

THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES OF ARMENIAN SOCIAL NETWORK USERS*

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Abstract: Online is one of the main types of communication and relationship building. Social networking site users are increasing day by day, not only in Armenia but worldwide. Currently, debates are actively underway about the impact of online communication on offline communication. Are online and offline communications two complementary means, or does one completely replace the other? "If people stay at home and do their daily activities without engaging with others, they will not put in the effort to establish social connections beyond the online world, as it would seem futile." The article explores the prevalence of social networks among Armenian users, their variations, online and/or offline communication preferences of Armenian users in various spheres of life, connected with age, gender, and depending on the subject of communication. As a result of a survey conducted using questionnaires, a range of preferences were identified, based on which users construct online communications. The main differences were observed among different age groups, rather than gender.

Key words: virtual communication, online and offline space, social networks, Armenian users

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ԵՊՀ Սոցիոլոգիայի ֆակուլտետի կիրառական սոցիոլոգիայի ամբիոնի
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Սոցիալական մեդիայի միջազգային փորձագետ, Վաշինգտոն, ԱՄՆ,
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Ամփոփում: Առցանց տիրույթը հաղորդակցության և հարաբերությունների կառուցման հիմնական հարթակներից է: Սոցիալական ցանցերի օգտատերերն իրենց հերթին օրեցօր ավելանում են ոչ միայն Հայաստանում, այլ նաև ողջ աշխարհում: Ներկայումս բանավեճ է ընթանում **անցանց** (իրական տարածության

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մեջ) հաղորդակցությունների վրա **առցանց** հաղորդակցությունների ազդեցության վերաբերյալ. արդյո՞ք առցանց և անցանց հաղորդակցությունները երկու փոխարացնող տիրույթներ են, թե՞, այնուամենայնիվ, մեկը գալիս է մյուսին ամբողջությամբ փոխարինելու: Եթե մարդիկ նստում են տանը և զբաղվում իրենց առօրյա խնդիրներով առանց ուրիշների հետ շփվելու, ապա նրանք սոցիալական կապեր ստեղծելու համար ջանք չեն գործադրի առցանց տիրույթից դուրս, քանի որ ստացվում է, որ այլևս դա աննպատակ է դառնում: Հողվածում քննարկվում են հայ օգտատերերի շրջանում սոցիալական ցանցերի տարածվածությունն ու դրանց տարատեսակները, հայ օգտատերերի կողմից կյանքի այս կամ այն ոլորտում առցանց և/կամ անցանց հաղորդակցության նախասիրությունները՝ կախված օգտատերերի տարիքից, սեռից և հաղորդակցության թեմայից: Հետազոտությունից, որն իրականացվել է հարցաթերթիկային մեթոդով, դուրս են բերվել մի շարք նախընտրություններ, որոնց հիման վրա հայ օգտատերերը կառուցում են առցանց հաղորդակցությունները: Հիմնական տարբերությունները նկատվել են տարիքային տարբեր խմբերի շրջանում:

Բանալի բառեր - *վիրտուալ հաղորդակցություն, առցանց և անցանց տիրույթ, սոցիալական ցանցեր, հայ օգտատերեր*

ПРЕДПОЧТЕНИЯ ОНЛАЙН И ОФЛАЙН КОММУНИКАЦИИ СРЕДИ АРМЯНСКИХ ПОЛЬЗОВАТЕЛЕЙ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЕЙ

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Аннотация. Пользователей социальных сетей с каждым днем становится все больше не только в Армении, но и во всем мире. В статье рассматривается распространение социальных сетей среди армянских пользователей и их разновидности, онлайн и/или офлайн коммуникационные предпочтения армянских пользователей в той или иной сфере жизни, связанные с возрастом, полом и в зависимости от темы коммуникации. В результате исследования, проведенного методом анкетирования, был выявлен ряд предпочтений, на основе которых пользователи строят онлайн-коммуникацию. Основные различия наблюдались среди разных возрастных групп пользователей.

Ключевые слова: *виртуальная коммуникация, пространство онлайн и офлайн, социальные сети, Армянские пользователи*

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Statistics demonstrates the predominance and active participation of people in the communication processes in online networks, not only in RA, but also in the whole world. Currently, approximately 4.80 billion people globally utilize social networks, with 150 million new users having emerged in just the last 12 months (Chaffey, 2023). Hence, social networks, being an ever-evolving sphere, necessitate

continual scholarly investigation aimed at elucidating prevailing patterns, trends, dynamic shifts, and the ongoing enhancement and augmentation of informational content through the prism of scientific inquiry.

