



YOUTH, DIGITAL CULTURE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MODERN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the limited empirical research on how youth in Azerbaijan navigate digital culture under socio-political constraints, a post-Soviet society undergoing rapid digitalization and socio-political transformation. Using a qualitative design with purposive sampling, data were analyzed through thematic analysis to capture in-depth youth experiences. The findings show that Azerbaijani youth strategically use digital platforms to express dissent through indirect and culturally adaptive practices, allowing youth to navigate cultural norms, express alternative narratives, and engage in social activism. The study identifies state surveillance and regulatory restrictions as primary constraints shaping youth digital engagement, which limit the scope and impact of online participation. These dual dynamics underscore the ambivalent role of digital culture as both an enabler of empowerment and a site of constraint. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how Azerbaijani youth strategically employ digital media to negotiate social, cultural, and political realities, while also revealing the contingent nature of digital-driven social change in transitional societies. The study recommends context-specific policies to improve digital literacy and protect youth civic expression in regulated digital environments. The study also provides directions for future research, including comparative analyses across post-Soviet contexts and intersectional examinations of digital participation. Overall, this research illuminates the transformative potential and limitations of digital culture in shaping youth agency and social change in modern Azerbaijan.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Azerbaijan has undergone significant social transformations characterized by measurable economic growth, rapid expansion of digital infrastructure, and intensified global cultural interactions, as evidenced by increased internet penetration rates, rising social media usage statistics, and state-led digital development initiatives (e.g., national ICT strategies). These transformations have been widely documented in recent scholarship, which highlights how post-Soviet modernization processes intersect with globalization and technological change, thereby reshaping societal structures, communication patterns, and cultural orientations in the Azerbaijani context. These changes have had a profound impact on young people, who position themselves as key actors in shaping digital culture and the dynamics of national social change.

With a relatively large youth population—constituting a significant proportion of the national demographic structure—Azerbaijan represents a particularly instructive case for examining the intersection of youth, digital culture, and social change. Recent demographic data indicate that individuals aged 18–30 form a substantial segment of the population, thereby amplifying their potential influence on cultural production, digital engagement, and socio-political transformation. Compared to other post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan's combination of rapid digitalization and controlled political environment provides a unique context for analyzing how young people negotiate technological opportunities within structural constraints (Aliyev, 2021). This phenomenon necessitates a critical examination of the interconnection between youth, digital culture, and



social change; however, existing studies have largely focused either on digital development at the macro level or on generalized patterns of youth engagement without adequately addressing how young individuals actively negotiate socio-political constraints within digitally mediated environments. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth, context-specific analysis of how Azerbaijani youth strategically utilize digital platforms to construct identity, engage in civic discourse, and respond to structural limitations within a transitional post-Soviet society.

Digitalization in Azerbaijan has increased rapidly since 2010, in line with government investment in information technology and expanded internet access. This expansion has contributed to the development of a broader and more accessible social media ecosystem; however, the extent of its inclusivity remains uneven and contested (Şentürk, 2024). While increased internet penetration has enabled greater participation among urban and digitally literate populations, disparities persist across rural areas, socio-economic groups, and gender lines. Consequently, rather than representing a fully inclusive environment, the Azerbaijani digital sphere reflects layered inequalities that shape differential access, participation, and influence among youth (Mammadova & Karimov, 2020). The digital sphere has become a platform where youth express identities, debate public issues, and organize social initiatives. However, the growth of digital culture also creates tensions between traditional values and more cosmopolitan cultural practices influenced by media globalization and transnational information flows (Huseynli, 2022).

