

Digital Natives in a Multilingual Periphery: The Socio-Demographic Profile and Media Consumption Intensity of Generation Z in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Generation Z is frequently described as a single global cohort of "digital natives," yet its media consumption is shaped by national infrastructure, platform ecosystems, and language environments that differ sharply across countries. This study addresses that gap by examining the socio-demographic profile and digital media consumption intensity of Generation Z in Uzbekistan, a large, young, and multilingual national market that remains underrepresented in the international literature. Using national statistical data together with an original audience survey, the study documents device access, platform usage patterns, daily consumption duration, news-source hierarchies, and language behaviour among Uzbek Generation Z respondents. The results show a smartphone-centred, social-first media environment structured around near-universal Telegram use, comparatively low regular TikTok engagement relative to global benchmarks, a Telegram-channel-dominated news ecosystem, and a trilingual (Uzbek–Russian–English) reading repertoire despite Uzbek remaining the dominant language of everyday communication. The study also finds a persistent split between passive scrolling and active content creation, consistent with the uses-and-gratifications and participation-inequality literature. These findings indicate that Uzbekistan's Generation Z shares the general behavioural architecture of global "digital natives" while exhibiting nationally specific platform hierarchies and multilingual consumption patterns that should inform media, journalism, and media-literacy policy in the country.

Keywords: *Generation Z; Media Consumption; Digital Natives; Uzbekistan; Media and Information Literacy; Platform Ecosystem*

1. Introduction

Generation Z — commonly defined as those born in the late 1990s through the early 2010s — is the first cohort to have been socialised from early childhood within an environment of mobile internet, social networking platforms, and visual-first communication. This has led much of the academic and popular literature to treat Generation Z as a relatively homogeneous, globally uniform "digital native" population. However, digital infrastructure, platform popularity, language environment, and economic capital vary substantially across countries, and a growing body of research argues that generational cohort effects must be examined in specific national contexts rather than assumed to be globally uniform.

Uzbekistan presents a particularly significant case for this inquiry. As of 2025, the country's National Statistics Committee reports that citizens aged 14–30 number 9,630,556, representing 25.7% of the national population, making Uzbekistan one of the youngest and most demographically significant markets in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is simultaneously undergoing rapid digital transformation, and its media environment is trilingual, combining Uzbek, Russian, and English content in ways that have no direct analogue in the largely monolingual national contexts that dominate the existing Generation Z media-consumption literature. Despite this scale and specificity, empirical, survey-based accounts of how Uzbekistan's Generation Z actually consumes media — which devices, which platforms, how intensively, and in which languages — remain scarce.

This study therefore asks three research questions. First, what is the socio-demographic and technological profile of Generation Z's media environment in Uzbekistan? Second, how intensively, and through which platforms and devices, does this cohort consume digital media on a daily basis? Third, how does the multilingual character of Uzbekistan's media space manifest in this generation's language and news-consumption behaviour? Addressing these questions contributes an empirically grounded national case study to the broader comparative literature on Generation Z media consumption, and provides an evidentiary basis for media policy, journalism practice, and media-literacy programming targeting this audience in Uzbekistan.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The international literature on Generation Z media consumption converges on several recurring themes that inform the present study's theoretical framework. First, Generation Z's relationship to media is commonly analysed through media and information literacy (MIL), which treats young audiences not as passive recipients but as subjects who must actively evaluate the reliability, source, and social value of the information they encounter (Panagiotou, Lazou, & Baliou, 2022; UNESCO, 2026). This framing is particularly relevant given the scale of global connectivity: the International Telecommunication Union (2024) reports that 5.5 billion people worldwide used the internet in 2024, equivalent to 68% of the global population, establishing the infrastructural backdrop against which Generation Z's socialisation has occurred.

