

# Social Media and Slacktivism in Young People's Life

**Ulbossyn M. Yessenbekova**

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan

## Abstract

This study examined such issues as social media in personality development and their influence on the development of public activism among young people. We also estimate the efficiency that various forms of information exchange have (shared or anonymous). The empirical base of the research includes sociological surveys held in Kazakhstan. We did a content analysis of frequently visited profile social media pages. The study found that the people who openly share on social media are more inclined to real-life engagement in public campaigns. Vice versa, anonymous support to the measures that are valuable to the community makes inclination of users to following real-life behaviors less likely. We believe that the social activism of young people should not only be targeted at an individual but must also serve the interests of governments and those of society. Overall, the Internet and online communities play a positive role in decision making on challenges in society and among young people.

Keywords: Slacktivism, social media, online activism, young people, politics, political activity, cultural perception, social groups, information society.

## Introduction

Owing to the emergence of new tools, the World Wide Web contributes to social development as it increased the frequency and density of communications, develops, and transforms personalities. Social media play an essential role here. They change a way of life in the community; provide alternative forms of social activism (Matyasik, 2014; Ali, Asghar & Mamoon, 2017). Social media, by involving billions of users in their space, significantly affect people's lives, personal worldviews, life priorities, and change their interests. People accept new milestones, attitudes, and values. Such particular qualities of online communities determine their influence on their audience, young people in particular.

Prolonged immersion in online communities and different active manipulations bring users into a cyber socialization condition (Pleshakov, 2010a, 2010b). Today's researchers and experts believe that social media give people a false sense of engagement (Weidman, 2020; Bradbury, Dubow, & Domoff, 2018). There is no need to diminish the importance of activism on social media, but for many people, such citizen activism has replaced real-life behaviors (Awan, 2017).

Among the challenges that today's Kazakhstan society faces, the socialization of young people is among the top problems. The balance between the development of the State and preservation of traditional values in the society in large part depends on a solution to

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Correspondence to: Dr. Ulbossyn M. Yessenbekova is an acting professor in the Department of Teleradio and Public Relations at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Republic of Kazakhstan.

the socialization problem. If we consider the low social activism of young people a pressing challenge along with political alienation, social indifference, and infantilism, then the use of social media might help to revive this process favorably. An important task is to develop in young people such qualities as responsibility, independence, proactiveness, and creative thinking.

Communication practices in online communities have turned into a kind of cultural interaction between social actors (He, 2017; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009). In these circumstances, reasoned participation of Internet users in public life might encourage young people's activism and bring certain tangible and intangible benefits. The availability of a large number of accessible Internet resources and a demand for them are also determining factors in the influence of online media on the social activism of young people (AIDajani, 2020; Liu, 2020).

These circumstances made it possible to assess the role of social media in the socialization of young people. In the research, we examined such issues as social media in personality development, their influence on the development of public activism among young people.

## Literature Review

The spread of internet technologies was marked with their transformation into a dominant form to make contacts in the society. The analysis of online communities as a phenomenon has become an important research area (Toffler, 2004; Castells, 2010; Moreno, 2004). The concept of post-industrial civilization and understanding of the information society have also been developed (Miroshnichenko et al., 2019; Ermakova & Sukhovskaya, 2020; Dubinina, Gulyaeva, & Kompaneeva, 2020; Piwowarski, 2020).

The difference between network society and the online community is clear now. The network society is precepted as a type of the information society. The online community is referred to as social contacts on the Internet exactly. However, people often use them as identical concepts. Castells, a recognized researcher in this field, points out to the personalized and personal character of social relations in the network society. To describe them, Castells used particular forms of sociality and interpersonal communication of an extraterritorial nature. In the digital era, social interaction, informatization, and social identity of its participants ensure the form of sociality. We adhere to the definition of the online community in the narrow sense as the Internet community or community of Internet users (Castells, 2016).

In studies of the online community phenomenon, it is essential to explore the network culture. Many researchers refer the network culture to the culture of communication and information sharing on the World Wide Web. There is also the opinion to refer it to the subculture with its ethics, rules, and language. In this direction, works by Lovink (2015), Boyd and Ellison (2007), Campanelli (2010), and Yessenbekova (2015) are considered important.

There is a lot of research on online communities. Graham (1999), Hagel and Armstrong (1998), Wenger (2008), Bimber (1998), Wellman and Hampton (2003), Beamish (1995), Bondarenko (2004), Fu (2019), Goswami and Kumar (2019), Bailo (2020), Shishaev, Fedorov, and Datyev (2020), Osler (2020) raised questions of social stratification of online communities, its establishment, and development.

