

“This Content May Disturb Adults”

We Are Not Your Crisis: Rethinking Adolescence in the Digital Age

“Social media should be labeled as ‘causing serious harm to adolescent mental health!’”(NPR, 2025). This call, from US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, demonstrates that the impact of social media platforms on young people is now being seen as dangerous as tobacco. Adults are coding the digital sphere as a “deadly” risk zone.

From European countries to Australia, from New Zealand to Turkey, a significant part of the world is currently busy searching for ways to ban children from social media. Adults love to demonize innovation. Every new app is a new disaster in their eyes. Yet, the “danger” in this story is the way young people grow up. Can’t young people learn to manage their emotions through screens, rather than on them? Perhaps it’s through mistakes, not filters. Social media isn’t as shallow as adults fear; it’s the most open laboratory of emotional intelligence, resilience, and identity experimentation. Therefore, this article will not explore how social media pushes adolescents to the brink, but rather how they construct themselves on social media.

According to the Pew Research Institute, a significant portion of young people use social media extensively. The data shows that one in six young people use two platforms—YouTube and TikTok—“almost constantly.” Seventy-one percent of young people say they access YouTube daily, followed by TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram (Associated Press). Yes, there’s a lot of texting, a lot of viewing. Social media has shattered the hierarchies of the old world. It can now broadcast thoughts, make emotions visible, and organize solidarity. Social media has created a new language for the youth of the 21st century; it’s a digital form of saying, “We are here.”

For this generation, social media isn’t a stage, it’s a laboratory. The important thing isn’t to get results, but to try. This may seem like “pretend play” to adults, but isn’t adolescence itself a period of experimentation? Social media has merely made that process visible. The truth is this: social media hasn’t destroyed young people; it has grown them in ways adults can’t grasp.

According to identity theorist Erik Erikson, the most critical task of adolescence is “identity acquisition” (Erikson). However, this task is no longer completed in quiet rooms, but online. A Systematic Review of Social Media Use and Adolescent Identity Development (2024) also shows that social media offers adolescents new opportunities to explore identity and test different selves. For adolescents, identity is no longer a fixed label, but a fluid experience. And this fluidity is a new form of psychological maturation. Let’s agree with adults on this point and ask: *Isn’t the problem not the existence of social media, but the “primitiveness” of the established relationship?*

Throughout history, every new form of communication has been branded a “disruptive force.” Murthy’s call is actually the modern version of a familiar fear: the new digital form of the “moral panics” sociologist Stanley Cohen described in 1972 (Young, 53). But today’s difference is this: *Could restricting this space mean closing down a generation’s identity laboratory?* For this generation, social media is a means of exploring identities and

connecting with others. Social media isn't a "space of emotional atrophy," as many adults believe, but a network where emotions circulate. Stories, posts, videos, or short comments—each of these is a modern tool for emotional regulation. Emotions are no longer only felt; they are crafted, shared, and reverberate. The phrase "If I'm crying, I post a story" might be ridiculed, but it is an honest admission: It's the digital era's emotional journal.

The article "Social Media Use in Adolescents: Bans, Benefits, and Emotion Regulation" (2023) suggests that social media bans may increase emotional pressure in young people, as the platforms have become a primary stress-coping strategy for many adolescents. Social media is sometimes as expensive as psychotherapy, sometimes as silent as a friend, but it's there—and even this "being there" is regulating. Empathy is a byproduct of this digital emotionality. Seeing sadness in a stranger's post and writing a few words underneath may seem like a five-second gesture of solidarity, but it's a meaningful act.

In the past, young people needed newspaper columns, wall posters, or public squares to discuss the issues of their time. Today's public square is digital. And yes, it's crowded. But this crowded space isn't a place where they get lost; it's a place where they find each other. Perhaps because society misunderstands the problem, it's trying to "fix" young people, rather than addressing social media. However, looking at the "moral panics model," it can be said that instead of protecting young people, they tend to criminalize their new cultural spaces.

The situation is similar in Turkey. TikTok videos are "corrupting morality," YouTube content is "threatening values," and social media censorship is legitimized under the guise of "protecting young people." According to Stanley Cohen's classic definition, moral panic is a state of social anxiety that begins when a particular segment of society, behavior, or group is declared "dangerous," and is amplified by the media and politics. (Cohen) Binark offers another reason for this condition, where he said, "Parental anxiety in Turkey perfectly indexes the moral panic dynamic detailed in Cohen's theories." However, the moral panic does not necessarily mean the decline of youth, but rather the loss of control by grown-ups (Binark & Kırsaçlıoğlu, 5). Moral panic refers to the situation where parents are concerned about the youth, who are visible on the internet for the first time.

RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council of Turkey) President Ebubekir Şahin's statement that "*the uncontrolled flow of content on social media and digital platforms poses serious threats, especially to vulnerable individuals*" is a recent example of this reflex (Birlik, 2025). In the days following this statement, controls on videos shared on the platform in Turkey were increased, and bans were expanded under the guise of "protecting young people." This "protection" is leading to a surveillance regime that limits young people's digital expression.

