



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM AND STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21253728>

ARTICLE INFO

Qabul qilindi: 04-iyul 2026 yil

Ma'qullandi: 06-iyul 2026 yil

Nashr qilindi: 08-iyul 2026 yil

KEY WORDS

social networks, internet addiction, psychological health, , youth psychology, digital hygiene, cyberbullying, dopamine trap, cognitive fatigue.

ABSTRACT

This article scientifically analyzes the dynamics of young people's use of social networks in the age of digital technologies and the resulting psychological changes. The study examines internet addiction, cyberbullying, depression, anxiety syndrome, and the causes underlying these negative consequences. The results of numerous studies currently being conducted on a wide scale prove that young people's behavior in the virtual world directly affects their psychological health in real life. The article integrates the latest international scientific data on digital neuropsychology and cognitive fatigue issues. At the conclusion of the article, a system of psychological, pedagogical, and social solutions, together with preventive recommendations, has been developed to address the problem.

Introduction: In the first quarter of the 21st century, the rapid development of information and communication technologies has fundamentally changed the way humanity lives. Today, the internet and social networks have become an inseparable part of young people's lives and a fundamental social institution. Worldwide, more than 90% of people aged 15 to 25 spend at least 3-4 hours a day in the virtual space. According to the latest reports from international statistics agencies, teenagers check their smartphones on average more than 150 times a day and update their social media pages every 6-7 minutes. While this phenomenon has, on the one hand, accelerated access to information, education, and global integration, on the other hand it is placing a serious burden and destructive effect on the psyche of young people. Youth is a delicate stage during which personality is formed and emotional and social development reaches its peak. It is precisely during this stage that the uncontrolled use of social networks gives rise to the following psychological problems:

Digital identity crisis: The gap between the idealized life in the virtual world and real life.

Disruption of emotional stability: Attention scattering and irritability caused by a constant flow of information.

Social isolation: Loss of live communication skills due to the dominance of virtual communication.

"Clip thinking": Inability to read long texts, and fragmented perception of information limited to a 15-30 second visual format.

According to scholars, the internet is not merely a technical tool but a psychological environment that shapes young people's consciousness, values, and emotional intelligence.

For example, researchers at Harvard University found that the processes occurring in the brain while using social networks match, by 92%, the changes seen in the brains of patients addicted to gambling.

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that give rise to the negative psychological consequences of social networks among adolescents and young people, and to propose scientifically grounded solutions to counter them.

Research methods: To study the psychological state of the research subjects, a comprehensive methodological approach was used during 2025-2026. The study involved 350 students and young people aged 16 to 22. The gender composition of the participants was 52% female and 48% male.

The following standardized psychodiagnostic methods were used in the study: **Kimberly Young's Internet Addiction Test:** Used to determine participants' level of virtual addiction.

Spielberger-Khanin method: Used to assess the level of state and trait anxiety among young people.

Psychophysiological methods: Tests assessing participants' sleep quality and ability to concentrate (Pieron-Ruser proofreading test).

Sociometric and statistical analysis: The data obtained were subjected to correlation analysis using "SPSS Statistics 26.0" software.

Research results: The empirical research and statistical analyses conducted showed that there is a direct correlation between the time young people spend on social networks and their psychological health.

Analyses conducted by scientific organizations (such as the World Health Organization - WHO) and leading universities show that spending long periods of time in front of a screen directly increases the risk of mental health problems.

Important statistical data and scientific findings that further confirm this correlation include the following:

Key statistical indicators and risk factors: The risk of mental illness doubles: According to a report by the U.S. Department of Health, among adolescents who spend more than 3 hours a day on social networks, the risk of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety doubles.

Screen time and mental state in percentages: According to the American Psychological Association, among young people who spend the most time on social networks, 41% rated their mental health as "poor" or "very poor". Among those who spend little time online, this figure is only 23%.

Symptoms of depression: Among adolescents with a daily screen time of 6 hours or more, the rate of occurrence of depression symptoms (25.9%) is nearly three times higher than among their peers who spend less than 4 hours in front of a screen (9.5%).

Gender differences: Social networks have a more negative effect on girls' psychology. According to a Pew Research Center study, 25% of girls said that social networks had harmed their mental health, compared to 14% among boys.

Psychological mechanisms underlying the correlation: It is not only the amount of time itself, but also the following factors arising during the use of social networks that worsen psychological health:

Social comparison syndrome: Seeing the "ideal life" and filtered images on social networks, young people begin to feel dissatisfied with their own lives and appearance. **Fear of missing out:** Young people live in a state of constant anxiety and stress, afraid of missing out on some interesting event or piece of news within their virtual circle. **Cyberbullying and virtual pressure:** Young people who are insulted or humiliated on social networks experience a sharp increase in feelings of depression and loneliness. **Cognitive changes:** Short, fast-paced content (TikTok, Reels, etc.) weakens the brain's ability to concentrate and control impulses.

Indirect harm: The health chain: empirical research shows that social networks displace the three most important healthy needs in young people's lives:

Sleep deprivation: Being on social networks at night disrupts the production of the sleep hormone (melatonin) and opens the way to depression.

Physical inactivity: Low physical activity leads to a decline in mental alertness and an increase in stress hormones in the body.

