The Risks and Opportunities of Use of Social Media: Youth Perceptions

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Abstract

The use of social media is increasing day by day in Georgia. Although Facebook has millions of users, the sites TikTok and Instagram are particularly popular with young people. Because their audience is mostly young, this study aims to explore the attitudes of young people, what are the risks and opportunities related to using social media platforms. This study was carried out in 2 stages. At the first step qualitative approach for preliminary research – focus groups and in-depth interviews methods were used and at the second stage online survey Google forms e-questionnaire was used. This paper analyzes young peoples' perceptions toward social media usage.

Keywords: social media, TikTok, Instagram, digital media, Georgian youth, risks & opportunities, usage of social media

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Social media is an integral part of our daily life, invading all areas our life but it poses a lot of challenges in the epoch of disinformation. Fake news, fake accounts, fake illusions - this is very often observed. In recent years, the issue of how to combat misinformation and fake news spread in social networks, has frequently been discussed by researchers as a challenge related to the dark sides of social media.

This global challenge is also relevant and important for Georgia because the use of social media is increasing day by day and, accordingly, the danger of spreading misinformation is very actual.

However, it is interesting that apart from these dangers, what other risks does the use of social media expose people to? Although Facebook has millions of users in Georgia, the platforms TikTok and Instagram are particularly popular with young people. Because their audience is mostly young, this study aims to explore the attitudes of young people, what are the risks and opportunities related to using social media platforms. Therefore, it is very important to research this highly relevant issue. Accordingly, for this purpose, two main research questions were developed.

1.2 The Main Research Questions

This study addresses following research questions:

RQ1. What are the risk factors of using social media by young people?

RQ2. What are the opportunities of development of using social media by young people?

2. Literature Review

In the last decade various studies has focused on the benefits, risks or threats and opportunities of usage of social media by young people in different Countries.

According to study of Reid and Weigle, which conducted research in USA, social media as a recent form of communication, has a significant role in young people's social lives but despite the numerous benefits they also have several potential risks (Reid, D. & Weigle, P. 2014). As the authors concluded: "Although there are numerous benefits to social media use for adolescents, there are also several potential risks that may be detrimental to their mental health and well-being. It is crucial that mental health providers be familiar with these benefits and risks in order to more effectively educate and guide patients and families towards only safe, healthy and appropriate use of this media" (Reid, D. & Weigle, P. 2014, p. 79).

Social media's widespread use in the digital age has led to concerns about addiction and dependence among young adults, "pervasive influence of social media in today's digital era has raised concerns about addictive behaviors and dependency among young adults" (Thomas et. al. 2023, p. 72).

As Tartari emphasized that benefits and risks of the using social media have a substantial impact on young people's physical and psychological development (Tartari, E. 2015).

Finnish researchers Aramo-Immonen and Jussila conducted longitudinal study among university students in regards to explore the risks of usage of social media and according to this study, "most perceived risk was technical barrier, based information security" (Aramo-Immonen, H. & Jussila, J. 2016, p. 5).

Mulisa and Getahun investigated, how Ethiopian students evaluated the benefits and risks of using social media and as they mentioned, despite the fact that there are several disadvantages associated with social media use, its' advantage for educational purposes is shown (Mulisa, F. & Getahun, D. A., 2018).

Discourse about the opportunities and risks of youth using the Internet has sparked significant interest among researchers from various fields (such as education, sociology, and psychology), as teachers, parents, and policymakers seek to identify which factors may encourage beneficial uses of digital media while mitigating associated risks (Andrea et al. 2020; Vanderhoven et al. 2014).

The Internet provides education, communication, community involvement, creativity, self-expression, and entertainment, but it can also expose young people to violent or hateful content, self-harm, pornography, inappropriate or harmful contact with others, harassment, and problematic peer behavior like bullying or privacy invasion (Andrea et al. 2020).

Norwegian researchers pointed out in terms of security control that there are differences in risk perception when using the four different SoMe platforms, where Reddit and Snapchat are considered as safest, and Facebook and Twitter as most risky (Nyblom, P., Wangen et. al, 2020).