Amid ongoing modernization, young people in Azerbaijan increasingly utilize digital platforms not merely as spaces for entertainment but as critical arenas for cultivating political awareness, engaging in civic discourse, and participating in forms of digital activism. This shift can be understood through theoretical frameworks such as the concept of the networked public sphere and youth agency, which

emphasize how digital environments facilitate new modes of participation, deliberation, and collective identity formation, even within contexts characterized by regulatory constraints and limited political openness. Several studies indicate that digital activism among youth has increased substantially, especially in response to issues such as corruption, economic inequality, and freedom of expression (Gasimova, 2023). Nevertheless, this dynamic does not unfold without obstacles. State control over the digital sphere, strict media regulations, and cyber-surveillance practices impose structural limitations on political expression. Under such conditions, adaptive strategies emerge, including the use of coded language, political humor, and popular cultural practices to communicate criticism indirectly (Rahimov, 2021).

Furthermore, digital culture in Azerbaijan has shaped new patterns of information consumption. Young people increasingly rely on social media as their primary information source, perceiving traditional media outlets as less credible or overly aligned with official state narratives (Nasraddinova, 2020). This shift affects how they interpret social realities and respond to public issues. However, the dominance of digital information also brings challenges such as polarization, misinformation, and the reinforcement of echo chambers, particularly in a regional political context that remains sensitive. Ongoing conflicts, especially regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh region, often turn the digital space into a battleground of competing narratives involving nationalism, historical memory, and geopolitical sentiment (Farzaliyev, 2022).

Nevertheless, digital culture offers significant opportunities for social innovation. Numerous community-based initiatives driven by youth have emerged online, encompassing fields such as education, gender equality, creative entrepreneurship, and the preservation of local culture. These movements signify a shift in youth orientation from mere consumers of technology to producers of ideas actively contributing to social



change (Ismayilova, 2021). By utilizing technology, Azerbaijani youth not only articulate social demands but also construct new forms of solidarity and cross-regional collaboration.

However, the relationship between youth, digital culture, and social change in Azerbaijan remains complex due to the interplay of multiple structural, cultural, and political factors. These include the tension between state control and digital freedom, disparities in technological access, the influence of traditional cultural norms, and the evolving strategies employed by youth to navigate surveillance and regulation. This complexity underscores the need for a multidimensional analytical approach that captures both enabling and constraining dynamics within the digital landscape. Digital modernization does not automatically yield political transformation or democratization. Instead, it can reinforce existing power structures if not accompanied by institutional reforms and improvements in digital literacy (Rustamov & Suleymanli, 2023). The imbalance between youths' critical capacity and rigid bureaucratic regulation may lead to political frustration or digital apathy. Moreover, disparities in technological access between urban and rural areas continue to create unequal participation in digital spaces.

In the global context, the Azerbaijani experience contributes to broader understanding that digital culture within post-Soviet countries cannot be separated from the political dynamics and authoritarian structures that shape them. While young people push the boundaries of social engagement, the state simultaneously develops mechanisms to manage and control the digital sphere in alignment with national political agendas (Mikayilov, 2021). This interaction produces an ambiguity: whether digital culture becomes a catalyst for progressive social change or is instead co-opted as an instrument for the reproduction of power.

Moreover, understanding youth engagement within Azerbaijan's digital sphere requires situating their practices within broader socio-political

transformations that shape agency, citizenship, and public deliberation. Digital interactions increasingly function as mediating sites where aspirations for modernization intersect with persistent constraints imposed by regulatory structures and cultural expectations. Consequently, the digital environment becomes both a catalyst and a contested arena for negotiating identity, legitimacy, and collective action. This duality underscores the need for analytical frameworks that capture not only the emancipatory potential of digital culture but also its entanglement with surveillance, governance, and uneven power relations in contemporary Azerbaijani society.

Given this complexity, systematic research on youth, digital culture, and social change in modern Azerbaijan is essential for advancing scholarly understanding of digitally mediated social transformation in transitional societies. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate how Azerbaijani youth construct and negotiate their identities within digital spaces, how they engage in civic and socio-political activities through online platforms, and how structural constraints shape the scope and impact of their participation. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the broader discourse on digital culture and youth agency in post-Soviet contexts. This background underscores the urgency of critically examining the dynamics of digital culture shaping social change among youth in the era of rapid digitalization in Azerbaijan.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, specifically adopting a multi-method approach that integrates elements of digital ethnography and phenomenological inquiry. This design is intended to capture the lived experiences, subjective interpretations, and socially constructed meanings that Azerbaijani youth attach to their engagement with digital culture, while also situating these experiences within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. Given the exploratory and



