

# Virtual Religious Manipulation And Psychological Vulnerabilities Of Adolescents

**Bekkiyeva Nargiza Rajabboyevna**  
University of Economics and Pedagogy,  
Karshi 180100, Uzbekistan  
Email: [nargizarajabboyevna@gmail.com](mailto:nargizarajabboyevna@gmail.com)

## Annotation

This article provides a scientific analysis of the impact of virtual religious manipulation on the psychological state of adolescent individuals. The study highlights psychological vulnerability factors characteristic of adolescence, including emotional instability, identity formation, the need for social approval, and insufficient development of critical thinking skills. In addition, the cognitive and emotional mechanisms of manipulative religious influence carried out through the internet and social media are also analyzed.

**Keywords:** virtual religious manipulation, adolescent psychology, psychological vulnerability, cognitive processes, emotional impact, media literacy, internet safety, social networks, virtual environment, information threat, critical thinking, identity formation, emotional instability, manipulative technologies, religious information.

**Introduction.** In the 21st century, the rapid development of digital technologies and internet systems has deeply penetrated all spheres of human life. In particular, social networks, messaging applications, and various virtual platforms have become the fastest means of information exchange. Today, young people, especially adolescents, are among the most active users of the online environment. While the virtual environment provides opportunities for learning, communication, and expanding worldview, it also contributes to the increase of various forms of manipulative influence. In recent years, the issue of virtual religious manipulation has become one of the pressing problems in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, and information security. Some manipulative religious content distributed via the internet may exert both emotional and cognitive influence on adolescents, negatively affecting their thinking processes and psychological state. Such influence is often carried out in a covert manner and is manifested through methods such as emotional pressure, inducing fear, promoting absolute truth claims, or social isolation. Adolescence is considered one of the most complex psychological stages of human development. During this period, identity formation takes place, independent thinking develops, and emotional sensitivity increases. At the same time, adolescents have a high need for social approval and are characterized by increased susceptibility to external influences. Such psychologically unstable conditions increase their vulnerability to virtual manipulation. Modern psychological studies show that manipulative information in the virtual environment significantly affects adolescents' cognitive functioning, emotional state, and social behavior. In particular, insufficient development of critical thinking skills, emotional instability, and identity crisis make them more vulnerable to manipulative ideas. As a result, adolescents may develop psychological dependence, social withdrawal, anxiety, and distorted perceptions.

The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that, in the current process of globalization and digitalization, protecting young people from virtual threats and developing their media literacy and critical thinking skills have become one of the key priorities. Therefore, the scientific study of virtual religious manipulation and adolescents' psychological vulnerabilities is of great importance not only from the perspective of psychology, but also in terms of education and social security.

## Literature review

The issues of virtual manipulation, the influence of religious information, and adolescents' psychological vulnerabilities are widely studied as one of the relevant scientific directions in modern psychology, pedagogy, and media research. In particular, with the development of digital technologies, interest in the psychological mechanisms of influence carried out via the internet has been steadily increasing.

Research in this field mainly covers aspects related to adolescents' emotional state, cognitive development, social adaptation, and exposure to virtual information.

In cognitive psychology, Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck scientifically substantiated that an individual's emotional reactions are closely related to their cognitive system. In Ellis's Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy theory, it is emphasized that irrational beliefs and dysfunctional constructs influence how individuals perceive external information. Beck, in turn, demonstrated that negative automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions can lead to anxiety and depressive states. These theories serve as an important methodological foundation for explaining adolescents' psychological vulnerabilities in the context of virtual manipulation processes.

In media psychology research, the impact of the internet and social networks on young people's cognition has been widely analyzed. Marshall McLuhan emphasized that mass communication media are among the key factors shaping human thought. Subsequent studies have shown that repeated information in virtual space can exert a strong psychological influence on individuals' beliefs and values. In particular, emotionally intense content that evokes fear or guilt is more quickly absorbed by adolescents.

