

SCREENS AND DREAMS: EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF ILLUSION

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the challenges, paradoxes, and transformations shaping contemporary education under the influence of digital technology, artificial intelligence, and dominant media culture. Rapid technological advancement has generated new cognitive and communicative patterns that profoundly affect how young people learn, think, and construct their identities. The paper employs a comparative theoretical analysis supported by relevant international and national research, complemented by professional insights grounded in the author's long-standing experience in the education sector. It examines shifts in value orientations, linguistic habits, and educational behaviours, with particular emphasis on the influence of social networks on attention, self-perception, and interpersonal relations.

Special attention is given to the widening generational gap between students immersed in digital environments and teachers originating largely from the analogue era, who often struggle to integrate digital tools into pedagogical practice. This gap is not only technological but also pedagogical and cultural, challenging the traditional role of the teacher as the principal authority and mediator of knowledge. The paper further investigates broader cultural implications, including shortened attention spans, the predominance of visual communication, and the culture of visibility and self-promotion that shape students' internal motivation, self-discipline, and cognitive development. In the Macedonian context, the study highlights the additional challenge of linguistic erosion and identity insecurity within a global climate of cultural uniformity. A central focus is placed on the integration of artificial intelligence in education—from its potential to support personalized learning to the risks of cognitive passivity and the erosion of independent critical thought. The paper ultimately argues for a new educational paradigm that harmonizes technological innovation with humanistic values, strengthens cultural and linguistic identity, and preserves the human dimension of learning.

Keywords: *digital education, artificial intelligence, generational gap, media culture, values, identity, Macedonian cultural identity*

Introduction

Education has always been more than an institution—it is a social contract, a cultural model, and a mirror of the era in which we live. Today, that mirror has transformed into a screen. Students, teachers, and parents inhabit a reality in which the boundaries between learning, entertainment, and consumer culture have become blurred. The classroom once defined by chalk and a blackboard has been replaced by one shaped by tablets and digital displays (Fullan, 2021). Yet, alongside technological advancement has come a decline in concentration, authenticity, and human connectedness. Contemporary education finds itself in a paradoxical state: the more information we possess, the less we engage in deep thinking; the more we communicate, the less we truly understand one another. Artificial intelligence, with its capacity to simulate human knowledge, raises a fundamental question: what remains genuinely human within the educational process?

Within this context, the aim of this paper is to analyse the transformations experienced by young people and educators in the digital age, to examine the linguistic and cultural implications of these changes, and to highlight the need for a new educational paradigm—one that balances technological.

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative, analytical, and comparative research approach. The analysis includes a systematic review of relevant international literature (UNESCO, OECD, UNICEF, Microsoft, Han, Carr, Zuboff) as well as national sources related to the educational context of North Macedonia. A comparative method was used to identify similarities and differences between global trends and local educational challenges. Particular attention was devoted to the discursive analysis of digital culture, linguistic shifts, the generational gap, and the integration of artificial intelligence in education. Additionally, the paper incorporates the author's extensive professional experience as an educational specialist, providing an applied perspective and deeper insight into the practical challenges present within schools. This professional dimension enriches the analytical framework and complements the theoretical findings with real-world observations from the educational system, progress with spiritual development and cultural awareness.

From Books to Clicks: The Future of Learning and Youth

The shift from the book to the click represents one of the most profound cultural and cognitive revolutions in the history of education. The textbook is no longer the primary source of knowledge; today, knowledge is dispersed across thousands of digital fragments, accessible with a single tap on a screen. This technological advancement has created a new type of learner—visual, fast-paced, and impatient. At the same time, it has introduced significant challenges to students' concentration, critical thinking, and creativity. UNESCO (2023) reports that 68% of students in Europe learn through digital devices, yet only 27% of teachers feel adequately prepared to teach in digital environments. In North Macedonia, according to data from the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES, 2022), more than 80% of primary school students use the internet daily, while only 41% read books beyond the required curriculum. This imbalance has produced a new form of dependency—an informational, but not a cognitive one. In the past, students learned through reading, discussion, and reflection; today, they learn through “watching” and “scrolling.” As a result, learning is increasingly becoming a superficial process. As Carr (2010) notes, digital media

reshape the structure of human attention—"the mind that was once a deep ocean has become a stream of clicks" (Carr, 2010).

