



The Influence of Social Media on Students' Behavior and Psychology based on FISE UNRIYO Students' Perspectives

Nuri Salsa Bella Ramadani¹⁾, Sri Nur Khalizah²⁾, Tri Septa Nurhantoro³⁾

^{1,2}International Relations Study Program, Universitas Respati Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³English Literature Study Program, Universitas Respati Yogyakarta, Indonesia

^{a)}Corresponding author: nuriirmdhn.i@gmail.com

^{b)}icha31823@gmail.com

^{c)}trisepta@respati.ac.id

Abstract. This study examines how social media influences students' behavior and psychology, with a focus on the role of digital literacy in shaping their responses. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research involved semi-structured interviews with four students from Universitas Respati Yogyakarta. Thematic analysis revealed five core areas of impact: emotional and psychological responses, self-comparison and social evaluation, behavioral shifts in social interaction, influence on perspectives and opinions, and time management strategies. Findings indicate that emotionally charged content on social media can trigger both motivation and psychological distress such as anxiety and overthinking. Students also experience upward social comparisons, which may lead to insecurity or act as a catalyst for growth. The study highlights a shift in communication behavior, with students increasingly preferring digital interaction over face-to-face engagement. Crucially, digital literacy emerges as a key protective factor—empowering students to critically filter information, manage emotional exposure, and practice self-regulation in online spaces. Overall, the findings show that youth are not passive digital consumers; rather, they actively engage with social media content while negotiating its psychological effects through varying levels of digital literacy.

Keywords: Social media, youth psychology, digital literacy, student behavior. Emotional impact

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing number of social media users especially in Indonesia. Social media is extensively used worldwide, particularly in Indonesia. This is evident from data in 2018 showing that Indonesia had the fourth largest number of Facebook users globally [1]. While having a global society being interconnected, the usage of social media also brings harm into the users.

The psychological effects of social media on youth are closely intertwined with their level of digital literacy. Digital literacy refers to the capacity to critically navigate, evaluate, and create information across digital platforms [2]. Among youth, higher digital literacy has been linked to more reflective media consumption, better emotional regulation, and reduced susceptibility to online harm. Conversely, low digital literacy may increase vulnerability to anxiety, misinformation, and distorted self-perception due to unfiltered engagement with curated content and algorithm-driven feeds. Therefore, understanding the psychological impact of social media on students requires examining how literate they are in managing digital content and shaping their own online experiences.

While being so close with social media in everyday life, it needs a profound definition to then be concluded as a well research. Social media can be defined as a digital environment where social realities are created and interacted with users across time and space. The values that exist in society appear in the same or different forms on the Internet [3]. Furthermore Kartini et al. [3] describe social media as an online sphere where individuals can exchange information and participate in entertainment that builds social interaction.

Social media as its own social sphere also has its own characteristics. Kartini et al. [3] mention the seven characteristics of social media including: 1) Network where the users builds community, 2) Information in form of interaction-based content, 3) Archiving system, 4) Interaction that commonly in form of simple document such as commentary and feedback, 5) Social simulation with its own norms and values that

sometimes create very special interaction, 6) User-made content, produced by user and consume by other users, 7) Dissemination of ideas in an active condition.

Social media brings a new sphere for people to interact, it also brings new context for people to interact. Social media represents a whole new context that differs in important ways from the traditional face-to-face way of interacting, affecting cognition and behaviour within an organization [4]. It can be implied by simpler examples, social media users in the new context showed new behaviours that piqued the interest of academics and researchers. Mulawarman and Nurfitri [5] offered a perspective from applied social psychology to review the behaviour of social media users as well as the implications. By analysing behaviour such as selfies, cyberwar, online shopping, personalised user self and the share culture. Mulawarman and Nurfitri [5] explained that those behavioural examples show how humans are very inseparable with the new reality of social media, and it proves the need for further specific discourses

The excessive usage of social media could affect the mental state of the students. Some recent studies showed the negative impact and correlation between social media usage and student mental condition. According to Chen and Xiao [6] students are going through a reduced self-appreciation and gratitude when using social media because of the act of comparing themselves with other students' snapshots. This indicates that there is a correlation between social media usage and students' psychology. Another study by Annisa et al. [7] shows significant negative correlation between self-confident levels and WhatsApp usage intensity among medical students.