Henceforth, it is imperative to better comprehend the preferences of users of social networks. The scrutiny of the behaviors of the latest users can have implications for diverse objectives, such as establishing connections with like-minded individuals, market targeting, or the expertise of specialists in the fields of marketing or advertising.

By discerning the attributes of one's specific audience and considering their behavioral traits, it becomes feasible to formulate and align one's own objectives and to devise strategies of informational impact geared towards their accomplishment, thereby efficiently attaining and engaging one's intended target audience.

Here we will differentiate between online and offline communication. Online communication is the transfer of information through various internet platforms in a synchronous or asynchronous context. And offline communication is the transmission of thoughts and/or various signs in real space and time in a offline manner (Lieberman, Schroeder, 2020:16-21).

According to Y. A. McKenna and J. A. Bargh, online communication diverges from offline communication on various fundamental dimensions, including accessibility, unpredictability, idealization of interpersonal communications, attenuation of physical cues, and the presence of anonymity. These distinct attributes, as articulated by the authors, facilitate enhanced ease of communication and serve to mitigate the barriers that are prevalent in offline communication (Nina, 2015: 9-15).

Currently, debates are actively underway about the impact of online communication on offline communication. Are online and offline communications two complementary means, or does one completely replace the other, in particular, online communication replaces offline communication, destroying the relevance of the latter (König, Seifert, 2020)?

Several studies have demonstrated that online communication can enhance preexisting relationships established through offline communications. This is attributed to the fact that relationships primarily cultivated solely through online channels, without corresponding offline counterparts, tend to exhibit a superficial nature, and over time, there exists a potential risk of detrimental effects on the relationship dynamics (Pallant et al., 2018: 4-15). The subsequent series of studies in this area elucidates that online communications encompass an enhancing mechanism for relationships initially established through offline communications, those relationships whose underpinnings were established in the offline sphere (Matook, Butler, 2014: 7-9).

Critics contend that online communications fail to replicate the sensation of real-life existence and the genuine interpersonal engagements it entails. Empirical studies

have corroborated that individuals who prioritize offline communication over online communication tend to exhibit a notably elevated level of emotional stability. Conversely, in situations where offline forms of communication prevail, individuals tend to manifest heightened levels of depressive tendencies and an increased need for social support over extended periods (Gross, 2002). Tyler posits that one contributing factor to this phenomenon is the absence of certain social cues that are inherently absent within the online sphere.

Hence, a phased picture emerges, initially accentuating the favorable facets of online predominance, including convenience, security, accessibility, self-expression, the establishment of novel social ties, and the cultivation of communication and social proficiencies. Subsequently, these positives give way to diminished offline social bonds, a diminishing grasp of reality, and a dwindling inclination to engage with it, eventually culminating in depressive manifestations. Consequently, social media, in its evolution, forfeits its intrinsic capacity for fostering genuine social communications.

According to recent statistics, approximately one-third (approximately 32%) of global internet users fall within the age bracket of 25 to 34 years. Furthermore, 18% of internet users belong to the age group of 18 to 24 years. Concurrently, it is noteworthy that 80% of internet users are concurrently active on various social networking platforms, with a considerable proportion being active across multiple social networks simultaneously (Statista, 2019).

As of the conclusion of 2022, the most prevalent virtual social networks include WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Weixin WeChat, QQ, Snapchat, and Telegram. It is important to note that not all of the aforementioned platforms enjoy extensive adoption and usage within the Republic of Armenia (Statista, 2023).

R. Hanna and several other theorists have underscored the transformation of the Internet, contending that it has evolved from a mere information platform into an influential medium. Consequently, there is an imperative need to gain insight into users' communication strategies, discern prevailing trends, and ascertain their distinctive characteristics and preferences (Kazakulova, Kuhn, 2012: 30-36).

Z. Bauman's perspective can be summarized as follows: "A significant proportion of individuals employ social networks as a means to disengage from reality and seek refuge within a comfort zone, where the voices encountered echo their own, and where the predominant visibility is that of their own self-reflection" (Atanesyan, 2019: 73-84).