Škripcová & Hladíková in their study reviewed young people's current social media trends and risks & opportunities. They attempted to describe the paradigmatic shifts linked not only with media convergence, but also with public convergence, which is particularly visible in young recipients - digital natives living in an era of so-called technological interference. These shifts present both opportunities and challenges, particularly in terms of psychological and societal survival (Škripcová, L., & Hladíková, V. 2020).

The results of Adolfathi and co-authors study which conducted among Iranian youth, revealed as treats and risks of usage social media as well as good platform for "growth and prosperity, safe relations and interactions, increasing social capital, escaping from loneliness, social identification" (Adolfathi, M., Dehdari, T., et. al. 2022, p. 6).

There are some studies which focused on swot analysis of usage different social media. For example, Swathi, P. K., & Sujatha, K. S. conducted comparative case study analysis of social media platforms and presented swot analysis of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat (Swathi, P. K., & Sujatha, K. S. 2022); Green and his co-authors while studying Instagram as a case study, presented swot analysis on Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest (Green et. al. 2018), etc.

Demirtepe-Saygili examined usage of social media from a stress and coping perspective. Social media can cause stress for users due to the substance of the postings they view, a fear of bad appraisal, an unhealthy attachment to social media accounts, and cyberbullying (Demirtepe-Saygili, D. 2022).

Wolfers & Utz study provided evidence that "social media can cause stress, serve as resources, and can be used as a tool for various coping strategies, but it remains unclear when social media can successfully mitigate stress" (Wolfers, L.N., Utz, S, 2022, p. 1).

Willoughby identified four potential risks: cyberbullying and online abuse, exposure to unfavorable user-generated content, the convergence of offline and online networks, and evolving privacy interpretations. (Willoughby, 2019).

Potential risks associated with social media use include cyberbullying, leakage of personal or financial data, a lack of media literacy (the capacity to differentiate misinformation/fake news from trustworthy sources), and harmful trends that can jeopardize life and injury. Furthermore, by utilizing social networks, we become more visible, increasing the risk of revealing personal information with people we would not want to share in real life (Georgieva et. al. 2024).

Young people's perspectives are explored in the book about risk and harm in youth sexting, specifically privacy violations and unwanted, pressured and coerced sexting (Setty, 2020).

As Bozzola and co-authors underlined in their study conducted in Italy, "Children and adolescents who use social media for many hours a day, are at higher risk for behavioral problems, cyberbullying, online grooming, sleep difficulties, eye problems (…), and headache. Moreover, uncontrolled social media use, can lead to sexting, exposure to pornography, exposed to unwanted sexual material online, and early sexual activity" (Bozzola et. al, 2022, p. 29).

The study which was conducted among students Minesota University, concludes that using of social media by students poses some risks and also wellbeing, regarding to psychological side: The study concluded that depression, stress, anxiety, emotional isolation, low selfesteem, memory loss, and selfharm are the psychological effects of social media use among

students and that there is a significant effect of the use of social media on the psychological wellbeing of the students in Minnesota, United States of America" (Olola, T. M., Asukwo, A. U. A., & Odufuwa, F., 2023).

According to Stavropoulos & co-authors, in addition to its advantages, digital media technology poses a risk to young people's ability to adapt because of the interaction between the user, the application, real-world circumstances, and virtual environments (Stavropoulos, et. al. 2021).

Some studies discussed mental health, as one of the risks of using social media. According to Naslud and his co-authors, "social media use can have negative effects on mental health symptoms, can potentially expose individuals to hurtful content and hostile interactions, and can result in serious consequences for daily life, including threats to employment and personal relationships" (Naslud et. al. 2020, p. 251).

As Bell & her co-authors underlined, during a few years, there were unspoken consensus that social media research should focus on their potential harm, such as negatively correlated mental health outcomes (Bell. A. R., et al. 2022).

Beyari emphasized that the use of social media may have negative effects on mental health, particularly among young people who are more likely to use these platforms extensively (Beyari, 2023) and according to his study, "social media can have both positive and negative effects on mental health, depending on how it is used and the specific features that are engaged with. It is therefore important for young people to be aware of the potential risks and to use social media in a balanced and responsible manner" (Beyari, 2023, p. 9).