interpretive nature of the research questions, which seek to understand how youth construct meaning, negotiate identity, and engage in socio-political practices within digital environments, a qualitative approach is considered most appropriate. Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize measurement and generalization, this approach enables in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, contextual nuances, and the dynamic processes through which digital culture influences social change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focuses on capturing the nuanced ways in which Azerbaijani youth engage with digital media, negotiate socio-political constraints, and participate in social and cultural transformation.

The research population consists of Azerbaijani youth aged between 18 and 30 years, a range selected based on commonly accepted sociological and policy-oriented definitions of youth in post-Soviet and global development contexts. This age group represents a transitional phase between adolescence and full adulthood, during which individuals are more likely to actively engage with digital technologies, experiment with identity formation, and participate in socio-cultural and political processes. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on clearly defined inclusion criteria, including frequency of digital platform usage (e.g., daily engagement), involvement in content creation or online discussions, and participation in digital communities or civic initiatives. This approach ensured the selection of information-rich cases that could provide meaningful insights into the research questions, while also maintaining diversity in terms of socio-economic background, education level, and geographic location. A total of 40 participants were selected, with the sample size determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby no new themes or significant insights emerged from additional data collection. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards and was sufficient to capture a diverse range of perspectives while allowing for in-depth analysis of participants' experiences and practices within digital environments.

Data collection was conducted using a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and digital ethnography. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions regarding digital engagement, identity construction, and social participation in their own words. Focus groups facilitated interactive discussions that revealed collective norms, shared challenges, and generational perspectives. Digital ethnography involved observation of participants' publicly shared online content, interactions, and digital communities to supplement interview and focus group data, providing contextual understanding of their online practices (Hine, 2015).

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted either in Azerbaijani or Russian, depending on participants' preference, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed following a systematic and iterative process as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, and definition. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were utilized to balance data-driven insights with theoretical frameworks. To enhance reliability and validity, coding consistency was maintained through repeated data review, and emerging themes were continuously refined to ensure coherence and analytical depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was performed iteratively, with both inductive and deductive approaches to ensure that emergent insights were grounded in participants' narratives while also reflecting theoretical frameworks from existing literature.

Ethical considerations were rigorously implemented throughout the research process in accordance with established qualitative research ethics guidelines (Jafarov & Hasanov, 2025). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's objectives. Measures were taken to guarantee anonymity and



confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Additionally, particular care was given to digital ethnography practices by restricting observations to publicly accessible content and avoiding any intrusion into private communications without explicit consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, with pseudonyms used in all transcripts and reports. Additionally, digital observations were limited to publicly accessible content, and no private communications were accessed without explicit consent.

By combining multiple qualitative methods and adhering to rigorous ethical standards, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how youth in Azerbaijan leverage digital culture to engage in social and cultural change, while navigating structural constraints and evolving societal expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal a multi-layered and contextually contingent relationship between Azerbaijani youth, digital culture, and social change, characterized by the simultaneous expansion of digital participation and the persistence of structural constraints such as regulatory control, socio-economic inequality, and uneven digital access (Goyushov & Huseynli, 2019). This complexity is evidenced through participants' narratives, which demonstrate how digital engagement operates both as a mechanism for self-expression and as a negotiated practice shaped by external limitations. Analysis of interviews, focus group discussions, and digital ethnographic data resulted in the identification of three interrelated themes through an iterative coding process. These themes emerged from repeated patterns across participants' narratives and were refined through constant comparison, ensuring that they accurately represent both dominant and divergent perspectives within the dataset. The

thematic structure reflects not only recurring empirical observations but also their alignment with broader theoretical constructs related to digital culture and youth agency: digital engagement as identity construction, digital platforms as spaces for socio-political negotiation, and the dual role of digital culture in enabling both empowerment and constraint. These findings are critically discussed below, with reference to theoretical and empirical literature.