The situation in Turkey can be described as a "digital moralism" or a "crisis of trust between digital generations." In this atmosphere of panic, adults see social media as a force corrupting young people's morals. This situation, in Binark's words, is a manifestation of "digital parental anxiety": "*Adults attempt to control a digital culture they cannot understand by banning it; whereas young people use this space as a form of learning, expression, and community building.*" (Binark)

The resulting picture is paradoxical: In Turkey, the policy of "protecting young people" actually means excluding young people from the digital public sphere. This is a classic moral panic cycle: adults identify a threat, political actors react in response, and social anxiety rises. Moral panics may represent a misreading of change.

Social media is often viewed as a "sign of deterioration," yet for younger generations, this space serves as a new form of self-expression and a means of raising social awareness. Social media isn't just a tool for consumption or spectacle; it's also a space of participation, humor, and solidarity. For example, in the early days of the massive Kahramanmaraş earthquake in 2023, which resulted in the loss of thousands of lives, platforms such as Twitter (X) and Instagram overcame the state's slow crisis communication and helped save more lives. Calls for help, location sharing, and resource coordination did what traditional media couldn't: they saved thousands of lives. Similarly, women's movements, environmental movements, and youth campaigns (e.g., #IstanbulContractKeepsAlive, #BosphorusResistance, #CleanMarmara) have transformed social media into a space of consciousness. In these spaces, young people produce content not just to garner "likes" but to transform the language of public debate. This resonance is the product of shared emotions, not algorithms. This is not a disruption, but the digital version of evolution. In short, social media doesn't make us superficial; it teaches us to be more mindful of ourselves and others. Therefore, any adult intervention that "attempts to fix adolescence" can actually be interpreted as resistance to the new forms of expression of the age. Perhaps young people aren't losing anything; they're learning to adapt to new ways of existing. Social media is both a mirror and a laboratory for modern adolescence.

Popular culture often portrays young people as victims of social media. The Adolescent (Netflix) is a typical example of this approach: a corrupted youth, insensitive parents, and a dark world ruled by algorithms... This narrative creates moral panic in the viewer but fails to understand their experience. So, if a murderer didn't use social media, wouldn't they be murderers? Perhaps, when the press dramatizes adolescents, teenagers are self-aware enough to criticize that dramatization? The real question here is: *Will adults dare to observe this transformation, or will they reapply a "moral label" to each new generation?*

Of course, there are risks, and they aren't entirely wrong. The dark side of social media is like a shadow. Sometimes, we get fixated on likes, and our values are handed over to algorithms. Research shows that this misconception can increase symptoms of depression. This is a warning; it's too concrete to deny. The Facebook-Instagram example is a striking example of how platforms, despite being aware of their psychological impact on young users, fail to intervene. In 2021, documents leaked by former employee Francis Haugen revealed that algorithms increase suicidal thoughts in children, exacerbate body dysmorphic disorder, and create a constant sense of comparison. Even more striking, the company concealed these findings. For example, last year, a Telegram blackmail group of more than 200,000 people was exposed in South Korea, and then the FBI took down another criminal group on Discord. "That's what online communities are like," said a young person who identified as "incel" and spoke to the BBC for a 2021 report on the subject: "They draw you in, so you enter an echo

chamber of people who have similar issues. You think about something small... Then you see other people thinking much more radical things. So you think small things are acceptable."

According to new research, more than half of children who get their news from social media feel anxious and disturbed when they see content related to war, violence, and death. The study reveals that social media companies are "unintentionally" exposing such content, particularly to children. According to research by the online safety organization Internet Matters, images of Charlie Kirk's murder, a drive-by shooting in Liverpool, war scenes, shootings, stabbings, and traffic accidents have recently begun appearing in children's feeds. Thirty-nine percent of those who viewed this content reported feeling "very" or "extremely" disturbed and anxious. The research reveals that more than two-thirds of children get their news from social media apps like TikTok and Instagram, but 40 percent don't follow any news accounts. Sixty-one percent of children who get their news from social media also report encountering disturbing news in the last month.

This contributes to the rise of the phenomenon known as "brain rot." The term "brain rot" is actually an ironic phrase that emerged in criticisms of digital platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube, based on short, rapid-fire content consumption. However, Yousef and colleagues' study emphasizes that "brain rot" is not a cognitive degeneration, but rather a phenomenon related to attention deficit, information fatigue, and dopamine cycling, resulting from algorithmic overstimulation. (Yousef et al., 2025) This danger is undeniable.

While online dangers are a burning issue, many experts emphasize that this issue should not be attributed entirely to platforms and their qualities or characteristics. The problem may not be that social media is destroying young people. The danger lies not in the platforms themselves but in the absence of self-control. Protection requires understanding, not restriction. Digital self-control has become the civic literacy of the new age. The roots of youth radicalization lie not within social platforms but within the fabric of real life—family, environment, class, politics, and media culture. The world has become all too susceptible to the specter of "social media channels leading children astray," which can inadvertently serve to obscure the socioeconomic conditions behind the crisis.