Social media such as Tik Tok also became largely used in Indonesia. Indonesia became the country with the highest number of TikTok downloads globally, with users spending around 39 minutes daily watching videos [8]. It is not surprising that students in Indonesia will also get affected by the intense usage of TikTok. A case study about TikTok #MarriageIsScary trend that has been done by Muhamad Fikri Asy'ari and Amelia [9] shows that the trend has an impact on how Gen Z views marriage life. The hashtag for the trend has spawned thousands of TikTok user response videos depicting concerns and fears from a woman's perspective. Based on earlier studies, it is possible that social media can influence and possibly alter individuals' behavior.

A recent related study from Muhamad Fikri Asy'ari and Amelia [9] titled *Terjebak dalam Standar Tiktok: Tuntutan yang Harus Diwujudkan? (Studi Kasus Tren Marriage is Scary)* focused on studying the "Marriage is Scary" trend on TikTok highlights how social media influences the psychological and behavioral responses of Gen Z. Using agenda-setting theory and qualitative methods, the research shows that algorithm-driven content on TikTok can amplify anxiety around relationships, particularly among young women. The trend reflects how repeated exposure to fear-based narratives can shape users' expectations and emotional outlook. This study underscores the role of social media in shaping students' perceptions, behaviors, and mental health in the digital age.

The related study shows that there is a correlation between social media, especially TikTok with how people perceive and react to things. In this study, the researcher focuses more on the usage of social media, not only analyzing one social media platform for the research. From the background description, a problem formulation was obtained; How does social media influence students' behavior and psychology? In line with the problem formulation, the research objective will be describing how social media can influence students' behavior and psychology.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how social media affects students' psychological and behavioral experiences. A qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate subjective meaning, context, and complexity in social settings. According to Creswell and Poth [10], qualitative research is especially suitable when exploring personal experiences, perspectives, and the meaning individuals assign to phenomena. Rather than generalizing results, the focus is on rich, in-depth understanding.

The research was conducted at Universitas Respati Yogyakarta (UNRIYO), particularly within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Economics (FISE), selected due to feasibility and the researchers' familiarity with the academic environment. This aligns with recommendations that qualitative fieldwork be situated in a context where the researcher has access and rapport [11].

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting students from batches 2023 and 2024, representing Gen Z in a university setting. Four students from different majors were chosen to ensure a

range of perspectives. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives [10].

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method. This format balances consistency with flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while guiding the conversation around key themes. As Silverman [11] notes, semi-structured interviews are ideal for capturing participants' reflections, emotions, and meaning-making in social research.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved coding responses manually, identifying patterns, and grouping them into larger themes. This method allows researchers to systematically extract meaning from qualitative data while remaining open to emerging insights [10].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a combined analysis of findings and discussion, thematically organized to explore how social media affects students' psychology and behavior. Drawing from qualitative interviews with four students from Universitas Respati Yogyakarta, each theme is analyzed in relation to existing theoretical perspectives and prior research. Through this approach, the research seeks not only to present observed patterns but also to interpret their deeper meanings and implications in students' everyday lives.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

The emotional responses of students to social media content illustrate how digital platforms function as both sources of relief and emotional disturbance. Most respondents described social media as a tool that can uplift their mood through motivational content, but also one that can trigger negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and overthinking. These emotional shifts were particularly evident when students encountered content that resonated with their current psychological state.

"Sometimes I come across sad quotes that make me overthink about life" (R2, personal communication, June 2025).