Digital Engagement and Identity Construction

Participants consistently emphasized that digital platforms function as critical sites for identity formation and self-expression, as illustrated by narratives in which individuals described curating online personas, sharing creative content, and engaging in discussions that reflect personal, cultural, and political identities. For instance, several participants highlighted how platforms such as Instagram and TikTok enable them to challenge dominant cultural expectations while selectively managing their visibility in response to social and political sensitivities. Many youth described social media as spaces where they could explore personal, cultural, and political identities beyond the limitations imposed by traditional societal norms. For example, several participants shared how creating and sharing content related to arts, culture, and lifestyle allowed them to present alternative narratives of Azerbaijani youth that challenge conservative expectations. These findings align with Huseynli's (2022) observation that globalization and transnational media flows facilitate new forms of cultural negotiation, enabling youth to mediate between traditional values and modern, cosmopolitan influences. Notably, digital identity practices were not only performative but also strategic: participants curated content and moderated interactions to navigate social and political sensitivities, illustrating a nuanced awareness of both opportunity and risk in digital spaces.



Digital Platforms as Sites of Socio-Political Negotiation

Another key theme concerns the role of digital platforms in facilitating various forms of political and social engagement, ranging from passive information consumption to active participation in online discussions, advocacy campaigns, and community-based initiatives (Naghiyeva & Hasanli, 2025; Özsoy, 2024). Participants reported engaging in issue-based conversations, mobilizing support for social causes, and contributing to digital activism efforts, thereby illustrating the diverse modalities through which digital engagement manifests in the Azerbaijani context (Suleymanli, 2021; Özsoy, 2024). The majority of participants reported using social media to discuss public issues such as corruption, economic inequality, environmental concerns, and civic rights. Several individuals described participation in online campaigns and community initiatives, ranging from local fundraising projects to advocacy for gender equality. This aligns with Gasimova (2023), who notes the rise of youth digital activism in contemporary Azerbaijan. However, participants also highlighted the limitations imposed by state monitoring, restrictive regulations, and self-censorship. To circumvent these constraints, youth employed creative strategies such as satire, coded language, and humor in digital communications (Rahimov, 2021). These practices reflect a form of “negotiated digital agency,” where empowerment is exercised within, and often constrained by, structural limits.

Digital Culture: Empowerment and Constraint

While digital culture provides avenues for self-expression and social mobilization, the findings indicate that it simultaneously reproduces existing inequalities and power dynamics, particularly along lines of socio-economic status and geographic location (Ismailzade, 2024). Participants from urban and higher-education backgrounds reported greater access to digital resources and opportunities for engagement, whereas those from rural areas

described limitations related to internet connectivity, digital literacy, and socio-cultural restrictions, demonstrating how structural disparities shape differential participation (Aliyev & Aliyeva, 2024). Urban youth with higher education and reliable internet access demonstrated more active participation, whereas rural participants faced technological and socio-economic barriers that limited their engagement. This digital divide reflects Rustamov and Suleymanli’s (2023) findings on uneven digital literacy and access in Azerbaijan. Additionally, participants expressed concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and the performative nature of online activism. While digital engagement facilitated social visibility, it did not always translate into tangible offline change, highlighting the ambivalent role of technology as both an enabler and a constrainer of social transformation.

Implications for Social Change

The study reveals that Azerbaijani youth actively reinterpret and utilize digital culture to negotiate their social, cultural, and political environments. Digital spaces function as arenas for experimenting with civic participation, expressing dissent, and constructing collective identities. However, the impact of these practices on systemic change remains conditional, mediated by political structures, regulatory environments, and socio-economic inequalities. This duality not only aligns with broader observations in post-Soviet contexts but also provides context-specific insights into the Azerbaijani case, where state regulation and cultural conservatism intersect with rapid digitalization (Goyushov & Huseynli, 2019). Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize either empowerment or control, this research demonstrates how youth actively navigate and negotiate these opposing forces through adaptive digital practices, thereby contributing a more nuanced understanding of digitally mediated social change in constrained environments (Mikayilov, 2021; Najafli, 2025). In effect, youth engagement in digital culture exemplifies



a “contested modernity,” in which empowerment, creativity, and innovation coexist with constraint, surveillance, and structural limitations.