Second, the uses-and-gratifications tradition provides a widely applied lens for explaining why and how Generation Z engages with social platforms, treating media use as driven by needs for habit substitution, socialisation, information, entertainment, and self-presentation rather than by any single motive (Hou, Hu, & Hu, 2022). Hou et al. (2022) further demonstrate that economic capital moderates participation shape, meaning that Generation Z should not be treated as an internally homogeneous audience even within a single platform ecosystem. Third, research on cross-platform behaviour shows that Generation Z routinely encounters a single piece of content across multiple platforms in different re-coded forms, and that global social media communication shapes this cohort's worldview, cultural contacts, and social relations (Ha & Chen, 2023). Fourth, survey-based research consistently finds a passive-active split: a majority of Generation Z social-media users remain observers who rarely comment, even though platform algorithms register even passive actions — views, saves, watch-through rates — as engagement signals feeding into content distribution (Elkatmış, 2024).

Fifth, comparative youth-media research documents a persistent preference for visual and short-form content among Generation Z, alongside platforms emphasising authenticity, such as BeReal, and influencer-centred content ecosystems (Tirocchi, 2024). Sixth, national and regional studies — most directly, research on Russian "digital youth" media consumption (Dunas, 2021) — show comparable social-first, short-format-oriented behaviour but are situated within largely monolingual national media environments, leaving open the question of how a trilingual environment such as Uzbekistan's modifies this general pattern. Finally, policy-oriented research from the OECD (2025) and the Reuters Institute (2025) documents both the opportunities (education, communication, creative expression) and risks (excessive use, exposure to harmful content, safety concerns) associated with heavy youth media consumption, alongside a global rise in the role of social platforms, video formats, and "newsfluencers" in news consumption specifically.

Taken together, this literature suggests four hypotheses that the present study tests empirically in the Uzbek national context: (H1) Generation Z's media environment in Uzbekistan is smartphone-centred and social-first, consistent with global patterns; (H2) platform hierarchy differs from global benchmarks in at least one substantial respect, reflecting national infrastructural and cultural specificity; (H3) news consumption is mediated primarily through social and messaging platforms rather than direct engagement with news websites; and (H4) language behaviour reflects a multilingual repertoire that coexists with, rather than replaces, a dominant national language for everyday communication.

3. Methodology

The study combines secondary national and international statistical data with an original survey of Generation Z respondents in Uzbekistan. Secondary sources include reports from the International Telecommunication Union (2024), the Uzbekistan National Statistics Committee (2025), the United Nations Population Fund (2025), and DataReportal's Digital 2025: Uzbekistan report (Kemp, 2025), used to establish the demographic and infrastructural context against which the primary survey data are interpreted.

The primary instrument was an original questionnaire, "Youth Media Consumption," administered to a Generation Z sample in Uzbekistan (respondents aged 14–24). The questionnaire captured seven blocks of information: socio-demographic background; primary media device; platform usage regularity; daily social-media consumption duration; news-source hierarchy and subscribed-account types; unprompted, everyday app-opening behaviour (i.e., what respondents typically do when opening a social platform without a specific purpose); and language use in both content consumption and personal writing, including multilingual mixing within a single message. Regularity of platform use was measured categorically (regular user vs. non-regular user) rather than through raw frequency counts, following standard practice in comparative platform-adoption research. Where percentages are reported as approximate, this reflects rounding of small-sample proportions and is noted accordingly.

Data were analysed descriptively, and the resulting profile was compared against the four hypotheses derived from the literature review, as well as against reported figures from Pew Research Center's (2024, 2025) US-based teen surveys and Elkatmış's (2024) Turkish Generation Z study, used as external comparative benchmarks rather than as directly equivalent samples, given differences in survey design and national context.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic scale and infrastructural context

According to the Uzbekistan National Statistics Committee, as of 1 January 2025 the population aged 14–30 numbered 9,630,556, or 25.7% of the country's total population — a demographic weight that positions Generation Z not as a marginal or emerging segment but as a substantial, currently active participant in the national media market, consistent with United Nations Population Fund (2025) data identifying Uzbekistan as one of Central Asia's youngest-skewing populations. Nationally, this demographic scale sits within a rapidly expanding digital infrastructure: DataReportal's Digital 2025: Uzbekistan report documents comprehensive growth in internet, mobile, and social media penetration (Kemp, 2025), consistent with the global trend of 5.5 billion internet users recorded by the International Telecommunication Union (2024).