Valkenburg and Peter (Peter and Valkenburg, 2006) conducted an examination of the engagement of young individuals and adolescents in online communication. Furthermore, there exists a body of psychological research exploring the transition from online to offline communications, which substantiates the presence of underlying psychological factors contributing to this transition.

In the article titled "Nobody on the Internet Knows I'm an Introvert," the authors observe that a primary motivation for users to engage in online communication is to alleviate feelings of depression and loneliness. Initially, within the realm of social networks, every user's voice is equally prominent; however, the persistence of this equilibrium hinges upon the analysis of the prevailing context and the communication strategy adopted (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002: 125-128).

Humans exhibit an inherent inclination to engage in social comparisons. Such comparisons with individuals possessing favorable attributes can lead personal trait development, while instances of downward social comparison transpire when individuals juxtapose themselves with those possessing unfavorable traits. The act of comparison serves as a constructive and motivating force, but becomes counterproductive when individuals come to realize the infeasibility of emulating their chosen point of comparison. This realization frequently engenders a sense of inadequacy, exerts a detrimental influence, and precipitates diminished self-esteem.

As part of their research, G. Chu and N. Adj discovered that a significant proportion of users on the Facebook social network perceive their Facebook friends as being not only happier and more successful online but also offline. Consequently, individuals tend to engage in self-comparisons with their idealized online personas, a practice that can detrimentally impact the development of a positive self-image and contribute to diminished self-esteem. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that online communications may incorporate elements absent in the non-virtual realm, and pertinent information about other users may remain inaccessible to the user in question (Erin et al., 2014: 206-222).

It is imperative to acknowledge that what online communication within the family is sometimes inferior to offline communication due to certain situations and statuses in the family. Among the foremost factors contributing to this disparity are educational pursuits and employment opportunities that necessitate residence outside the family's immediate geographic vicinity, often abroad. This holds particular relevance within the context of Armenian society, given the substantial proportion of individuals engaged in academic and professional pursuits abroad. For this demographic, the online sphere serves as a critical conduit for bridging the gap in offline communication. In an evolving trend, family members increasingly exhibit a preference for seeking information and counsel from their social network connections rather than relying on familial relationships and direct familial communications.

In this article, we shall expound upon the findings derived from research investigating the communication preferences of Armenian social network users, which illuminate their tendencies in utilizing online and offline modes of communication within specific spaces of life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted this research between February and May 2023 through online surveys, engaging with approximately 400 Armenian users within the virtual social network. It is essential to emphasize the deliberate steps taken to ensure the reliability of the data. The study utilized a random sampling methodology by disseminating the questionnaire link across carefully chosen social media groups and pages, thereby enabling the formation of a broad and heterogeneous respondent pool. While acknowledging the potential for intentional distortion of demographic information on the internet, the survey design incorporated measures to mitigate this risk. To enhance validity, we cross-referenced demographic details where possible and ensured the respondents' anonymity, fostering a more candid and accurate response environment. Moreover, the inherent limitations associated with online surveys, including potential biases, were transparently acknowledged. These efforts collectively contribute to the validity of the obtained demographic indicators, providing a robust foundation for the generalization of findings in the research paper.

The objective of the study was to elucidate the online and offline communication preferences of Armenian users, with a focus on their interpersonal communications in both online and offline sphere.

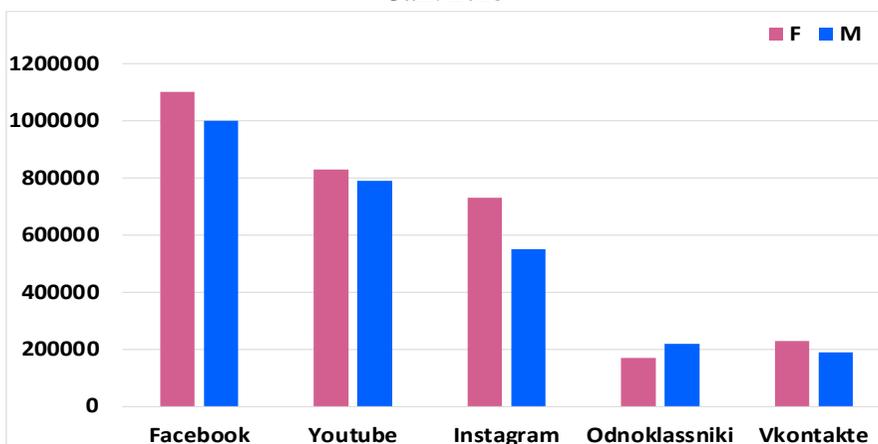
The research objectives are:

- Clarify what social networks are most widely used among Armenian users.
- To find out the preferences of Armenian users in terms of online and offline communication in different aspects of life, considering factors such as age, gender, and communication context.