As Shivanand concluded, the use of social media contributes to technology addiction among adolescents, which has a negative impact on mental health and well-being. To avoid addiction, effective intervention and prevention strategies must be used (Shivanand, RG., 2023).

As study of Adelhardt and Eberle highlighted, TikTok has considerable potential as an engaging educational tool but also indicated two challenges: The first one involves balancing instructive content with enjoyable distractions. The algorithms driving user interaction frequently cause youngsters to deviate from their intended focus, discouraging some from using the platform for educational purposes. The second problem is assuring the credibility of the content and sources. As development opportunity, they emphasized that, one of the possibilities is "implementing easy-to-use filters designed to filter educational content for students, although the effectiveness and feasibility of such filtering mechanisms and possible labelling would require profound assessment" (Adelhardt & Eberle, 2024, p. 7).

The book "Social Media - Opportunities and Risks" (2024), aimed to open to readers a guided tour of digital frontier, examining the possible benefits and dangers that social media brings to individuals, corporations, and society.

As for Georgian context, L. Tsuladze, A. Berdzenishvili (2013) studies social media development tendency in Georgia, however they didn't focus on the attitudes of young people. Osepashvili studies the usage of social media platform for educational purpose by students and teachers (Osepashvili, 2014); There is a study which exploring the risks of disinformation, misinformation and fake news during the covid-19 pandemic from social media (Osepashvili, 2023).

Therefore, it possible to say that, there are no studies in Georgia which focused about social media usage by young people. Thus, the novelty and actuality of this research, is undeniable.

3. Method

The data for this explanatory study were collected by qualitative as well as quantitative methods and it was carried out in 2 stages.

At the first stage, for the preliminary research were conducted 2 focus groups with students and 8 in-depth interviews in order to indicate the attitudes of young people.

For the second stage the quantitative study was conducted using Google forms as a data collection technique, in April and May 2023.

The survey was conducted electronic questionnaires, which were distributed in various student Facebook groups. At the whole, 380 respondents participated in this questionnaire.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Research Results of Focus Groups and In-depth Interviews

As it was revealed by the qualitative approach, most of the respondents think that main risks are related to personal information; It causes threat of cyberbullying; spread of disinformation and fake news; addiction; It causes illusion, the threat of blurring the line between virtuality and reality etc.

As for opportunities of developments, according to the young people, social media will be more frequently used by traditional news media, they will find new ways to spread brief videos among users, like a TikTok platform; social media will be more actively used in social media marketing;

Social media will be more useful for educational reasons; It will help increase engagement in civic activism in a variety of ways; It will help even more to get useful information and advice.

4.2 Results of Quantitative Study- Findings and Discussion

As the results of the descriptive analysis of socio-demographic information from Table 1 showed about respondents' profile: 47 percent (n=180) of questioned young people were male and 53 percent (n=200) were female.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of Socio-Demographic Information

Variable	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Male	180	47
Female	200	53
Age:		
18-24	290	40
25-35	190	60

N=380

Most of questioned respondents (60%) were 18-24 year and 40% belonged 25-35 age category.

Results of the figure 1 shows, which related to question, if they consider yourself addicted to social media, the answers distributed as follow: 68 % (250) consider themselves as an addicted, 8 % (30) no and 24 % (90) of respondents avoided answering.
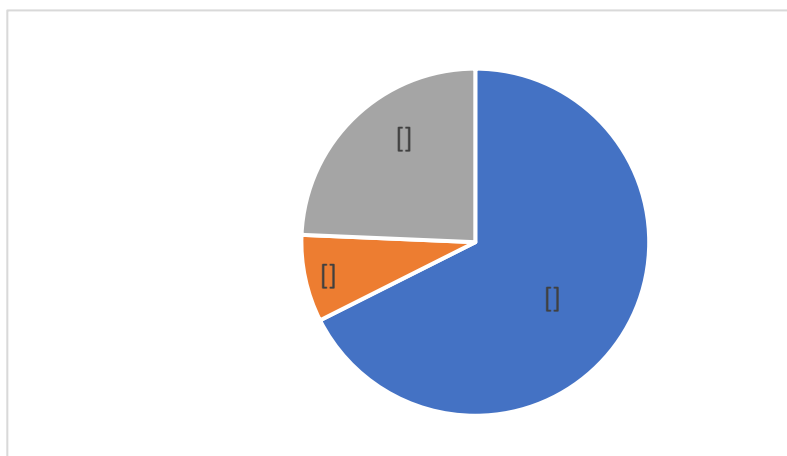