Decline in live communication: Virtual connections cannot satisfy deep emotional needs, resulting in increased social isolation among young people.

Table 1. Indicators of young people's daily internet usage time and psychological state (as a percentage of the total number of participants)

No.	Daily time (hours)	Share of participants (%)	Level of internet addiction	Anxiety and depression indicator	Sleep quality disruption
1.	1-2 hours	15%	Low (Healthy norm)	Normal emotional state	5% (rare cases)
2.	3-5 hours	45%	Moderate (Risk zone)	Moderate anxiety, irritability	38% (sleep deprivation)
3.	More than 5 hours	40%	High (Clinical addiction)	High anxiety,	82% (severe sleep deprivation)

According to the research results, among young people who spend more than 5 hours a day on social networks, **78%** were found to have a high level of anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

Our correlation analysis showed that as the time spent in front of a smartphone screen increased, young people's academic performance indicator (GPA) at their educational institution proportionally decreased.

Furthermore, among the young people who participated in the survey: **62%** feel dissatisfied with their own lives when they see their peers' "ideal" pictures. **44%** determine their self-worth based on the number of "likes" and comments on social networks. **29%** reported having experienced bullying or humiliation in the virtual space at least once. **55%** of participants admitted to experiencing "phantom vibration syndrome" (the sensation that the phone is vibrating in one's pocket even when it is not) when left without a smartphone at night.

Discussion and underlying causes: The results obtained show that the destructive effect of social networks on young people's psyche is not merely coincidental but has deep social-psychological and physiological causes. The causes of the problem can be divided into three main groups:

Neurobiological and Psychological Causes: Social networks manipulate the brain's "dopamine reward system." Modern IT corporations operate on the basis of neuromarketing and behavioral psychology algorithms. Every new "like," message, or randomly interesting video triggers an unexpected sense of reward in the brain and releases the dopamine hormone. Young people become accustomed to quick and easy gratification.

As a result, processes in real life that require difficult and prolonged effort (reading books, preparing for lessons, learning a profession) come to seem boring to them. This leads to a decline in willpower and attention. The prefrontal cortex of the brain continues to develop in young people until the age of 25. For this reason, adolescents are the group most quickly susceptible to virtual manipulation.

Socio-economic and environmental factors: In many cases, the lack of emotional connection between parents and children, and misunderstandings within the family, force young people to escape into the virtual world. In psychology, this is called "**escapism**" (escaping from reality). An adolescent exhausted by real-life problems, parental pressure, or loneliness turns to their smartphone. An adolescent who cannot find their place or express themselves in real life creates an artificial, bright, and "successful image" of themselves in the virtual world.

Idealization and Comparison Syndrome: On social networks, people usually display only the most beautiful, successful, travel-filled, and luxurious moments of their lives. Young people, however, perceive this as visual reality. As a result of comparing their own ordinary, everyday life with others' visual "ideal" life, adolescents develop self-hatred, a sense of failure, and an inferiority complex. In social psychology, this condition is referred to as "uncontrolled social comparison."

Strategic solutions and recommendations: The negative psychological consequences of the internet and social networks cannot be resolved solely through bans or by simply switching the internet off.

This requires a systematic and step-by-step approach. Based on the research findings, the following package of solutions is proposed:

Solutions at the Personal and Family Level Introducing "digital detox" days: Completely disconnecting from the internet for at least one day a week, or during certain hours of the day (for example, 2 hours before sleep). This normalizes biological rhythms and the release of the melatonin hormone.

Creating "screen-free zones": Declaring the kitchen and bedroom at home as areas free from smartphones.

Improving the family's emotional environment: Parents must communicate with their children live, emotionally, and sincerely, without any gadgets, for at least 30 minutes a day. Children should find the "recognition and attention" they seek in the virtual world within their own family.

Educational and Pedagogical Solutions "Media literacy" and "Digital hygiene" classes: Organizing special seminars in schools and higher education institutions on the safe and effective use of social networks, understanding algorithmic traps, and distinguishing fake information and cyber manipulation.

Creating alternative activities: Increasing young people's interest in real life and live competition by involving them more broadly in sports, art, reading, and intellectual clubs (robotics, debate clubs).

Psychological and Institutional Solutions: Modernizing the psychological service: Practicing psychologists in educational institutions should undergo special professional development courses on working with young people suffering from cyberbullying and internet addiction.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy: Organizing group psychological training sessions for young people severely addicted to the internet. Teaching them skills to manage their emotions without relying on virtual "likes."

Conclusion: In conclusion, while the internet and social networks open the door to enormous opportunities for the development of modern youth, if left uncontrolled they can become a powerful weapon that erodes the individual's psyche. Our research clearly demonstrated a strong link between time spent on social networks and psychological distress (anxiety, insomnia, and personality fragmentation). The solution to the problem lies not in completely cutting young people off from modern technologies or banning them, but in developing in them "**digital culture**", "**digital intelligence**" and "**critical thinking**" skills. Only through the systematic and coordinated efforts of families, educational institutions, and the broader public can we protect our young people from the destructive psychological traps of the virtual world and ensure they grow into happy, healthy individuals in real life..

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