Taking into consideration various factors such as the popularity of social networks in Armenia, the presence of Armenian users on these platforms, their functionalities, strengths, limitations, country of origin, and other relevant criteria, the following virtual social networking sites that enjoy widespread usage in Armenia were identified: Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Youtube, VKontakte, and TikTok. The rationale behind this decision lies in the distinct communicative dynamics and functionalities inherent to social networks compared to messaging apps. Social networks serve as multifaceted platforms where communication constitutes one facet amid various functions, including content sharing, community building, and information dissemination. By concentrating on social networks, the study sought to delve specifically into the preferences within this context, aiming for a more in-depth exploration of user behaviors and interactions unique to these platforms. The decision to exclude messaging apps aimed at maintaining precision and clarity in investigating the nuanced communication patterns within the defined scope of social networks among Armenian users.

Regarding the definition of a social network and the decision to focus exclusively on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, TikTok, and Vkontakte, it is imperative to delineate the distinctions between social networks, video hosting, and messaging platforms. A social network, as conceptualized in this study, refers to an online space designed for the formation and maintenance of social connections, encompassing features that extend beyond immediate communication or video sharing. While platforms like WhatsApp may involve social aspects, their primary function is direct communication, distinguishing them from the broader, relationship-centric nature of social networks. The decision to narrow the research scope to social networks was deliberate, focusing on platforms where users engage in multifaceted social interactions, aligning with the study's objective to explore nuanced communication preferences within this context. This approach aimed for specificity and depth in understanding the distinct dynamics of social network communication among Armenian users.

Figure 1: Representation of Armenian users in social networks by gender, Jan. 2023



The Facebook social network holds a prominent position among Armenian users³⁵, with a significant portion of survey participants identifying as Facebook users or utilizing multiple social networks concurrently.

Instagram is steadily approaching Facebook in terms of audience size, boasting approximately 1-1.1 million active users, and this number continues to increment gradually each month. Roughly three-quarters of Instagram's audience consists of users under the age of 35. Conversely, half of Facebook's user account

³⁵ S. Kemp, Digital 2023: Armenia, 2023, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-armenia#:~:text=Facebook%20users%20in%20Armenia%20in.in%20Armenia%20in%20early%202023>.

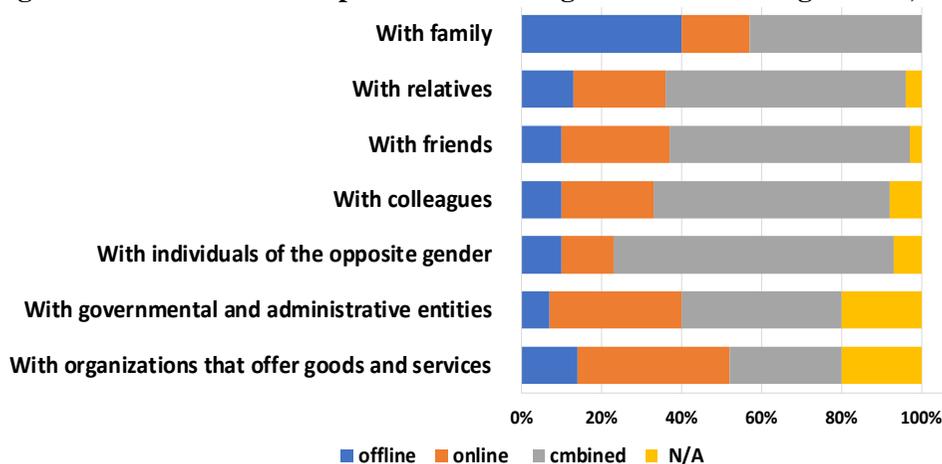
falls into the 35 and older age group.