Figure 1. Addiction to social media

How many hours a day do you spend on social media? The results of this research question on the figure 2, showed that 37 % of questioned respondents (140) spent more than 6 hours, 32 % (120) 3-4 hours, 18 % (70) 5-6 hours and 13 % (50) 1-2 hours.
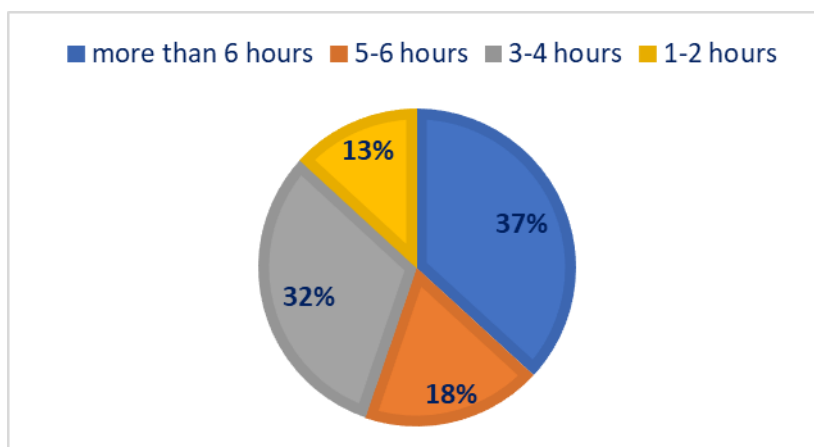

Figure 2. Frequency of using a day

Table 2 shows the results of descriptive analysis of usage of social media. On the question - "Which social media user are you?"- they could choose more than one answer.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of usage of social media

	Social media	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Rank
1	LinkedIn	60	16	6th
2	YouTube	270	71	3rd
3	Twitter	90	24	5th
4	TikTok	220	58	4th
5	Instagram	350	92	2nd
6	Facebook	360	95	1st

N=380

As it clear from the table 2, mostly they are users of Facebook 95 %, Instagram 92 %, YouTube 71 %; and TikTok – 90 %. Georgian youth are less likely to use Twitter 24 % and LinkedIn 16 %.

In the next question – "Which social media do you prefer?" - they could choose only one answer. The figure 3 shows the results of this question.
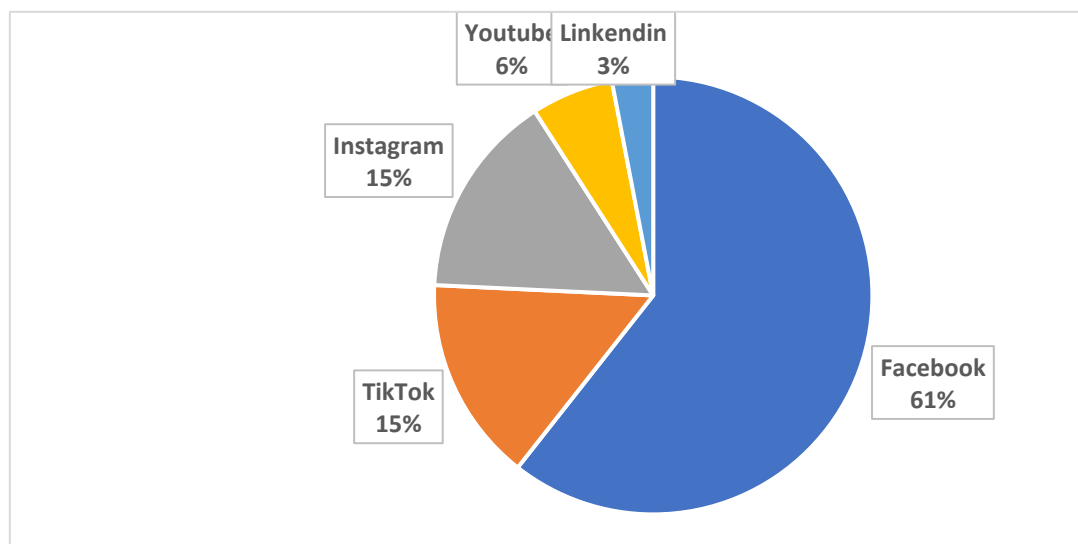