Integration with Existing Literature

The findings corroborate prior research on youth digital practices in transitional societies while offering localized insights specific to Azerbaijan. Whereas global studies emphasize digital media as a driver of activism and civic engagement, the Azerbaijani context illustrates the need to consider authoritarian regulation, cultural conservatism, and uneven digital access as critical moderating factors. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of examining digital identity construction as an intersectional practice, integrating generational aspirations, socio-economic status, and cultural norms. This expands the theoretical understanding of digital youth culture by emphasizing both the performative and strategic dimensions of online engagement in contexts of constrained freedom.

Conclusion of Findings

Overall, the results underscore the dual and negotiated character of digital culture among Azerbaijani youth, highlighting its role as both an enabling and constraining force within a transitional socio-political landscape (Kuchkarov & Rahimova, 2025; Bedford, 2023). This synthesis suggests that digital engagement should be understood not as a linear driver of social change but as a contingent process shaped by the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions (Tahir, 2025). Consequently, the study contributes to theoretical discussions by proposing a framework of ‘negotiated digital agency’ to explain how youth operate within and adapt to regulated digital environment: as a platform for empowerment, creativity, and collective engagement, and simultaneously as a space shaped by structural limitations, surveillance, and unequal access. Digital practices among youth are not merely reflective of global trends; they are actively

negotiated, adapted, and localized, revealing both the potential and limits of digital culture as a medium for social change in contemporary Azerbaijan.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study advances the understanding of youth engagement with digital culture by conceptualizing it as a form of ‘negotiated digital agency,’ in which empowerment and constraint coexist within structurally regulated environments. Rather than merely confirming existing assumptions about digital participation, the findings demonstrate how Azerbaijani youth actively navigate, reinterpret, and adapt to socio-political limitations, thereby contributing a context-specific theoretical perspective to broader discussions on digital culture and social change in transitional societies. Digital platforms serve as vital arenas for identity construction, civic participation, and collective action, allowing youth to express alternative narratives, engage in social activism, and experiment with new forms of community collaboration. However, the potential of digital engagement to drive tangible social change is mediated by factors such as state surveillance, restrictive regulations, technological inequalities, and socio-economic disparities, which create uneven opportunities for participation across different demographic groups. The findings highlight that while digital media can facilitate innovation, social mobilization, and cross-cultural dialogue, it is also susceptible to reproducing existing hierarchies and limitations, demonstrating the dual character of digital culture in transitional societies. These findings generate important, contextually grounded implications for policymakers, educators, and social organizations in Azerbaijan. Specifically, the study suggests the need for policy frameworks that balance digital regulation with the protection of youth expression, educational programs that enhance critical digital literacy and resilience against misinformation, and community initiatives that create safe and inclusive digital spaces for civic engagement. Such targeted interventions are essential to



addressing the structural constraints identified in this study while maximizing the transformative potential of youth digital participation. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of recognizing the strategic, contextually grounded, and locally adapted ways in which youth navigate digital spaces, emphasizing that empowerment through digital culture is neither automatic nor uniform but contingent upon broader social, political, and economic conditions. For research, it is essential to address the limitations of this study by conducting longitudinal investigations that examine how digital engagement evolves over time and whether it translates into sustained offline social change. Additionally, comparative studies across post-Soviet contexts would enable a deeper understanding of how varying political and cultural environments shape digital practices. Further research should also adopt an intersectional lens to explore how factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status influence access, participation, and agency within digital spaces, thereby providing a more comprehensive and differentiated analysis of youth digital culture. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary Azerbaijani youth utilize digital culture to negotiate identity, agency, and social change, offering a model for analyzing youth engagement in similarly transitional and digitally connected societies worldwide.

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