4.2 Device and platform architecture

The survey confirms Hypothesis 1: Generation Z's media environment in Uzbekistan is overwhelmingly smartphone-centred. The smartphone was the primary media device for 94% of respondents, with computers (28%) and tablets (11%) occupying a distinctly secondary role. Regarding platform regularity, Telegram was used regularly by nearly all respondents (approximately 100%), followed by Instagram (approximately 80%) and YouTube (approximately 70%). Short vertical video content (Reels/Shorts/TikTok-style clips) was widely consumed as an everyday practice, but regular use of TikTok specifically as a platform was reported by only about 17% of respondents — markedly lower than global benchmarks for this age group and providing clear support for Hypothesis 2, that Uzbekistan's platform hierarchy diverges from international patterns in at least one substantial respect. This suggests that short-form vertical video consumption in Uzbekistan is substantially mediated through Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube rather than through TikTok as an independent platform, a national specificity not captured in Pew Research Center's (2024, 2025) US-based benchmarks, where TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat maintain consistently high daily usage among teenagers.

Table 1. Comparative Platform-Regularity Profile Identified in This Study

Platform	Regular Use (Uzbekistan Gen Z)	Primary Function Observed
Telegram	~100%	News channels, messaging, private forwarding
Instagram	~80%	Visual content, news outlet pages
YouTube	~70%	Video, explainer content
TikTok	~17%	Short video (secondary to Telegram/Instagram/YouTube for this format)

Daily consumption duration was substantial and fairly evenly distributed across intensity bands: 28% of respondents reported spending 4–6 hours per day on social media, another 28% reported 2–4 hours, 17% reported 1–2 hours, and 11% reported 6–8 hours — indicating that a large majority of respondents spend at least two hours daily on social platforms, comparable in magnitude to Pew Research Center's (2024) finding that nearly all US teenagers report daily internet use and that almost half describe themselves as "almost constantly online."

4.3 News source hierarchy and account subscriptions

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, news consumption was mediated predominantly through messaging and social platforms rather than direct visits to news websites. Approximately 90% of respondents reported obtaining news primarily through the Telegram channels of news outlets (e.g., Kun.uz, Daryo, Gazeta.uz), with the same outlets' Instagram pages forming a secondary channel (approximately 55%), while television and print sources accounted for a small minority. When asked more specifically how they learn about domestic and international news, 89% of respondents cited news

outlets' Telegram channels first, 56% cited the same outlets' Instagram pages, and only about 22% cited direct visits to news websites — confirming that, for this cohort, journalistic content is encountered primarily within a platform-mediated feed rather than through direct navigation to institutional news sites.

Subscribed-account composition further illustrates the plurality of this information environment: 72% of respondents follow news outlets and journalists, 44% follow bloggers and influencers, 44% follow educational content accounts, and 39% follow entertainment content — indicating that formal journalistic sources, informal influencer content, and educational material occupy adjacent positions within the same information field for this audience, a configuration that elevates the practical importance of media and information literacy (Panagiotou et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2026).

4.4 Everyday platform behaviour: passive scrolling versus active participation

When asked what they typically do upon opening a social media platform without a specific purpose, 61% of respondents said they check news first, 44% said they scroll passively through the feed, 44% said they watch stories, and 33% said they create content. This distribution indicates that active content creation coexists with, but remains less common than, passive consumption behaviours — consistent with Elkatmış's (2024) finding that a majority of Generation Z social-media users function primarily as observers rather than active commentators, and with the broader "participation inequality" pattern documented in digital-platform research, whereby a comparatively small share of users generates most original content while the majority consume and lightly react.

4.5 Language profile and multilingual repertoire

Language behaviour provides direct evidence relevant to Hypothesis 4. As a primary language of everyday communication, approximately two-thirds of respondents (around 67%) identified Uzbek, while roughly 28% identified near-equal use of Uzbek and Russian. However, when asked which languages they use to read content, the majority of respondents selected multiple languages simultaneously — Uzbek (in both Latin and Cyrillic script), Russian, and English — indicating that while Uzbek remains dominant for everyday spoken and written communication, media content consumption occurs within a genuinely multilingual repertoire. This finding supports Hypothesis 4 and distinguishes the Uzbek case from comparable research on Russian "digital youth" media consumption (Dunas, 2021), which is situated within a substantially more monolingual national media environment, and from Ha and Chen's (2023) account of global social-media communication, which does not register a comparable three-way national-language structure specific to the post-Soviet Central Asian context.