In the Macedonian context, this shift is evident within the teaching process itself. Teachers observe that students are increasingly unable to sustain attention for more than a few minutes. Additionally, the culture of "instant results" is pervasive—students expect immediate answers, solutions, or rewards. This trend, driven by the rapid dynamics of social media, suppresses the ability to practise patience and perseverance in learning.

Nevertheless, digital education also carries substantial potential. Online learning platforms, interactive applications, and virtual classrooms open opportunities for inclusivity, personalized learning, and global collaboration. Yet they also demand a new type of pedagogy—one based not on the transmission of knowledge but on mentorship and the cultivation of critical-thinking competencies. In the future, the central challenge in education will not be access to information, but the ability to interpret it. As the OECD (2024) emphasizes, the twenty-first-century school must teach young people to recognize truth in an era of misinformation and meaning in a time of excessive exposure.

Thus, the shift "from book to click" is not merely a technological transformation—it marks a transition from reflection to reaction, from depth to speed, and from human understanding to algorithmic logic. If education fails to preserve its humanistic core, we risk producing a generation that "knows everything" but "understands little."

Scroll and Soul: The Lost Art of Learning

In the age of scrolling, attention has become the rarest human currency. Children and young people today inhabit a reality of continuous visual stimulation, where a thought lasts no longer than a single TikTok clip. According to Microsoft (2022), the average attention span of young people has decreased from twelve to eight seconds. Teachers around the world report the same difficulty: it is increasingly challenging to retain the interest of students accustomed to fast, colourful, and fragmentary content.

This phenomenon has generated an entirely new cognitive model—young people no longer read to understand, but to recognize a visual signal. Instead of processing an idea, they "like" it; instead of engaging in discussion, they "share" it. As a result, learning is losing its spiritual and reflective dimension.

Loss of "Macedonian's" and Linguistic Identity

A particularly troubling phenomenon is the gradual erosion of linguistic authenticity, especially among young people in North Macedonia. Under the influence of digital culture and social media, Anglicisms, abbreviations, and slang constructions increasingly penetrate everyday speech and writing, altering the structure of the Macedonian language. A study conducted by the Institute for the Macedonian Language "Krste Misirkov" (2023) indicates that in the online written communication of secondary school students, more than 40% of the vocabulary used consists of foreign—mostly English—words. When words disappear, the concepts they carry disappear with them—when the word "respect" vanishes, its cultural weight diminishes; when "conversation" is replaced with chat, the depth of dialogue is lost. This is not merely a linguistic issue but a cultural one. Language is not simply a tool for communication but a vessel of identity. When young people replace Macedonian expressions with digital slang, they unconsciously distance themselves from the roots that define them (Hall, 1996). In many cases, young people cannot identify an appropriate

Macedonian equivalent because the Macedonian lexicon sounds to them “old-fashioned” or “too formal.” Such linguistic hybridity generates a generational divide not only in vocabulary but also in values. When words disappear, the concepts they carry disappear with them—when the word “respect” vanishes, its cultural weight diminishes; when “conversation” is replaced with chat, the depth of dialogue is lost. This is not merely a linguistic issue but a cultural one. Language is not simply a tool for communication but a vessel of identity. When young people replace Macedonian expressions with digital slang, they unconsciously distance themselves from the roots that define them.