There exist social networks for which we lack precise statistical data due to their failure to furnish comprehensive information regarding the Armenian user base. TikTok falls into this category. While it is evident that the user population is continually expanding, precise statistics are still unavailable (Martirosyan, 2022).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Thus, Armenian women exhibit a significantly higher propensity to divulge personal information in online sphere (66%) compared to men (34%), corroborating findings from several other international studies (Atanasova, 2016).

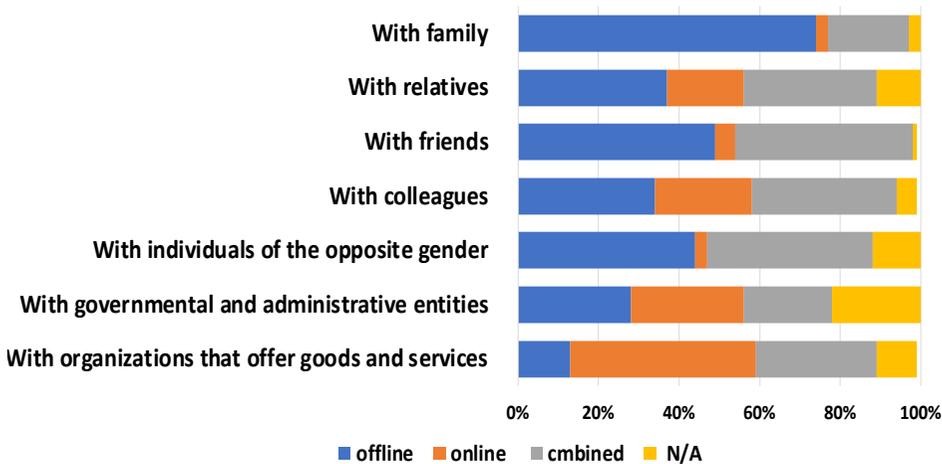
Figure 2: "Communication preferences among users under the age of 15", %



It is evident from the figure that individuals within this age group show the least inclination towards engaging in offline communication with family members, relatives, and friends. Simultaneously, this demographic exhibits the highest inclination for exclusively online communication with family, friends, and relatives. Many individuals in this age group prefer a combined approach to communicating with colleagues and individuals of the opposite gender, highlighting a constraint on offline communications. Considering that users within this age bracket generally maintain limited communications with state and administrative bodies, it can be inferred that educational institutions, and occasionally other educational-related government entities such as ministries, play a prominent role in disseminating information related to educational matters.

Although individuals within this age range may not necessarily engage in extensive purchasing activities, largely due to varying financial capabilities, a substantial portion of them still exhibit a preference for online-only or combined mode purchasing methods.

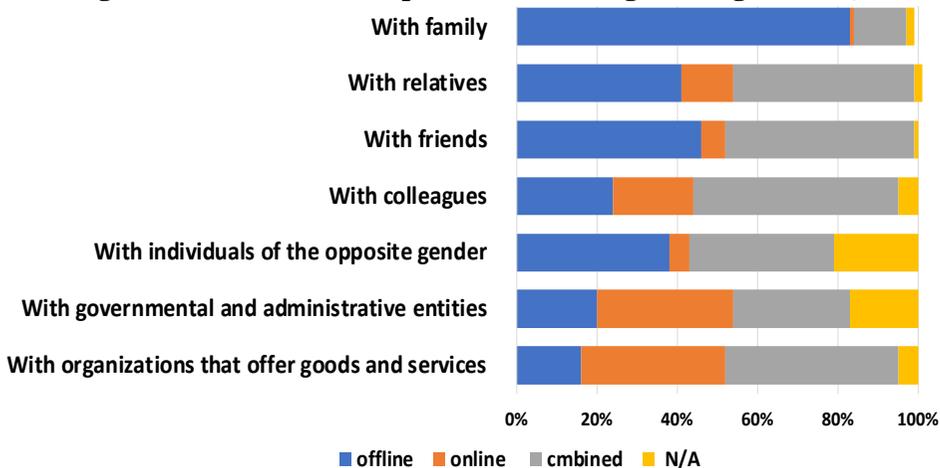
Figure 3: Communication preferences among users aged 16-30, %



In the case of this age range, an opposing trend is evident: they exhibit a preference for engaging with family members and friends through offline platforms. This observation may suggest that, unlike in some other societies, a majority of young individuals in Armenia within this age bracket reside with family members and, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, primarily establish connections through offline means.

