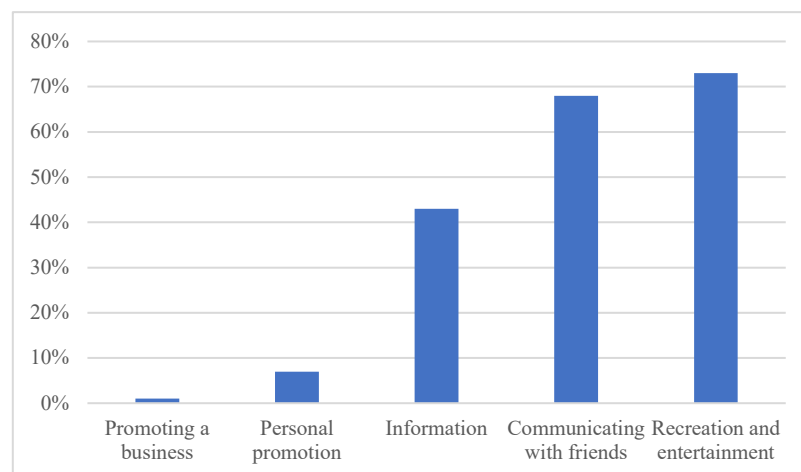


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by purpose of using social platforms

In contrast, personal promotion (7%) and business promotion (1%) are significantly less mentioned, suggesting that most respondents use these platforms from a rather passive or recreational perspective, and less with professional or commercial intentions.

Figure 4 highlights that the majority of respondents (42%) perceive the influence of social media on mood as generally positive. This opinion suggests that social media is frequently associated with pleasant moments, relaxation or social interactions that contribute to a better mood.

This percentage, although small, is not negligible, especially in the context of current discussions about the effects of social media on mental health (Figure no. 4).

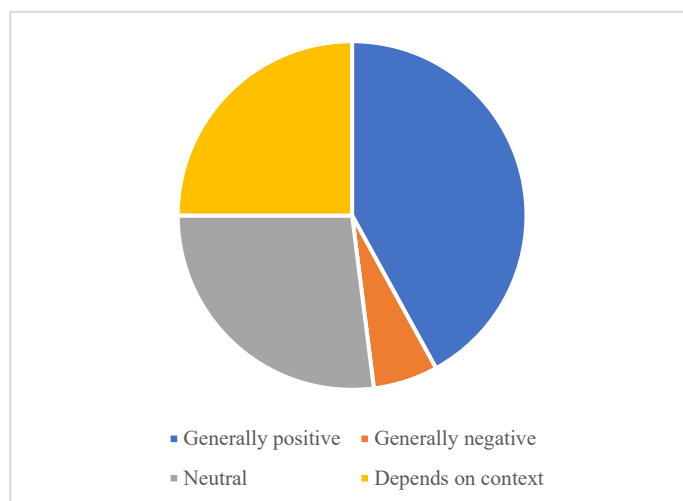


Figure 4. Distribution of respondents according to the influence of social media on mood

The majority of respondents (85%) use social networks to find out about various opportunities (educational, career, volunteering or events). This high percentage shows that social platforms are no longer used only for entertainment, but have become a relevant source of useful information. Only 8% of participants stated that they do not use social networks for this purpose, while 7% do not currently do so, but would like to. The results indicate a clear trend towards the digitalization of information sources and suggest that social platforms can play an important role in the process of professional guidance and personal development of young people.

Overall, the results indicate that social media plays a central role in the daily lives of young people. The high frequency of use, the dominance of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and the importance of entertainment, communication, and information confirm that digital platforms have become essential environments for youth socialization.

The findings confirm previous studies showing that social media supports communication, identity expression, access to information, and participation in online communities (Smahel & Wright, 2014; Velicu, 2014). At the same time, the results also support the view that social media may produce emotional and behavioral risks, especially when use becomes excessive or when young people are exposed to social comparison, unrealistic standards, or unverified information (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Dobre et al., 2024). The study also shows that young people do not perceive social media in a one-dimensional way. Many respondents associate digital platforms with positive emotional experiences, while others perceive their effects as neutral or dependent on context. This supports the idea that the influence of social media is not uniform, but varies according to individual experiences, platform type, content consumed, and the balance between online and offline activities.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for educational initiatives focused on digital literacy, critical evaluation of online information, emotional self-regulation, and responsible use of social media. Schools, universities, parents, and youth organizations should encourage young people to use digital platforms not only for entertainment, but also for learning, professional development, civic participation, and healthy communication. At the same time, attention should be paid to the risks of excessive use, online pressure, and the possible negative effects of constant comparison with idealized digital content.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of 100 respondents selected through the snowball method, which means that the results cannot be generalized to all young people in Romania. The sample is also strongly concentrated around university students, which limits the representativeness of the findings for young people with different educational, occupational, or social backgrounds.

Second, the study is based on self-reported data. Respondents may overestimate or underestimate the time spent on social media, the emotional effects experienced, or the purposes for which they use digital platforms. Therefore, the results reflect perceptions and declared behaviors rather than objectively measured digital activity.

Third, the analysis is descriptive and does not include inferential statistical tests, correlations, regression models, or group comparisons. As a result, the study cannot establish causal relationships between social media use and emotional, social, educational, or behavioral outcomes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory tendencies within the analyzed sample.

Conclusions

This study examined the influence of social media on young people's behaviours, perceptions, and everyday digital experiences. Based on the questionnaire applied to 100 respondents aged 16–30, the findings show that social media has become a central component of young people's daily routines, especially for communication, entertainment, information, and access to personal or professional opportunities.

The results indicate that most respondents use social networks intensively, with a significant share spending between three and five hours per day on these platforms. Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most frequently used platforms, confirming young people's preference for visual, dynamic, and easily accessible content. Social media is used mainly for recreation, communication with friends, and information, which shows that these platforms function simultaneously as spaces for relaxation, socialization, and access to current content.

The study also highlights the ambivalent impact of social media on young people. On the one hand, digital platforms support connectivity, access to information, self-expression, and the discovery of educational, career, volunteering, or event-related opportunities. On the other hand, the findings suggest that social media may generate pressure related to self-image, social comparison, excessive screen time, and difficulties in maintaining a healthy balance between online and offline life. Therefore, the influence of social media should not be interpreted as exclusively positive or negative, but as dependent on the way young people use digital platforms, the type of content they consume, and their level of digital awareness.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the multidimensional role of social media in the lives of young people, connecting behavioural, emotional, social, and developmental aspects. From a practical perspective, the results underline the importance of digital literacy initiatives that help young users evaluate online information critically, manage screen time, protect their digital identity, and use social media in a constructive and balanced way. Schools, universities, parents, and youth organizations can play an important role in supporting responsible online behaviour and reducing the risks associated with excessive or uncritical use of digital platforms.

The study also has several limitations. The sample was relatively small and selected through the snowball method, which means that the results cannot be generalized to all young people in Romania. In addition, most respondents were students, which limits the diversity of the sample. The research was based on self-reported data and descriptive analysis, without inferential statistical tests, correlations, or regression models. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory tendencies rather than causal explanations.

Future research could expand the sample to include young people from more diverse educational, occupational, and geographical backgrounds. It would also be useful to apply comparative analyses according to age, gender, residence area, or level of education. Further studies could include correlation or regression analysis to examine more precisely the relationships between time spent on social media, emotional well-being, self-image, and educational or professional outcomes. A qualitative component, such as interviews or focus groups, could also provide deeper insights into young people's personal experiences in the digital environment.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement:

ChatGPT (version 5.0) was responsibly used for language improvement. After this process, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the present article.

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