Beyond linguistic transformation, media culture is reshaping the very aesthetics of values. Beyond linguistic transformation, media culture is reshaping the very aesthetics of values. While the offerings of social networks are global, the content consumed by young people is often superficial and commercialized. Youth in North Macedonia, like their peers worldwide, live under the pressure of “perfect images”—standards of beauty, success, and happiness constructed through illusion (Zuboff, 2019). Images of Dubai, travel, expensive cars, and “influencer lifestyles” create a psychological burden. Young people measure themselves against ideals that do not exist, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction and insecurity. According to UNICEF (2023), 64% of young people in Southeast Europe report that social media causes anxiety, especially when comparing themselves to others.

Thus, “Scroll and Soul” is not merely a metaphor—it reflects a reality in which scrolling replaces inner depth. In this digital dynamic, the student becomes a consumer of information rather than a creator of knowledge, while the teacher becomes an observer rather than an educator. If in the past learning was a process of elevating the spirit, today it is reduced to the motion of a thumb over a screen. In this small, symbolic gesture lies the entire human drama of the twenty-first century—the struggle between speed and meaning, word and image, identity and illusion.

Brains and Trains: Teaching the Digital Generation

Teachers today stand on a metaphorical railway platform where the train of technology departed long ago, while many still hesitate to board. The global shift toward digital education has created an invisible yet profound generational gap between digital-native students and analogue-era teachers. OECD (2023) reports that in more than 60% of countries, teachers feel technologically unprepared to meet contemporary instructional demands.

In North Macedonia, although the Ministry of Education and Science has been working actively toward digitalizing the educational process since 2021, many teachers continue to experience fear and uncertainty toward technology. Some perceive digitalization as a threat to their professional role rather than an opportunity for its expansion. According to the Bureau for Development of Education (2022), 47% of teachers admit that they use digital tools only when they are obliged to do so. However, in the age of artificial intelligence—where knowledge is accessible within seconds—the teacher must transform into a mentor, guide, and ethical role model. The roots of the problem are not merely technical but also cultural. For decades, the educational system has shaped the figure of the teacher as the “sovereign of knowledge” rather than as a mediator between the student and information. However, in the age of artificial intelligence—where knowledge is accessible within seconds—the teacher must transform into a mentor, guide, and ethical role model.

In this regard, the central challenge is no longer how to transmit knowledge, but how to cultivate understanding. The teacher must redirect energy from lecturing to interaction, from assessment to inspiration. As Fullan (2021) argues, the successful teacher of the twenty-first century is not the one who knows the most, but the one who can spark curiosity.

The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Teaching

With the emergence of tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Copilot, education has acquired a new dimension. Students can now obtain answers, generate essays, or conduct research within seconds. Yet this raises serious pedagogical and ethical concerns. Is the student truly learning if the machine performs the thinking? Some experts warn that excessive reliance on artificial intelligence may lead to cognitive passivity—a condition in which young people cease to think critically because algorithms perform those tasks more efficiently. For this reason, the role of the teacher must not be reduced to technical support, but must remain a form of human guidance—teaching students how to think, not merely what to know. Within this context, teachers require sustained support through continuous training, collaboration, and mentorship. A change in school culture is essential—from fear of technology to partnership with it. Teachers and AI should function symbiotically: the machine as a tool, and the human as the source of meaning.

In North Macedonia, several pilot programmes by UNICEF and MoES (2024) are already oriented toward integrating digital competencies into curricula. However, without systematic support and motivation, such initiatives risk remaining only well-intentioned ideas. The digital generation does not seek perfect teachers, but authentic individuals who understand how the screen thinks, yet know how to speak to the human soul. The teacher of the future will not be the one who delivers lectures, but the one who listens, understands, and inspires students to think with their own hearts and in their own language.

Mind and Grind: Education in a Wired World

The contemporary student lives within a culture of comparison, where a person's value is measured by the number of likes, followers, and views they accumulate. The architecture of social media has created a new unit of measurement for success—visibility. If knowledge once constituted power, today visibility functions as currency. As Byung-Chul Han (2017) observes, the modern individual exists within a “performance society,” in which everyone must constantly display themselves, produce an image of who they are, and remain digitally present in order to be acknowledged.