Figure 3. Preference of One Particular Social Media

According to the results of figure 3, the majority of questioned respondents prefer Facebook, followed by Instagram and TikTok. To the open-ended question why you prefer a particular platform, it was revealed that in the case of Facebook it is explained by the messenger or the communication function and receiving information;

In the case of Instagram, they emphasize that it is more diverse and relevant to the interests of specific people. Unlike Facebook, they get less negative information and content;

Those who prefer TikTok explain that they get interesting and informative information in short videos.

Regarding the answer to the next open-ended question - what they think the main function of social media is, it was revealed that most of them consider it is communication, receiving and spreading information as well as entertainment. At the same time some of the respondents emphasized the usage for educational purposes, referring to YouTube and TikTok videos.

Figure 4 shows the results of 5-point Lickert scale, in your opinion, to what extent is the privacy of your personal information and data protected on the internet? "1" was "very low" and "5" – "very high".
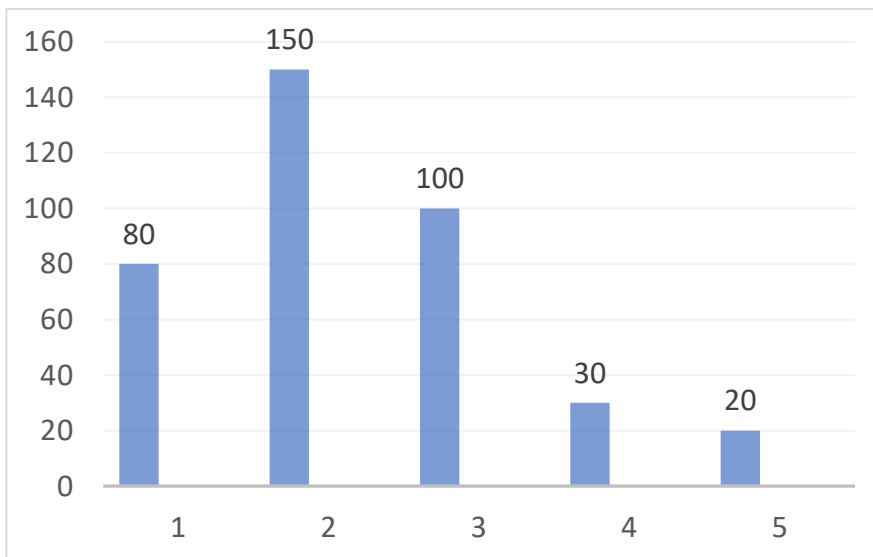
Figure 4. Personal Information and Data Protection

According to the results of the survey, the majority of respondents believe that personal safety is not protected.

The risks of using social media:

