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## **PERCEPTIONS, HABITS, AND EXPECTATIONS OF YOUTH IN THE CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary young generations are growing up in a dynamic digital environment shaped by the internet, mobile technologies, and social networks. This paper examines the habits, attitudes, and expectations of young people within the topic “Digital Horizons: A Round Table for the New Media Era,” focusing on digitalization, media literacy, marketing, economy, and environmental awareness. The research is based on a survey conducted among 110 young respondents using a structured questionnaire with 28 questions. The study analyzes the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics, digital practices, trust in media, and the influence of social networks on opinion formation. Particular attention is given to digital literacy, online shopping habits, the role of influencers, and perceptions of technological and environmental changes. The findings may contribute to improving educational, media, and development policies aimed at young people in the digital era.

**Key words:** digitalization, media literacy, social networks, youth attitudes

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary generations of young people are growing up in a dynamic digital environment in which the internet, smartphones, and social media platforms have become central channels for acquiring information, education, social interaction, and consumer decision-making. The intensive use of digital tools is transforming not only the quantity and speed of information to which young people are exposed, but also the ways in which they interpret, evaluate, and use that information in everyday life. Empirical research and large longitudinal datasets indicate a growth in diverse digital skills among youth, but also significant disparities in skill levels — ranging from technical literacy to the ability to critically assess sources and protect privacy (Kovačević, 2023; Stanković, 2025).

Digital literacy no longer simply means “knowing how to use a device”; it encompasses the critical evaluation of media content, the recognition of manipulative or false information, an understanding of online business and marketing practices, and ethical behavior within digital communities. In this context, educational institutions and public policies must strive for an integrated approach that includes technical, analytical, and socio-ethical dimensions of literacy in order to prepare young people to become active and responsible participants in the digital economy. Important sources include international reports and multi-year studies that map the knowledge and gaps in the digital skills of pupils and students.

At the same time, a growing body of research on disinformation and “fake news” indicates that young people are exposed to various forms of inaccurate or manipulative content, and that their ability to recognize and respond appropriately depends on a combination of knowledge, media habits, and contextual factors (e.g., school education, family practices, region). Recent scoping reviews and systematic analyses highlight the need for prevention programs and educational interventions tailored to the age and digital habits of young people.

Social media and digital marketing have multiple effects: they serve as platforms for information sharing and social support, but also as powerful channels for commercial communication and the shaping of consumer habits (Jeličić, 2024). Studies on Generation Z suggest that online recommendations, influencers, and targeted advertising are key factors in purchase decision-making, while simultaneously influencing perceptions of

ecology, values, and identity. Understanding this complex set of influences requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods — which is also the aim of your research conducted on a sample of 110 respondents using a structured questionnaire.

Based on the above, this paper will, through the analysis of 20 questions in a structured questionnaire, examine the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and digital practices, trust in media, the influence of social media on attitude formation, as well as attitudes toward the digital economy and environmental awareness. The results obtained are expected to serve as a foundation for recommendations in the fields of education, policy, and media practice, with the aim of improving media literacy programs, regulating digital platforms, and developing more effective digital marketing practices targeted at young people.

### **Literature review**

When it comes to the development of advanced digital literacies, young people represent a particularly significant target group. This fact gains additional weight in light of the growing body of research indicating that negative digital experiences may have adverse effects on young people's mental health and overall well-being (Beyens et al., 2024). Such findings have recently contributed to the emergence of a form of moral panic surrounding the use of digital technologies among youth (Redman et al., 2021). As a result, educational systems increasingly implement preventive measures aimed at protecting young people from digital risks, often at the expense of their digital freedoms. Examples of such approaches include proposals to restrict mobile phone use in schools in the United Kingdom, the United States, and across Europe, as well as restrictions on social media use introduced in Australia (Blake et al., 2025).

However, education and the practice of imposing bans have traditionally represented a tense and problematic relationship (Kuelzer, 2023). In this context, digital prohibitions may be viewed as a form of knowledge censorship that is misaligned with students' everyday practical needs and that overlooks the central role of digital technologies in contemporary civic life. Such restrictions may potentially hinder classroom learning rather than enhance it. They may also negatively affect the development of digital

literacies and, indirectly, broader processes of democratic education and civic formation among young people. Although there is increasing evidence that digital literacy is crucial for the long-term digital safety and well-being of youth (Smahel et al., 2023), institutional responses remain predominantly risk-oriented. This approach may help explain why the teaching of advanced digital literacies continues to be insufficiently developed (Setty, 2021), with schools primarily focusing on basic software skills and the delivery of cautionary messages (Costa & Oliver, 2025), reflecting a simplified and limited understanding of digital technical knowledge.