"If I'm already tired and see content that matches my bad mood, it makes it worse" (R1, personal communication, June 2025).

"The effect is that when I watch sad content, I cry, and content that makes me angry, I get angry. Social media is very influential, especially with the background, so I get more emotional" (R3, personal communication, June 2025).

"When I use social media, I feel relaxed, especially watching my favourite videos" (R4, personal communication, June 2025).

These emotional responses are consistent with findings from broader psychological studies. Keles, McCrae, and Grealish [12], in their systematic review, confirmed that excessive engagement with social media is significantly associated with heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, particularly among adolescents and young adults. This aligns with the students' own narratives of overthinking, emotional fatigue, and mood swings triggered by emotionally charged online content.

R2 explained that sad quotes often make them reflect deeply, sometimes leading to overthinking about life choices and personal worth. In contrast, motivational content boosts their confidence and energy to face the day. R1 shared that emotional alignment with negative content, especially when already feeling tired, worsens their mood and mental clarity. Similarly, R3 reported feeling overwhelmed by emotional content, noting that background music or dramatic narration often amplifies their emotional response. On the other hand, R4 expressed that social media helps them feel relaxed, especially when watching favorite videos.

These diverse reactions point to the concept of emotional contagion in online environments, where users mirror the affective tone of the content they consume. This aligns with Chen and Xiao [6], who argue that curated digital experiences often magnify emotional responses, especially among youth. The study supports the notion that social media's constant presence and algorithmic personalization can deepen pre-existing emotional conditions, blurring the boundary between users' inner emotions and external triggers. These emotionally driven responses underscore the importance of digital literacy in regulating psychological engagement with online content. As Pangrazio and Sefton-Green [2] suggest, critical digital literacy empowers users to recognize and evaluate the emotional manipulations embedded in algorithmically curated media. For instance, emotionally charged background music, relatable quotes, or visual storytelling often serve as triggers for emotional contagion. Students who are more digitally literate are likely to

recognize these strategies and engage more mindfully with content that reflects or influences their mood. Thus, while social media can function as both emotional support and emotional stressor, digital literacy may serve as a cognitive filter that mitigates its psychological intensity.

Self-Comparison and Social Evaluation

Another prevalent theme was the tendency of students to compare their progress with that of their peers, particularly when observing achievements shared on social media. While none of the respondents admitted to being significantly affected by influencers or celebrities, the visible progress of friends such as academic milestones, career steps, or personal development served as a benchmark for self-evaluation.

“If I see my close friends achieving something, sometimes I feel like I’m behind” (R1, personal communication, June 2025).

“I never compare myself to others. Because in my opinion, everyone's life has its own path, so we can't rely on others” (R2, personal communication, June 2025).

“I use others’ progress as inspiration, not something to envy” (R3, personal communication, June 2025).

“I don't think I've ever compared myself to anyone else because that's pretty horrible” (R4, personal communication, June 2025).

R1 acknowledged occasional feelings of being left behind when seeing close friends achieve something significant but emphasized turning those feelings into motivation. R2 claimed they generally do not compare themselves to others because every individual has their own path, but admitted sometimes feeling insecure when viewing updates from old school friends. R3 viewed comparison positively, using it as a benchmark for growth and a way to strengthen personal goals. Meanwhile, R4 stated they do not engage in comparison at all, considering it mentally unhealthy.

This behavior exemplifies the upward comparison process as described in Festinger’s [13] Social Comparison Theory. Importantly, the students’ responses reveal a dualistic nature: comparison can be both demotivating and aspirational. The key difference lies in how individuals interpret others’ success—either as a threat to self-worth or as a motivator for self-growth. These narratives reflect a nuanced psychological engagement, suggesting that the emotional impact of comparison is highly dependent on one's mindset and coping mechanisms.