Furthermore, this particular demographic displays the lowest inclination to engage in online communication with organizations that offer goods and services, and this tendency is growing more pronounced. Communication with individuals of the opposite gender also leans toward offline platforms; however, the preference for a combined approach implies a diminishing inclination for strictly offline communication.

Figure 4: Communication preferences among users aged 31-55, %

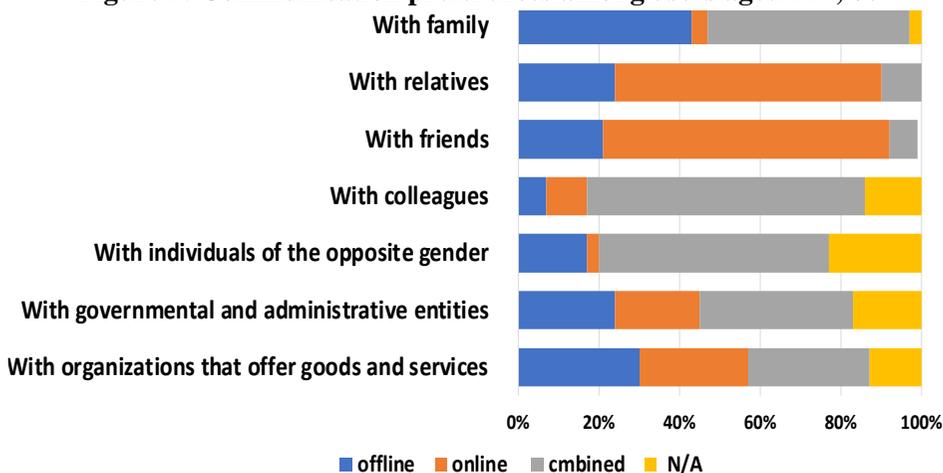


Users within this age bracket exhibit a preference for offline communication with family members, while with friends and family, they tend to favor combined communication. Additionally, their inclination is to restrict communication with colleagues to offline channels. In contrast, friends, as a social group distinct from

family, display a stronger tendency to transition from combined offline and online communication to exclusively offline communication. This inclination may be attributed to the fact that individuals in this age group generally lead lives closely intertwined with family members, and it is less common for them to reside far from their familial environment.

Moreover, when viewed through a generational lens, these users entered the realm of social networks at a later stage in life, signifying that it will require some time for them to fully or predominantly transition their communication preferences to online platforms.

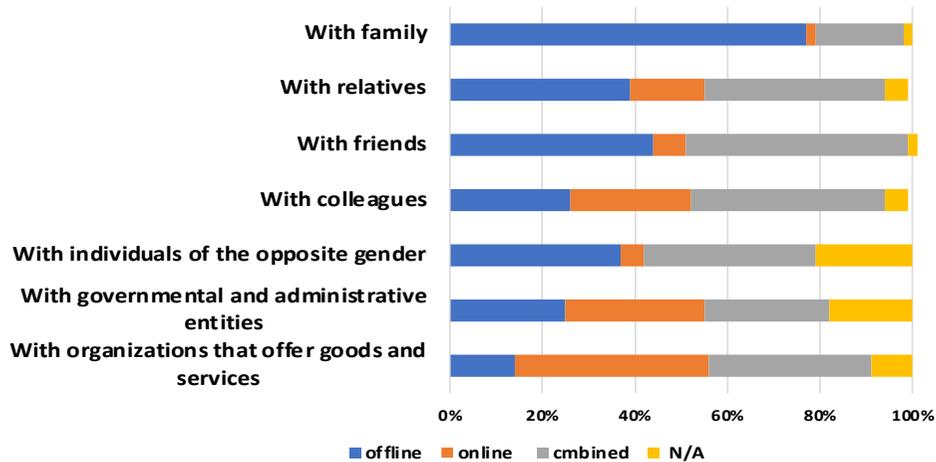
Figure 5: Communication preferences among users aged 55+, %



One characteristic particular to this age group is their inclination toward online and combined communication options with family members. This inclination may stem from the circumstance that other family members, particularly younger ones, reside either outside the country or apart from the core family unit. Regarding friends, their preference for offline and combined communication could be influenced by the relatively limited extent of active social contacts among users in this age cohort within Armenian society. Even in cases where such contacts exist, the mode of communication often depends on geographical proximity, thereby favoring online or combined methods of communication.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this demographic segment encountered the greatest challenge in responding to inquiries regarding their communication preferences with individuals of the opposite gender. This challenge may suggest that individuals within this age range are either married and primarily engage in communication within the familial context, or that, in line with Armenian social norms, they do not frequently engage in offline communications with individuals of the opposite gender.