Digital literacy, however, extends far beyond mere technical competence. It also entails the development of critical and ethical awareness of power relations, as well as the cultural and social dynamics that shape digital participation [8]. Such an approach requires an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates insights from digital culture studies (Costa & Oliver, 2023), citizenship education, and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2021). Viewing digital literacy as a multidimensional concept centered on individuals' digital cultural experiences enables a shift in educational practice—from controlling and monitoring online behavior toward fostering ethical digital engagement. Research shows that young people respond more positively to approaches that provide support rather than judgment (DeLara, 2012). In this context, a redefined understanding of digital literacies can contribute to raising awareness of the social rules and norms governing digital practice, thereby orienting educational strategies toward empowering young people as responsible digital citizens equipped with the cultural knowledge necessary for safe and reflective navigation of digital environments.

The concept of cultural knowledge plays a significant role in identifying the fundamental principles of advanced digital literacies and in indicating ways in which they may be more systematically integrated into educational processes (Mladenović, 2025). This concept goes beyond technical competence and encompasses an understanding of the socio-cultural processes that define the digital sphere of action. In digital environments, this includes recognizing what Jenkins (2019) and colleagues describe as participatory digital culture, in which information consumption intertwines with opportunities for creative expression and interaction (Jenkins & Jie, 2024). At the same time, digital civic engagement is often associated with various forms of domination, such as the spread of disinformation or

cyberbullying, raising questions about the social responsibility of social media platforms (Jenkins, 2019).

### **Research results**

The research was conducted in the period from December 15, 2025 to January 5, 2026, across the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia, using a survey method. The analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample indicates that a total of 110 respondents from the younger population participated in the study. In terms of gender structure, the sample is relatively balanced, with women representing the majority (58%), while male respondents account for 42%. Regarding age distribution, the largest proportion of respondents belongs to the 23–26 age group (50%), indicating that the sample is predominantly composed of young adults. The 19–22 age group accounts for 25% of respondents, while those aged 15–18 represent 15% of the sample. The least represented category is the 27–30 age group, comprising 10%.

With regard to respondents' status, the results show a pronounced dominance of the pupil/student category, which includes 98% of the total sample, while 2% of respondents are employed. No unemployed respondents were recorded, which is consistent with the fact that the research primarily targeted a younger population engaged in formal education. Concerning educational structure, the majority of respondents have completed or are currently attending secondary school (70%), while 30% are enrolled in undergraduate academic studies. Respondents with completed master's degrees were not recorded in the sample, further confirming that the study encompasses predominantly younger individuals in the early stages of their educational cycle.

The findings indicate a high level of self-confidence in respondents' digital competencies. In response to the statement that they develop their digital skills and consider themselves digitally literate, 95% of respondents express agreement, with 85% agreeing and 10% strongly agreeing. Negative responses are minimal (5%), and no neutral responses were recorded, suggesting a high level of perceived digital literacy among respondents.

In contrast, attitudes toward the role of educational institutions in preparing young people for the digital era are markedly critical. As many as 80% of

respondents disagree with the statement that educational institutions adequately prepare young people for the digital environment, with 72% strongly disagreeing. Positive responses are marginal (12% in total), while 8% remain neutral, indicating a significant gap between individually acquired digital skills and perceived institutional support.

Regarding ease of use of digital tools and online platforms, the results are unequivocal: 100% of respondents express agreement, with 81% strongly agreeing and 19% agreeing. No negative or neutral responses were recorded, further confirming a high level of operational digital competence within the sample.

Perceptions of the impact of digitalization on the quality of education reveal a somewhat more moderate, yet still predominantly positive orientation. The majority of respondents (70%) believe that digitalization has improved the quality of their education, while 20% are uncertain and 10% disagree. This distribution indicates differentiated experiences concerning the effects of digitalization in the educational process.

The results show that social media have a strong influence on the formation of respondents' opinions on social issues. As many as 95% of respondents agree with this statement (55% strongly agree, 40% agree), while negative and neutral responses are negligible. However, when it comes to trust in information published on social media, the findings indicate pronounced skepticism. A total of 75% of respondents do not trust information from social media, 20% remain neutral, and only 5% express trust. These findings reveal a discrepancy between the recognized influence of social media and the level of trust in the content disseminated through them.

Regarding the influence of traditional and digital media (online portals, television, and social media) on shaping attitudes toward technology, the results are more divided. A majority (60%) believe that media influence their attitudes, 18% are uncertain, and 22% disagree, indicating a moderate but significant media influence in the perception of technological issues.

The analysis of influencer impact reveals a predominantly positive effect on respondents' interests. Overall, 65% state that influencer content affects their interest in certain topics, 25% are undecided, and 10% perceive no such influence. Nevertheless, trust in influencers is markedly low: 75% do not believe that influencers present products objectively and honestly, while

25% remain neutral and no positive responses were recorded. Despite this skepticism, 75% of respondents believe they can distinguish between authentic and paid content, 20% cannot clearly recognize the difference, and 5% are undecided. This suggests a relatively developed level of critical digital literacy, particularly in understanding marketing strategies in digital environments.