Among CIS scholars, Lev Vygotsky highlighted the significant role of the social environment in personality development. According to his view, human thinking and behavior are shaped through external social influences. This approach serves as an important theoretical foundation for explaining the impact of the virtual environment on adolescent psychology. Similarly, Alexei Leontiev demonstrated that activity and communication are the main factors in personality formation, thereby providing a basis for understanding the psychological consequences of virtual communication.

Researchers in Uzbekistan have also conducted scientific studies devoted to the spiritual-psychological security of young people, internet culture, and information threats. These studies particularly emphasize the influence of manipulative information distributed via the internet on adolescents' worldview, as well as the need to develop critical thinking and media literacy among them. In some works, the formation of emotional stability in adolescents and the development of psychological defense mechanisms are considered important factors in preventing virtual manipulation.

Virtual religious manipulation is a complex psychological and social phenomenon based on cognitive vulnerability, emotional instability, and media influence mechanisms. Therefore, the integration of psychological, pedagogical, and information security approaches is of significant scientific importance in studying this issue.

### **Analysis and results.**

During the study, the impact of virtual religious manipulation on adolescents' psychology was analyzed from psychological, cognitive, and social perspectives. The obtained scientific data indicate that manipulative information in the virtual environment significantly affects adolescents' emotional state and cognitive processes. In particular, psychological characteristics typical of adolescence such as emotional sensitivity, identity formation, the need for social approval, and insufficient development of independent thinking make individuals more vulnerable to virtual influences. The analysis revealed that virtual manipulation is often carried out through emotional pressure. Information based on fear, feelings of guilt, anxiety about social exclusion, or the notion of "absolute truth" is more easily accepted by adolescents. This is because, at this developmental stage, emotional responses are more dominant than cognitive control mechanisms. Therefore, adolescents tend to process manipulative information emotionally rather than through critical analysis.

From a psychological perspective, it was observed that manipulative religious content exploits adolescents' internal anxiety and sense of uncertainty. In particular, adolescents who feel socially isolated or lack emotional support tend to become more quickly attached to virtual groups. This is associated with the mechanism of social identification, where the adolescent seeks to perceive themselves as part of a certain group.

From a cognitive perspective, it was found that manipulative information may lead to the formation of dysfunctional constructs in adolescents. For example, irrational beliefs such as "only we are right," "others are on the wrong path," or "protection is achieved through fear" reduce an individual's ability to objectively evaluate reality. This, in turn, negatively affects social adaptation and emotional stability.

During the analysis, another important finding was identified: when virtual manipulation persists over a long period, it may intensify symptoms such as stress, anxiety, aggressiveness, or social withdrawal in adolescents' psychological state. In some cases, excessive dependence on the virtual environment also leads

to a decline in real-life communicative activity. The development of media literacy, the formation of psychological defense mechanisms, and the strengthening of critical thinking skills among adolescents play a crucial role in reducing the negative impact of virtual manipulation.

**Conclusion.** In the modern digital information space, virtual religious manipulation has emerged as one of the pressing issues affecting adolescents' psychological security. The results of the study indicate that psychological characteristics typical of adolescence such as emotional sensitivity, identity formation, the need for social approval, and insufficient development of critical thinking intensify vulnerability to virtual manipulative influences. In particular, emotionally charged religious content circulating on the internet and social networks can significantly affect adolescents' cognitive and emotional states.

Based on the analysis, it was found that virtual manipulation is most commonly carried out through emotional pressure, inducing fear, promoting the concept of absolute truth, and fostering a sense of "social belonging." As a result of such influence, adolescents may develop dysfunctional constructs, irrational beliefs, and one-sided perspectives. This, in turn, negatively affects their psychological stability, social adaptation, and independent thinking abilities. Furthermore, the study revealed that insufficient development of media literacy and critical thinking is one of the key risk factors of virtual manipulation. If adolescents lack the skills to analyze and evaluate online information, they are more likely to accept manipulative ideas. Therefore, educating young people in information security culture, developing their analytical thinking, and forming psychological defense mechanisms are of crucial importance.

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