Figure 6: User Preferences Based on Gender- Responses of female participants, %



As depicted in the figures 6 and 7, user preferences do not undergo obvious changes depending on the gender of the users. This observation aligns with prior investigations addressing the same topic. The research initiative titled "Online Communication Preferences: Age, Gender, and Network Usage Duration Dependencies" sought to explore the selection of online communication strategies, preferences in forming relationships, and how these choices vary based on age, gender, and the duration of network usage. In particular, the study centered on preferences regarding communication and relationship development with family members, friends, colleagues, and anonymous individuals.

Therefore, our research, conducted through a questionnaire-based approach, has highlighted several preferences that guide users in constructing online communications. The primary distinctions were noted among various age groups rather than genders.

CONCLUSIONS

Examining the preferences of Armenian social network users reveals the following trends:

1. Armenian social network users display a growing inclination to substitute offline communication with online communication. Consequently, there is an uptick in the preference for combined (online and offline) communication, averaging around 30% across all age groups. Simultaneously, we witness a decrease in exclusive offline communication, with a shift towards online-only and combined communication formats. This shift is particularly pronounced in users under the age of 15, reaching up to 60%, although similar patterns are observed in older user groups as well.

2. Users in the age brackets of 16-30 (74%) and 31-55 (83%) predominantly

favor offline communication with their family. This phenomenon can be attributed to different factors. In the case of older users, it may be influenced by their late adoption of the internet and social networks, resulting in a preference for offline communication. Conversely, younger users share a similar lifestyle with their family members, leading to unavoidable offline communication.

3. Regarding specific spaces, the inclination towards online and combined communication is particularly pronounced in communications with state and administrative entities, as well as organizations offering products and services. Unlike other age groups, young individuals show a strong preference for minimizing offline communication with entities providing goods and services, with 46% opting for online-only purchases. In comparison, this preference stands at 36% for the 31-55 age group, 38% for those under 15, and is lowest at 27% for individuals aged 56 and above.

4. Individuals at the youngest and oldest ends of the age spectrum prefer organizing their communications with family members not only in offline settings but also in a combined format. This preference is observed in 43% of those under 15 years old and 50% of those aged 56 and above. For young people, this inclination may stem from their familiarity with online communication from an early age, making it more comfortable. Conversely, in the case of older individuals, it could be due to living separately from younger family members, potentially residing in different countries.

Women exhibit a broader spectrum of online communication with various individuals, in contrast to men who tend to cultivate narrower relationships, resulting in a more limited scope of communications, acquaintances, and relationships. Moreover, gender can play a role in shaping the selection of communication cues and language. Furthermore, the aforementioned research indicates that women experience fewer personal communication intricacies in the online realm and often feel more at ease with online communication compared to offline communications.³⁶

Returning to the research conducted within the framework of this article, it is noteworthy that men exhibit a lower preference for offline communication with state and administrative bodies compared to women. Irrespective of age disparities, users tend to prioritize offline communications with family over communications with relatives, friends, or colleagues.

In the case of women, unlike other aspects such as personal connections, friendships, and professional relationships, there is a prevailing inclination towards online shopping. This preference aligns with one of the hypotheses proposed in previous international studies, which posits a positive relationship between the

³⁶ **Thayers S. E., Ray S.**, Online Communication Preferences across Age, Gender, and Duration of Internet Use, *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Volume 9, Number 4, 2006 pp 432–440

convenience of online platforms and the frequency of online shopping, a relationship that has been affirmed within the Armenian context as well.

Furthermore, experts argue that the consumerism displayed by users in the online realm has significantly reshaped society, particularly its consumption culture and behavior. In tandem with this phenomenon, discussions are arising within the online spaces regarding the phenomenon of consumption addiction, which is considered relatively rare.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.