Within the framework of the research, we discuss user socialization of users in online communities, user activism in online communities, their role in the development of

social processes, and decision making on sociocultural problems. To that process; Gordilov (2011), Kim (2000), Tilley and Bruce (2006), Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson (2004), Markov (2000), Rimsky (2009), Yessenbekova (2018), Wang, Guo, and Degol (2019) made a significant contribution.

With the development of the information, environment slacktivism got a negative connotation. On Internet sites, users may effortlessly and without any liability speak up, make comments, be participants of verbal forums and online petitions, like, and share. All these behaviors are examples of new slacktivism. They replace real-life impulsive actions and behaviors. But, in practice, they do not lead to necessary changes that are an aim in social campaigns (Izmestieva, 2015). There are three widely accepted approaches to studies of the nature of the social protest through the lens of social information platforms.

The first approach is the smart mobs theory by U.S. sociologist Howard Rheingold. The theory is based on the fact that modern communication tools can mobilize large audiences in a matter of minutes and regulate their behavior. Rheingold gives high priority to virtual mass media as political resources (Rheingold, 2002). The second approach is the cost minimization theory. Its main theorist, U.S. researcher Clay Shirky, believes that new online tools enable people to join communities to solve problems without financial, time, or emotional costs (Shirky, 2011). Group efforts raise efficiency as participants act with no pressure applied in pursuit of a personal gain. Then with the help of new communications, the public pressure acts as a method to influence political, social, or administrative decision making. The third approach is the theory of networks and information flows. The fundamental idea by the ideologists of this theory, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, says that in modern society, the process of formation and implementation of relations of power has been transformed into a new process-oriented procedure. And as the government regulates communications, its opponents, being completely dependent on a situation, have to struggle with such regulation practices (Šišulák, 2017). But regulating and enforcement are not able to ensure the sustainability of the authorities. It is communication that is the main element to structure relations of power, and that is a challenge in the political sphere, including social practices (Yessenbekova, Turzhan, Koshanova, Yegemberdiyev, & Kutym, 2020).

Slacktivism supporters argue that many initiatives on social media turn into real-life campaigns over time. We agree that ongoing globalization in the information market is changing forms of communication and people's perception. Social mobilization of the society and groups of people occurs through YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter.

If activism in real-life implies the awareness of an individual of an issue, changed opinions, and his or her real-life engagement in public campaigns, then slacktivism provides wonderful opportunities for mobilization of impressive numbers of people. Fictitious activism in slacktivism looks like *lazy* communication when users do not try to understand a process. They make e-manipulations: machines like reposting, liking, e-petitioning. Therefore, many problems do not reach a level of real-life politics and keep staying inside social media platforms. Despite this, we believe that conventional civic activism and online activism have some similarities. In both cases, there are risks for participants, and they also have to bear some costs (Kogel, Fomichev, & Bortnikov, 2017). The society will, for a long time, have the self-deception illusion, and important public initiatives will not find desired real-life development (Yessenbekova, 2018b).

This completed brief overview makes it possible to specify the methods of social communication in virtual communities, evaluation of the specifics that these form of communications has, the efficiency of social contacts on the Internet and social media.

## Methodology

The concept of the information society is a theoretical background of the research. The technique is based on the interdisciplinary approach using principles of comparativists. To achieve a full understanding of specifics that social media have, we refer to the structural-functional analysis. The empirical base of the research was the results of the surveys held in 2014-2018 in Kazakhstan by various non-governmental organizations and foundations. For instance, the data of sociological research obtained by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation where one thousand people participated in the survey (aged 14-29 yrs) representing 14 Kazakhstan regions and cities.