This phenomenon alters the very nature of education. Rather than a process of personal development, education increasingly becomes a form of self-promotion. Students often choose what to learn based on how “useful” or “popular” it appears online, rather than according to its intrinsic intellectual value. Such a utilitarian orientation produces a generation that thinks in the grammar of trends rather than the grammar of ideas.

Education and the Cultural Void

In this digital epoch, a paradox emerges: young people have access to more knowledge than ever before, yet they experience a deeper sense of emptiness than previous generations. This emptiness is not intellectual but spiritual and cultural. Students learn how to navigate applications, but not how to experience art; they know how to search for information, but not how to formulate a meaningful question.

In the Macedonian context, this void is dual: alongside the global digital gap, there exists a crisis of identity. The erosion of Macedonian linguistic and cultural self-awareness—the blending of English slang with social-media norms, together with the marginalization of cultural heritage in favour of a “global style”—produces young people who are globally connected yet locally uprooted

(Institute for the Macedonian Language “Krste Misirkov,” 2023). This phenomenon also affects motivation for learning. Social networks promote a culture of the “perfect life”—appearance, wealth, travel, and luxury—while core human values such as empathy, solidarity, and critical thinking gradually fade. Youth are no longer shaping a personality; they are curating a profile. Ideals of beauty and success become external, visual, and quantifiable.

This phenomenon also affects motivation for learning. Teachers increasingly observe that students lack sustained interests, maintaining only momentary impulses. As UNICEF (2023) indicates, 58% of young people in Southeast Europe admit that they rarely finish what they begin, as they are easily diverted by new digital content.

Towards a New Paradigm of Education

Despite these challenges, the digital era offers the potential for a renewed humanism—an educational model that integrates technology with ethics, speed with depth, and algorithmic efficiency with moral awareness. Artificial intelligence may serve as a tool for the democratization of knowledge, but only if human beings retain their role as those who question, doubt, and feel. The education of the future must return to its essence: to form persons, not profiles; thinkers, not users. The teacher must become a guardian of values, and the student—a seeker of meaning. As Delors (1996) asserts, “learning to be” constitutes the highest form of education. Within the “wired” conditions of the modern world, where the human mind and machine interact continuously, the future of education will depend on our ability to preserve the human face of knowledge. Even the most intelligent machine cannot replace the simplest human kindness.

Conclusion

Education in the 21st century stands at a crossroads between technological advancement and a profound loss of human meaning. The digital revolution has democratized access to information, yet it has relativized wisdom. Young people grow up surrounded by screens, applications, and algorithms that shape their perception of reality, while teachers find it increasingly difficult to maintain their attention. This situation is not only a pedagogical challenge but also a cultural one. Education today should not fight against technology, but rather cultivate it in the service of humanity. Instead of viewing the screen as an enemy, we should treat it as a mirror—one that encourages us to look beneath the surface. The future of education cannot be measured through digital indicators but through human outcomes: empathy, respect, curiosity, and cultural awareness. The Macedonian language and Macedonian identity, in this sense, are not merely linguistic categories but spiritual foundations that safeguard identity in a global sea of uniformity. If we succeed in integrating knowledge, critical thinking, and digital competencies with an appreciation for language, tradition, and values, then education will truly become a journey—not only toward success, but toward the self. In an era when screens have become our constant companions and technology increasingly shapes how we learn, live, and connect, it is essential that we do not lose what makes us human. The greatest challenge of our time is therefore not only how to teach children to use technology, but how to teach them to remain human. Education must not become a mechanical exchange of information; it must remain a space where curiosity, character, empathy, and cultural awareness are cultivated. Our task—as teachers, researchers, parents, and students—is to guide technology so that it serves humanity, rather than the other way around. Education must once again become a journey inward, not a race toward the market. Only then will the “screen” cease to be a wall and become a window toward genuine human meaning. Let this be a reminder that the future is not created by technology, but by the people who know how to use it wisely. And it is precisely in this that our strength lies.

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