Figure 5 shows the results on the question - what are the main risks of using social media? They could choose more than one answer).
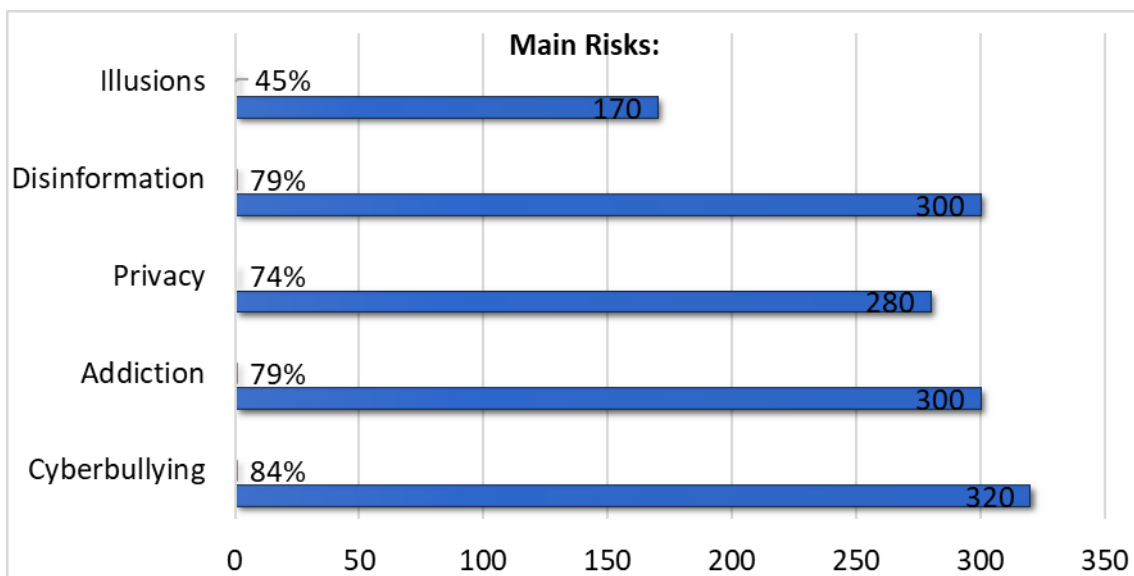

Figure 5. Main Risks of Social Media Using

As it was revealed, the main risks of using social media are: the first - cyberbullying, the second – addiction to social media platforms and disinformation; the third – breaking the privacy;

In the next open-ended question - they had an opportunity to answer and characterize these risks: "Please write down, in your opinion, what are the risks, what are the dangers associated with the use of social media? You can describe it briefly according to specific platforms".

Some phrases of answers:

"People easily humiliate, bully and insult strangers. We often see cyberbullying on Facebook, which has a sharp negative impact on people's psyche"

"Cyberbullying, hate speech are the weakest and negative sides, because even fake news can be verified and identified, but people often cause a lot of damage to the psyche and health of other people with their comments and feedback"

"Addiction, wasting time, cyberbullying"

"I think that the main risk and danger while using social media is the vulnerability of personal data and together with it the possible hacking of our accounts, during which an interested person (malicious person) can view/distribute our private correspondence".

Disinformation and easy access to personal information is the biggest threat and risk in social media"

Questioned young respondents also emphasized one risk factor especially toward Instagram – it is blurring the line between reality and virtuality, because Instagram mostly shows embellished reality:

"On Instagram, we often see "ideal" accounts, edited photos, which often causes a decrease in self-esteem in people".

"People lose the line between reality and illusion, live in a virtual world, which causes an identity crisis in many of them".

They also mentioned, a waste of time that leads to addiction. This is explained by the fact, called "Fomo effect", they are afraid not to miss something and often scroll their smartphones.

This analysis is showed on the figure 3. Here presented the results of the open-ended question and perceptions, related to the risks of using social media, such a distribution was revealed according to different platforms:

Table 3. Risks of Using to Different Platforms

	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	YouTube
Cyberbullying	+		+	+
Wasting a lot of time and addiction	+	+	+	
Challenges of Privacy, Non-security of personal data	+		+	
Fake news & Disinformation	+		+	+
Illusory reality		+	+	

The opportunities of the development of social media:

As for development opportunities, according to questioned young people's opinion, social media will be more frequently used by traditional news media, they will find new ways to spread brief videos among users, like a TikTok platform; social media will be more actively used in social media marketing;

They also pointed out that, social media will be more useful for educational reasons; it will help increase engagement in civic activism in a variety of ways; it will help even more to get useful information and advice and it will be further developed technologically

Some phrases of answers:

"About social media development opportunities in Georgia, we should probably judge according to the audience. From all social networks, information shared by media platforms, cards, as well as descriptions of educational or cognitive projects, and so on, can be distributed..."

