

THE DIGITAL MAHALLA: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MECHANISM OF MODERNIZATION AND TRADITIONAL REINFORCEMENT IN UZBEKISTAN**Gulzoda Mannobova**PhD Student, Department of Philosophy and National Idea,
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Abstract. This study investigates the transformative role of social media in Uzbekistan, analyzing how digital platforms function as a virtual extension of the traditional mahalla. Using a mixed-methods approach combining digital ethnography and survey data (N=1,200), we explore how Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube are reshaping economic, religious, and social life. The results indicate that while social media accelerates economic modernization and educational access, it simultaneously reinforces traditional mechanisms of social control (uyat) and religious revivalism. We conclude that the Uzbek digital sphere operates as a "Digital Mahalla," a unique ecosystem where global connectivity is filtered through local cultural imperatives.

Keywords: Digital Mahalla; Uzbekistan; Telegram; Social control; Uyat (shame); Digital Islam; Central Asia; Platformization.

Introduction. In the past decade, Uzbekistan has experienced a "silent digital revolution." Following the 2016 political reforms, internet penetration has surged, fundamentally altering the communicative landscape of Central Asia's most populous nation. However, current scholarship often views digital adoption in the Global South through a Western lens of "individual liberation" or "democratization." This perspective fails to account for the unique socio-cultural fabric of Uzbekistan, where communal identity often supersedes individualism (Dadabaev, 2023). This article explores the tension between the internet's globalizing influence and the traditional local structures of Uzbek society, particularly the mahalla—the neighborhood organization tasked with social welfare and community policing. It questions whether social media is undermining these traditional institutions or offering a new support system for them. (Radnitz, 2024). This study tests the hypothesis that social media in Uzbekistan has evolved into a "Digital Mahalla," a space that facilitates modern economic activity while reinforcing traditional hierarchies and moral codes (Kudaibergenova, 2023).

Methods

To capture the complexity of the Uzbek digital sphere, this study employed a **mixed-methods research design** spanning from January 2023 to January 2025.

- **Quantitative Data Collection.** We conducted a stratified random survey of internet users (N=1,200) across three regions: Tashkent (urban center), Samarkand (traditional urban), and the Fergana Valley (conservative rural). The survey measured platform preference, daily usage duration, and trust in digital versus state media. The survey instrument was adapted from the Central Asia Barometer methodology (Central Asia Barometer, 2024).
- **Digital Ethnography (Netnography).** We conducted a qualitative content analysis of high-traffic Uzbek social media spaces. **Telegram:** We observed 50 key

public channels—including news, trading, and community groups—to study how information spreads and economic activities occur (Abdullaev, 2023).

Instagram & TikTok: We analyzed the comment sections of 20 viral posts about "controversial" behavior (e.g., dress code violations, public displays of affection) to identify patterns of moral policing and the use of *uyat* (shame) (Turaeva, 2023).

- Data Analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to identify correlations among age, region, and platform usage. Qualitative data were coded for recurring themes, including "entrepreneurship," "religious instruction," "migration," and "social shame."

Results

The data reveal a highly stratified digital landscape that is distinct from Western models.

- The Hegemony of Telegram. The survey results confirm that Telegram is the dominant digital infrastructure in Uzbekistan. 82% of respondents identified Telegram as their primary source of news, ahead of state television (12%) and other social platforms (6%).

The Informal Economy: A qualitative analysis of "Telegram Bazaars" reveals a thriving informal economy. In rural areas, 65% of female respondents reported using Telegram groups to sell homemade goods (*samsas*, textiles) or services, bypassing formal tax structures (Yuldashev, 2025).

- Mechanisms of Social Control (The "Digital Uyat"). The ethnographic analysis of Instagram revealed intense "horizontal surveillance."

Policing Behavior: In 90% of viral posts analyzed that involve women's attire or behavior, the top-rated comments invoked concepts of *uyat* (shame) or *ma'naviyat* (spirituality). Users frequently tagged relatives or local community figures, effectively digitizing the *mahalla's* social pressure mechanism (Kudaibergenova, 2023).

Vigilantism: We observed instances of "doxing," in which users collaborated to identify individuals in viral videos and report them to their families or the authorities (Lewis, 2024).

- Religious Revivalism. The study identified a significant rise in "Digital Islam." Short-form videos (Reels/TikTok) featuring young, tech-savvy religious influencers generated 300% more engagement than official state religious accounts. These influencers primarily discuss daily ethics (*adab*) and ritual correctness, appealing to a youth demographic seeking an identity distinct from Soviet secularism (Ruziev, 2024; Lemon & Thibault, 2024).
- Educational and Migratory Aspirations. Among users aged 18–25, social media is mainly used for practical purposes. 70% of this group reported using YouTube for educational activities such as language learning and coding (World Bank, 2024). Additionally, social media acts as a "migration infrastructure," with influencers offering detailed guidance for labor migration to the USA, South Korea, and Russia (Kakhkharov, 2025).

Discussion.

The results support the "Digital Mahalla" hypothesis. Social media in Uzbekistan is not an unbridled space for individual expression but a curated environment governed by communal norms.

- Modernization within Tradition. The widespread use of Telegram for commerce (Hasanova & Kim, 2024) shows that Uzbek society is embracing digital modernization while reinforcing the traditional family unit. The "Telegram economy" enables women to contribute economically without leaving the domestic sphere, thereby maintaining traditional gender roles while engaging in modern capitalism.
- The Paradox of Surveillance. The "horizontal surveillance" observed on Instagram suggests that the mahalla has successfully migrated to the cloud (Radnitz, 2024). Unlike the "Panopticon" (state watching the people), Uzbekistan operates as a "Synopticon" (the people watching each other). This peer-to-peer policing creates a "chilling effect" on individual expression that is more effective than state censorship alone (Marat, 2023).
- The Privacy Gap. Our findings highlight a critical "privacy paradox." While users are wary of state surveillance, they voluntarily expose themselves to community surveillance. The lack of digital literacy about data privacy remains a significant vulnerability (Cybersecurity Uzbekistan, 2025).
- Implications for 2030. As the state advances its "Digital Uzbekistan 2030" strategy (Mirziyoyev, 2024), it faces a challenge. The digital sphere has empowered two opposing forces: a globalized, pro-migration youth and a conservative, religious revivalist movement. The "Digital Mahalla" currently contains these tensions, but as internet penetration approaches saturation, the ability of traditional norms to police digital behavior may fracture.

Conclusion

This study interrogates the assumption that digital connectivity in the Global South inevitably leads to Westernized individualism. Our analysis of the Uzbek digital sphere reveals a far more complex reality: the emergence of the "Digital Mahalla." This socio-technical phenomenon shows that traditional community structures in Uzbekistan have not been eroded by the internet but have instead colonized it, adapting digital platforms to serve age-old functions of commerce, communication, and control. We conclude that the Uzbek internet is defined by a fundamental duality. On the one hand, it functions as a critical engine of modernization. The "Telegram economy" has democratized market access, allowing marginalized groups—particularly rural women—to bypass physical and bureaucratic barriers to entrepreneurship. On the other hand, this same infrastructure facilitates a resurgence of pre-Soviet religious and moral identities. The "Digital Mahalla" is thus a space of contradiction, where global youth culture coexists with, and is often checked by, a digitized Islamic revivalism.

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