The students’ responses in this theme reflect the core ideas of Festinger’s [13] social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their progress and abilities to others within a similar group. On social media, students are consistently exposed to curated portrayals of success—ranging from academic milestones to lifestyle choices—which can prompt feelings of inadequacy or inspire self-improvement.

Interestingly, many participants in this study demonstrated a reflective and selective response to these comparisons, often choosing to interpret others’ achievements as motivational rather than discouraging. This capacity aligns with what Pangrazio and Sefton-Green [2] describe as critical digital literacy: the ability to not only access and understand digital content but also to assess its emotional impact and the social dynamics embedded within it. These findings suggest that students who develop critical digital literacy are more resilient in the face of social comparison, as they possess the skills to manage their emotional responses and contextualize the online narratives they encounter.

Behavioral Changes and Social Interaction

The interviews also revealed how prolonged engagement with social media has redefined interpersonal communication. Several respondents noted a preference for indirect communication via social media platforms, even in face-to-face settings. This behavioral shift reflects a growing reliance on mediated interaction that prioritizes efficiency and emotional safety over personal immediacy.

“I sometimes talk to people via WhatsApp even when we’re sitting next to each other” (R3, personal communication, June 2025).

“It can worsen human interaction and distract from real conversations” (R1, personal communication, June 2025).

“With social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, there is a dm feature, for me this helps me to be able to communicate with people around me” (R2, personal communication, June 2025).

“With social media, I get new things to tell them” (R4, personal communication, June 2025).

R3 admitted to messaging people via WhatsApp even when sitting beside them, seeing it as more convenient. R1 voiced concerns about social media’s impact on real-world interaction, arguing that it can distract people from being present in conversations. In contrast, R2 expressed a more positive view, noting that features like direct messages on Instagram or TikTok make it easier to stay connected with others. R4 added that social media provides new topics to discuss with friends and family, thereby enriching conversations.

These changes in communication behavior are not unique to this sample of students. Uhls, Ellison, and Subrahmanyam [14] note that adolescents increasingly curate their social image and manage interpersonal boundaries through digital platforms. While this offers control and emotional safety, it may also lead to a gradual decline in direct communication skills and empathy. In university contexts, this manifests in students preferring indirect communication—even in physically co-present situations—which reflects a growing normalization of digital-first interaction styles.

From a sociological perspective, this trend represents a normalization of what McFarland and Ployhart [4] termed the 'digital layer' of social contexts, where individuals operate simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces. The phenomenon demonstrates how students increasingly curate their social interactions, using digital tools to manage emotional exposure, maintain distance, or avoid discomfort. Such adaptations may be functional in the short term, but also raise concerns about diminishing interpersonal depth and empathy in face-to-face communication.

Influence on Perspectives and Opinions

Respondents acknowledged that social media has the power to shape public discourse and influence their own viewpoints, particularly on issues they are emotionally or intellectually invested in. However, most students demonstrated a degree of skepticism and critical filtering in how they processed the information they encountered.

“I always try to consider both sides. Social media’s perspective is not always 100 percent right” (R1, personal communication, June 2025).

“If the content makes logical sense to me, I consider it. Otherwise, I ignore it” (R2, personal communication, June 2025).

“Yes. For example, in the case of Jokowi’s diploma, when there was news that his diploma was fake, it automatically influenced my view and I believed that it was fake. When there is further information that there is evidence of the authenticity of the diploma, I will join the opinion that the diploma is not fake” (R3, personal communication, June 2025).

“Very, very influential on my views, especially about hoax news” (R4, personal communication, 2025).

R1 emphasized the importance of considering both sides before accepting any perspective presented online. R2 stated they only accept content that aligns with logical reasoning and personal interest, especially in subjects like politics or education. R3 provided a concrete example involving a political controversy, describing how their views shifted as they accessed more balanced and verified information. R4 believed that social media strongly affects their opinions, especially regarding hoaxes, and that critical and positive use of the platform can strengthen understanding of news.