Besides, we did an experiment that covered 291 bachelor and master students. The experiment aimed at the identification of the influence that various public events make on activism among young people. Participants in the experiment were supposed to choose the unique public events and specify which form of engagement they prefer to support them. We analyzed the most frequently visited profile pages of prominent politicians, public figures, businesspersons, and culture representatives on the VK.com, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

## Results and Discussion

Social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Vk.com) have their existence a little over ten years. They include hundreds of thousands of communities with users who share interests, thereby setting marketing trends (Chernova, Tretyakova, & Vlasov, 2018). Kazakhstan's segment of social media also includes many directions. The following VK.com publics are famous among young people: OMTS (One Million True Stories), Amazing Alma-Ata, OmirlikMani Bar, Typical Almaty, StuDEN, Kazakh for Dudes, Za Tebya Bake! Similarly, on Instagram, the following communities have large audiences: ZTB-kz, Kaztwitter, Insta-prikoli, Kaz-tv, Salemvines, etc. There are also various communities by subject on Facebook: Books and Book Lovers, Astana: What? Where? When? KR DOCTORS, Fashion Park, Classifieds, Made in K.Z. These communities are mainly targeted at young people and have from 30 thousand to 1 million users. With a population of 18 million people, such communities are large and have a high impact (Raibaeva, 2012; Isabaeva, 2012).

This study included sociological surveys to identify side effects in the network culture that pose a potential threat to individuals and the society in general. Unfortunately, openness in the Internet environment gives users access to both cognitive and optimistic and other online content that might be prohibited by law or antisocial. Intense intercultural contacts are not only mutually enriching but might also be incredibly damaging for public interests. We believe that a responsible government should ensure real citizen activism, teach people how to distinguish between slacktivism and real-life forms of engagement in the activities that are useful for society (Yessenbekova, 2016).

The survey results show that collective consciousness is far from sociocultural traditions, social institutions, national traditions, and values. Figure 1 presents higher aggressiveness in web communications, which is significantly higher than that in the empirical social environment (see Figure 2).

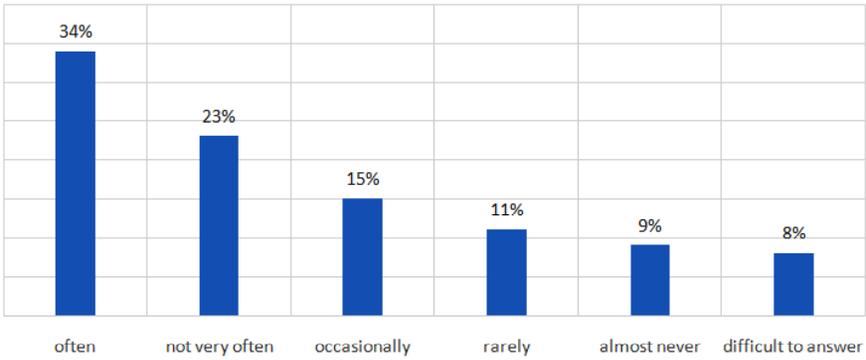


Figure 1. Observed aggression in the Kazakhstan segment of the Internet (%)

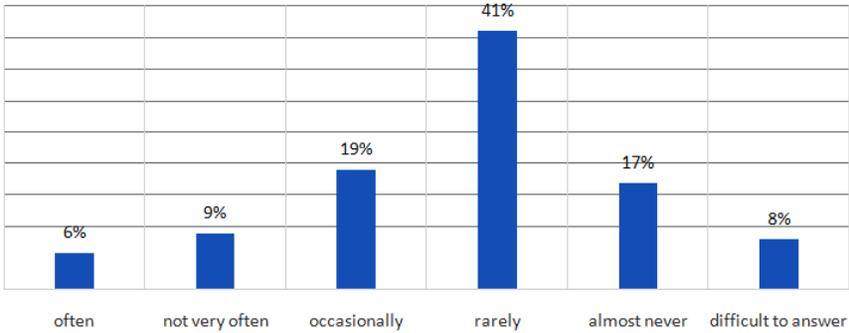


Figure 2. Cases of aggression in real life (%)

As the social media monitoring shows, the Internet does not only contribute to consolidation in the society but also creates divider-barriers within it, *small islands* for disruption of relations in the society. A part of the population feels like residents of the empirical space, while another part feels comfortable in the virtual world. Recent protest campaigns have had signs of both groups. For instance, campaigns start in social media and, upon the audience mobilization, move to squares and streets. All this was observable in the time of election campaigns in April-July 2019 in Kazakhstan.

To assess the influence of political and social media contents on the activism of young people, we experimented with bachelor and master students. The objective was to choose the most exciting videos on important events from Kazakhstan (during January-June, 2019). We interviewed 291 people aged between 20-30 years. There is the rating of the events that had more than 90 percent of votes: Protest campaigns on June 9-10 following the presidential elections (112 persons); N. Nazarbayev’s resignation as Kazakhstan president (61 persons); Astana renaming (35 persons); Kazakhstan talent Dimashconquered the USA (14 persons); They are blocking social media (May, June) (11 persons); Nauryz Meiramy celebration (9 persons); Explosion at the military warehouse in Arys (8 persons); Youth campaign “I have a choice” (6 persons); Establishment of new airline Fly Arystan (4 persons); and Establishment of movement “Oyan, Qazaqstan”(3 persons).