5. Discussion

The findings collectively support the four hypotheses advanced in the literature review while adding a nationally specific inflection to each. Generation Z's media environment in Uzbekistan is unambiguously smartphone-centred and social-first (H1), aligning with the global "digital native" characterisation found throughout the international literature (Panagiotou et al., 2022; Hou et al., 2022). However, the platform hierarchy diverges from commonly cited international benchmarks in a specific and theoretically important way (H2): Telegram, rather than a short-video-first platform such as TikTok, occupies the dominant position in this national ecosystem, with TikTok itself showing comparatively low regular-use rates despite the broader popularity of short vertical video as a content format consumed through other platforms. This suggests that global claims about Generation Z's platform preferences require careful national calibration rather than uncritical extrapolation from US- or Western-centred survey data such as Pew Research Center's (2024, 2025) reports.

The news-consumption findings (H3) carry direct implications for journalism practice in Uzbekistan. Because approximately 90% of respondents encounter news primarily via Telegram channels rather than through direct engagement with news websites, journalistic visibility and credibility for this audience are substantially determined by channel-level packaging, timing, and forwarding behaviour rather than by website design or search-engine visibility — a media-ecosystem structure that differs meaningfully from markets in which direct website traffic or platform-agnostic search remains a primary news-discovery route. This also means that media-literacy interventions aimed at this cohort should be designed around channel- and forward-based information flows specifically, rather than assuming a website-centred information-seeking model.

The passive–active split documented here (Section 4.4) reinforces the participation-inequality pattern identified in the broader Generation Z literature (Elkatmış, 2024) and has a direct implication for how journalistic reach should be measured among this audience: because a minority of users actively creates or comments while a much larger share consumes, saves,

and privately forwards content, engagement metrics based solely on public commentary are likely to substantially undercount this cohort's actual exposure to, and circulation of, journalistic material.

Finally, the multilingual repertoire documented in Section 4.5 (H4) is arguably the most nationally distinctive finding of this study. Whereas much of the international Generation Z literature — including comparable research on Russian "digital youth" (Dunas, 2021) — is situated within predominantly monolingual national media environments, Uzbekistan's Generation Z operates within a media space in which Uzbek remains dominant for personal communication while Russian and English content are routinely consumed alongside it. This trilingual pattern has direct implications for content strategy, national media policy, and future research: media and information literacy interventions, journalism education, and platform-level content moderation in Uzbekistan cannot be modelled solely on monolingual international frameworks but must account for the specific Uzbek–Russian–English linguistic architecture documented here.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to document the socio-demographic profile and media consumption intensity of Generation Z in Uzbekistan, a large, young, and multilingual national market that has received limited empirical attention in the international Generation Z literature. The findings confirm that this cohort shares the general behavioural architecture associated with global "digital natives" — smartphone-centred, socially mediated, and characterised by a persistent gap between passive consumption and active content creation — while exhibiting two nationally specific features that distinguish it from commonly cited international benchmarks: a Telegram-dominated, rather than TikTok-dominated, platform hierarchy, and a genuinely trilingual (Uzbek–Russian–English) content-consumption repertoire that coexists with Uzbek-language dominance in everyday personal communication.

These findings carry practical implications for three audiences. For journalists and newsrooms, the dominance of Telegram-channel-mediated news discovery indicates that channel-level packaging and forwarding dynamics, rather than website traffic, should be treated as the primary determinant of reach among this audience. For media-literacy educators and policymakers, the coexistence of formal news sources, informal influencer content, and educational material within the same subscription field underscores the practical urgency of media and information literacy programming calibrated to a platform-mediated, multilingual information environment rather than a single-source, monolingual model. For comparative Generation Z research more broadly, the Uzbek case demonstrates that even widely cited global patterns in platform preference require empirical verification within specific national and linguistic contexts before being generalised.

Future research should extend this survey-based profile with longitudinal data capturing how platform hierarchies and language behaviour evolve over time, and should examine directly whether media-literacy interventions designed around the channel- and forward-based information flows documented here measurably improve source evaluation and misinformation resistance among Generation Z audiences in Uzbekistan and comparable multilingual national contexts.

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