"I think that the Georgian online space is gradually moving from Facebook to Instagram, and Tik-Tok is also becoming more and more popular. Companies have already started posting information about their services as required by a specific platform. On Instagram, more attention is paid to photo content, cards, and sophisticated designs. Users write small videos on TikTok, because they know that the users of this platform do not watch large videos. One example comes to mind when there were elections for the mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze used Facebook quite effectively. But he realized that he also needed to support younger audience, so he started recording small videos for TikTok. For example, he and his wife recorded a popular video game called "Questions for Couples".

"Therefore, every company, private person or politician on each platform will little by little post content relevant to the audience and understand where it will be more effective to place ads".

As most of the surveyed respondents think, they consider the offering of educational content as one of the factors of development. Many respondents mentioned that they use social media platforms to study English language and they thought that it can be used for educational reasons, for independent learning processes.

"In my opinion, TikTok, although it wastes a lot of time, will improve in the future and give us more opportunities for personal development, by adding educational or other cognitive content."

"It can be used for education. Development is possible if we use social media in a good way"

"Facebook can increase engagement in civic activism as well as be used more for educational purposes"

As some respondents emphasized, technological processes of social media platforms will be inevitable:

"In the process of technological development, the possibilities are endless, therefore, social media provides an opportunity for the development of all areas if the goal is defined and the strategy is set correctly".

"I think that soon, we will be able to talk to our friends and relatives on Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp with a 3D visual image. I see the possibility of this kind of technological development in the near future."

It is worth mentioning that despite revealing some risks, according to the results of this study, it has a more positive than harmful effect, as it was revealed by most open-ended answers.

5. Conclusions and Limit of This Study

To sum up, this study has focused on Georgian population and explored perceptions of young people about the challenges and opportunities of using social media. Based on the findings, the majority of questioned respondents prefers Facebook, followed by Instagram and TikTok. To the open-ended question why you prefer a particular platform, it was revealed that in the case of Facebook it is explained by the messenger or the communication function and receiving information; In the case of Instagram, they emphasize that it is more diverse and relevant to the interests of specific people. Unlike Facebook, they get less negative information and content; Those who prefer TikTok explain that they get interesting and informative information in short videos.

The study answered the RQ1 about risks and challenges. As the results of this research showed, the use of social media by young people in Georgia are related to some main risks' factors, such as cyberbullying, disinformation, challenges of personal information and addiction.

Additionally, as the study also found according to the results of the survey, the majority of respondents believe that personal safety is not protected.

Although numerous risks and challenges using of social media by young, there are also benefits and opportunities and the study answered the RQ2 about opportunities. According to the findings of this research, as for the development opportunities, traditional news media will try to use social media more often, new ways to spread brief videos among users, like a TikTok platform will be found for this purpose; social media marketing will more actively use social media platforms. Social media will definitely become more useful for educational purposes; involvement in civic activism will be increased in different ways; it will be more possible to obtain useful information and advice; It will be further developed technologically.

It is worth mentioning that despite revealing some risks, according to the results of this study, it has a more positive than harmful effect.

According to the findings of the study results, it is crucial that digital media literacy be mandatory subject course not only for student journalists, but for students of any specialty, so that they can distinguish between fake and real stories and critically understand them; cyber safety and cyber hygiene could be also taught, in order to young people can avoid cyberbullying and keep personal information; It is desirable that traditional media share their news not only on Facebook, but also on Instagram and TikTok in the form of short videos, which will increase their youth audience, because using of media habits are changing increasingly day by day; It is also desirable for traditional media to find new strategies and create educational content that will increase the youth audience on TikTok and Instagram.

This study was limited only explore perceptions of Georgian young people about the risks factors and opportunities using of social media. For the future research could be interesting widen and further develop of the topic of social media use by youth and conduct the research which will be based according to use and gratification theory.

For further studies it would be also interesting to conduct comparative research on the example of other Countries, which will be clearly highlight the similarities and differences in the use of social media among young people in different countries.

Authors contributions

Author Dr. Dali Osepashvili was responsible for study design and revising, for data collection. She read and approved the final manuscript.

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The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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