Under the terms of the experiment, participants were supposed to specify (i) which form of expression for their opinion they choose (public or anonymous), and (ii) which support public campaigns they consider efficient. Experiment results highlighted the direct correlation between open, public expressions of opinions by young people and their further real-life engagement in public campaigns. More than two-thirds of participants

chose the public, open form (68%, 198 persons) of engagement in campaigns. More than 90% of people in this group declared their readiness to take real-life measures to support campaigns, volunteer, provide financial assistance, or take part in other real-life forms. Less than 10% refused from further support. These data point out to the fact that the participants who publicly supported a campaign are more inclined to real-life voluntary engagement in public campaigns. Another part of participants (32%, 93 persons) in the experiment chose the anonymous support to campaigns. Of them, only 29 persons considered real-life engagement possible. More than 70% refused from further support or real-life engagement. Hence, we might conclude that anonymous support to social and publicly beneficial campaigns reduces the inclination to further real-life behaviors.

Based on findings from the experimental survey, we may conclude that the online calls that are well-thought-out in terms of their content and form might be an efficient way to involve young people in public campaigns. Findings of the experiment and behaviors of young people, in this case, might be pieces of evidence for this statement.

The analysis of collective protest moods and their cultural diversity points out to the fact that social media and mobile communications are a reason for the mobilization of a large-sized audience. They have turned into the tools that support a new type of political and social engagement based on political autonomy and horizontal ties, informal leadership, and spontaneous solidarity. Slacktivism serves to solve such problems in society as civil rights protection, public safety, preservation of national values, environmental protection, etc. Thinking of the dilemma of whether slacktivism is positive or negative, we need to distinguish between various aspects of this phenomenon. The issue of usefulness to society also has many facets and answers. It is impossible to unequivocally say that this or that approach is positive or negative. There is another important reason. The society, including young people, should be active and involved in public life. Collaboration between society and young people should be mutually beneficial. Any of the two forms of action turns into active citizenship and real-life engagement in decision making on solutions to problems in society.

## Conclusion

New information technologies transform the institutional routine into a society-government relationship. The emergence of online communities, on the one hand, contributes to consolidation in the society, the genesis of the virtual life, and the emergence of e-democracy. On the other hand, the rich information field gives rise to new challenges and social relations, the emergence of divider-barriers between actors in communication processes. It is clear from the monitoring of social media that the Internet does not only contribute to consolidation in the society, but it also creates a divider-barrier there and *small islands* there for disruption of social relations. Interactions of people in the virtual space highlight the issue of public activism of Internet users where young people make a significant part.

Within the research, we completed sociological surveys to identify the side effects of the network culture that pose a potential threat to individuals and the society in general. The survey results showed that collective consciousness is far from sociocultural traditions, social institutions, national traditions, and values.

To estimate the influence of political or social media contents on the activism of young people, we experimented with students. We found the direct correlation between open and shared expressions of opinions by young people and their further real-life participation in public campaigns. More than 2/3 of participants chose a public and open form of participation in campaigns. More than 90% of persons in this group declared their

readiness to take real-life measures (volunteering, financial support, or other type of real-life engagement). Less than 10% refused from further support. Based on these data, we might conclude that the participants who publicly supported a campaign are more inclined to real-life voluntary engagement in public campaigns. Another part of the participants in the experiment chose anonymous support for the campaign. Of them, more than 70% refused from further support or real-life engagement in them.

There are many points of view on the prospects for the development of social networks, and these prospects depend on the target audience to which they are targeted. The study of the social activity of young people should include a comprehensive study of the forms and types of its manifestation in modern society. A comprehensive, methodological substantiation of the primary socio-psychological approach to the definition of the phenomenon of social activity is needed. To analyze the social activity of young people, it is necessary to study their personal and socio-psychological determinants, which form the basis for future research.

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**Ulbossyn M. Yessenbekova** is an acting professor in the Department of Teleradio and Public Relations at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Republic of Kazakhstan. Her research interest is the scientific direction of media such as trends in the development of modern mass communications, humans in the information society.