Sponsored content exerts a moderate but notable influence on purchasing decisions. Half of the respondents (50%) report that sponsored content affects their purchasing decisions, 30% perceive no such influence, and 20% are undecided. In contrast, attitudes toward the effectiveness of social media marketing compared to traditional marketing are overwhelmingly positive: 85% consider digital marketing more effective, 10% disagree, and 5% have no clear opinion. These findings confirm the dominance of digital channels in young people's perceptions and their central role in contemporary marketing strategies.

The results demonstrate a strongly positive attitude toward the potential of the digital economy. As many as 95% of respondents agree that the digital economy creates more job opportunities for young people (60% strongly agree, 35% agree), while 5% are undecided and no negative responses were recorded. Attitudes toward the impact of artificial intelligence on the labor market are more heterogeneous: 55% believe AI will significantly transform the labor market, 25% disagree, and 20% are undecided, reflecting both expectations and uncertainty characteristic of perceptions of disruptive technologies.

Online shopping is perceived very positively: 95% of respondents believe it is easier and safer today than before (65% strongly agree, 30% agree). Similarly, 97% believe that digitalization enhances economic efficiency (72% strongly agree, 25% agree), with only 3% neutral responses and no negative answers, indicating near-consensus on the macroeconomic benefits of digitalization.

Young people also recognize the positive potential of digital technologies in environmental protection. A total of 65% believe that digital technologies contribute to environmental protection (55% agree, 10% strongly agree), while 35% are undecided. Social media also influence environmental awareness: 65% report that social networks affect their awareness of ecological issues, while 35% remain undecided. Moreover, 80% state that

online ecological information motivates them to change their behavior, suggesting that digital media exert not only informational but also motivational effects.

Overall perceptions of digital transformation are highly positive, with no negative or neutral responses recorded. There is also unanimous agreement (100%) that young people should participate more actively in shaping digital policies (70% agree, 30% strongly agree). Educational initiatives such as “Digital Horizons” are positively evaluated by 90% of respondents, while 10% remain undecided. Finally, there is absolute consensus (100%) that the future of media primarily depends on the needs and habits of young people, strongly confirming their central role in shaping the contemporary and future media landscape.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the conducted research confirm that young people in the contemporary digital environment represent highly active, competent, and self-aware users of digital technologies, characterized by a high level of operational digital literacy and well-developed everyday digital practices. Respondents largely recognize their own digital skills, their ability to navigate online tools and platforms, and the advantages that digitalization brings in the fields of education, the economy, consumption, and social engagement. Digital technologies are deeply integrated into their patterns of communication, information acquisition, and decision-making, confirming the central role of the digital environment in the lives of modern generations of youth.

At the same time, the findings indicate a pronounced gap between individually acquired digital competencies and the perception of institutional support. The majority of respondents believe that educational institutions do not sufficiently keep pace with the dynamics of digital change nor adequately prepare young people for the challenges of digital transformation. This finding highlights the need for systematic improvement of educational policies and curricula, with a focus on developing the critical, analytical, and ethical dimensions of digital literacy, rather than concentrating solely on technical skills.

It is particularly significant that young people simultaneously recognize the strong influence of social media on opinion and attitude formation, while also

expressing a high level of skepticism toward the reliability of information disseminated on these platforms. This ambivalence indicates a growing critical awareness among young users, especially regarding the understanding of commercial and marketing content, the role of influencers, and sponsored advertising. Although digital marketing and influencers exert a noticeable impact on interests and consumer decisions, young people demonstrate the ability to distinguish between authentic and paid content, which represents an important indicator of the development of advanced digital literacies.

The results also confirm a pronounced optimism among young people regarding the potential of the digital economy and economic digitalization, alongside a degree of uncertainty concerning the long-term effects of artificial intelligence on the labor market. Digital technologies are perceived as a significant driver of economic opportunities, but also as a factor requiring continuous adaptation of knowledge and skills.

In the environmental domain, the findings suggest that digital media and social networks play an important role in raising environmental awareness and motivating behavioral change among young people, thereby opening space for more effective use of digital channels in promoting sustainable development.

Finally, the research confirms a strong consensus among young people that the future of media, digital policies, and social development largely depends on their needs, habits, and active participation. The findings provide a valuable foundation for the creation of education, media, and development policies targeted at youth, as well as for further research into the complex relationships between digital literacy, media practices, and social change in the new media era.

### **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization, M.P.; methodology, S.N. and M.V.; software, B.V.; formal analysis, M.P. and B.V.; writing-original draft preparation, M.P.; writing-review and editing, M.P. and S.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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