Understanding how algorithms influence the content we see on social media is essential to developing critical digital literacy. According to Buckingham [15], algorithm-driven feeds do not simply reflect neutral information flows but instead prioritize certain topics and narratives, often based on user behavior and engagement metrics. This algorithmic curation can shape what users perceive as important, trustworthy, or true. Therefore, individuals—especially students—must be equipped with the ability to question and critically analyze the objectivity and intent behind viral content and trending topics. Such awareness allows them to avoid being misled by emotionally charged or manipulated content and to engage more responsibly with digital information.

This selective processing aligns with Kartini et al.’s [3] concept of 'active audiences'. Users who do not passively absorb content but instead interpret, question, and evaluate it. The findings suggest that while social media holds the potential to influence opinions, students' critical engagement acts as a buffer against misinformation and manipulation. This indicates a promising level of digital literacy and a reflective habit of questioning dominant narratives, rather than merely echoing prevailing trends.

Time Management and Discipline

Contrary to common assumptions about students' inability to manage screen time, the interviewees consistently described proactive strategies to balance academic tasks and social media use. These include setting personal boundaries, scheduling dedicated study times, and consciously using social media as a leisure activity rather than an impulsive habit.

“I finish my tasks first so I can enjoy social media later without guilt” (R1, personal communication, June 2025).

“Creating principles, organising my own time, disciplining myself” (R2, personal communication, June 2025).

“I set aside study time in the morning to avoid distractions” (R3, personal communication, June 2025).

“we can access social media to learn and find entertainment at the same time” (R4, personal communication, June 2025).

The students' reported strategies for organizing study and leisure time highlight a form of self-regulation that extends beyond typical academic behavior—it involves deliberate control over social media use in response to emotional needs. Dreier et al. [16] identify this as a key behavior: adolescents who adjust their social media use based on mood—reducing use when feeling low or increasing it when feeling neutral—demonstrate higher digital self-awareness and emotional agency. Although most participants in their study (13 out of 19) did not actively self-regulate, those who did showed improved mood and attention control over time. Similarly, some students in this study reflected on how they consciously scheduled or reframed digital activity, turning social media into a structured reward rather than a distraction. This suggests that digital literacy extends into behavioral competence—where self-regulation and digital awareness work together to support psychological resilience and academic discipline.

R1 described prioritizing academic work to enjoy guilt-free leisure time on social media, and even recognizing physical exhaustion from excessive screen use. R2 shared their principle of self-discipline, sticking to a schedule to avoid distraction. R3 mentioned allocating study time during early morning hours to stay focused. R4, while not setting strict schedules, believed in the positive integration of social media for both education and entertainment purposes.

These accounts suggest that students are not entirely vulnerable to the addictive design of digital platforms. Rather, they engage in a kind of self-regulation that reflects personal discipline and awareness of digital wellbeing. This challenges the stereotype of the chronically distracted student and instead presents a more balanced picture—one where social media use is integrated into daily life without overtaking it. Such discipline, if encouraged through institutional support, could foster healthier media habits in the academic environment. On the other hand, social media can also be used to find information that can support our learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that social media has a multifaceted influence on students' psychology and behavior, particularly among youth who are active digital users. Emotional content—both uplifting and distressing—can significantly shape mood, trigger overthinking, or serve as motivation. Social comparison is also common, with students measuring their achievements against peers' curated successes, sometimes resulting in insecurity or personal growth. Importantly, the research emphasizes that students are not passive digital consumers; their responses are mediated by their level of digital literacy. Those with higher digital literacy are more capable of regulating their emotional reactions, critically evaluating online information, and managing their time effectively. As communication shifts increasingly toward digital spaces, digital literacy becomes essential not just as a technical skill, but as a form of psychological resilience. Overall, the findings suggest that the psychological impact of social media on youth is deeply intertwined with their ability to navigate and reflect on digital experiences consciously and critically.

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