



Analyzing Communication Behavior and Digital Engagement Patterns Among University Students on Social Media Through the Lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 26-09-2025

Revised 21-10-2025

Accepted 17-11-2025

Keyword:

Communication Behavior,
Digital Engagement, Social
Media, University Students,
Digital Communication

ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has changed the way people communicate, especially among university students. Social media has become one of the most dominant platforms for building social interactions, exchanging information, and supporting academic activities. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study aims to explore in depth the communication behavior and digital engagement patterns of university students across multiple social media platforms. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 undergraduate students from various disciplines at three major universities, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, study background, and frequency of social media use. The research seeks to understand student experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of digital communication on both academic and personal life. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and underlying meanings related to students' engagement motives and communication styles. The findings indicate that social media not only facilitates flexible communication, but also shapes how students manage relationships and academic collaboration in virtual environments. However, the use of social media also presents challenges, such as reduced face-to-face interaction quality and increased potential for distraction. Theoretically, this research extends the Uses and Gratifications framework by contextualizing it within academic digital engagement, while methodologically contributing to the qualitative exploration of online communication dynamics. The study highlights the importance of understanding digital literacy and responsible media consumption to ensure that students can maximize the benefits of digital communication in the academic environment. The results of this research are expected to provide useful insights for students, educators, and future researchers who are interested in studying digital engagement patterns among the young generation in the era of social media.



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INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, social media has become an inseparable part of daily life, especially for university students who are often referred to as digital natives. In Indonesia, the number of internet users is projected to reach 212 million by 2025, marking a significant increase from previous years. This growth further strengthens Indonesia's position as one of the largest digital markets in the world. Social media platforms are no longer used solely for entertainment and interpersonal communication; they have also evolved into spaces for academic discussion, self-expression, identity formation, and community building. The high accessibility and interactive features of platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, and LinkedIn allow students to engage in various forms of communication and participation that were previously unavailable. However, this rapid rise in digital engagement also raises important questions about how students manage their communication behavior and engagement patterns on these platforms — questions that are crucial for understanding their cognitive, social, and emotional development within the context of higher education today.

Previous studies have explored how social media is used, mostly by looking at how often it is accessed and its impact on academic performance, mental well-being, and digital identity. As communication and information technology continue to develop, online media has become easier to access and more efficient, making it a main source of information for the public. Online media doesn't just change how information is delivered, but also how people receive and process that information (Juditha, 2018). Recent works, such as those by Bennett et al. (2022) and Al-Menayes (2021), emphasize that the relationship between digital engagement and communication behavior is far more complex than frequency of use or academic outcomes. These studies argue that contextual factors—such as cultural norms, academic pressures, and institutional digital ecosystems—significantly shape engagement patterns, yet remain underexamined in non-Western contexts.

Despite this progress, the literature still shows notable limitations. First, empirical studies in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, often adopt descriptive rather than analytical perspectives, overlooking how cultural and academic contexts mediate digital engagement. Second, while theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Uses and Gratifications Theory have been employed, few studies have critically tested how these frameworks apply to hybrid academic–social uses of social media among university students. Third, methodological diversity remains limited, with few qualitative inquiries capturing the lived experiences and meaning-making processes behind digital engagement.

Addressing these gaps, this study offers a focused and contextually grounded exploration of how Indonesian university students communicate and engage digitally across multiple platforms. Anchored in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research investigates the psychological and social motivations that drive students' online behavior while highlighting how academic and cultural environments influence these interactions. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study provides a deeper understanding of students' digital engagement as a lived experience rather than a measurable variable.

With platforms offering interactive and participatory features, students are able to fulfill various needs such as self-expression, collaboration, and information sharing. However, this rapid growth in digital engagement presents challenges in balancing academic responsibilities and managing time, while also navigating complex online interactions. Through this lens, the study contributes theoretically by contextualizing established communication theories within a Southeast Asian higher education environment, and practically by offering implications for educators and policymakers aiming to foster responsible and meaningful digital engagement.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the communication behaviors and digital engagement patterns of university students from Universitas Hasanuddin and IPB University on social media. A total of 25 participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) active undergraduate students enrolled in social science or communication-related programs, (2) frequent users of at least two social media platforms (Instagram, X, TikTok, or LinkedIn), and (3) willingness to reflect on their digital communication experiences. The sample ensured gender balance and representation across academic years to capture a wide spectrum of engagement behaviors.

Data collection is done through an online open-ended questionnaire, allowing participants to share personal insights into their communication styles, motivations, and emotional responses. The questionnaire was designed following three thematic domains derived from the Uses and Gratifications framework: (a) motives and purposes of social media use, (b) patterns of interaction and self-presentation, and (c) perceived academic and social impacts. The instrument consisted of 12 open-ended questions that were reviewed by two communication research experts and pilot-tested with five students to assess clarity and content relevance. Feedback from the pilot phase was used to refine question wording and sequencing to enhance reliability and interpretive depth.

To ensure methodological rigor and credibility, several validation strategies were applied. First, triangulation was conducted by comparing responses across institutions and gender groups to identify

consistent patterns. Second, peer debriefing was employed, where two independent researchers reviewed the coding process to minimize subjective bias. Third, member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary themes with five participants to confirm interpretive accuracy.

Data analysis is performed using thematic analysis, where recurring ideas are identified and grouped to uncover patterns in the students' communication behaviors and digital engagement on social media. The six-step procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the analysis: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme generation, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report production. NVivo 12 software was used to assist in organizing and coding qualitative data.

In addition, the researchers also conducted a literature review to enrich the theoretical understanding and support the data analysis process by referring to relevant previous studies. In line with this, the research is also framed within a phenomenological perspective, focusing on exploring the meaning behind students' lived experiences of digital communication. Phenomenological research aims to uncover the essence of a phenomenon through participants' consciousness and personal narratives. According to Creswell (1998), this approach emphasizes *epoche*, where the researcher suspends prior assumptions to understand the phenomenon through the participants' own descriptions. This design choice enhances replicability and credibility by ensuring transparency in participant selection, instrument construction, and analytic validation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire responses from university students at IPB and Unhas revealed various insights regarding their use of social media in academic and personal contexts. The respondents provided feedback on their social media habits, content preferences, and the impact on their academic performance.

1. **Social Media Usage:** Respondents commonly use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp. For academic purposes, Google is widely used for research, while social media platforms serve both entertainment and educational roles. Students mentioned using social media for personal updates, communication, and sometimes for academic purposes such as watching tutorials or seeking study resources.
2. **Content Preferences:** The majority of respondents engage with content related to entertainment, personal updates, and news. Academic-related content, such as learning videos and tutorials, was also frequently consumed, although it was not the dominant type of content. Other interests include food blogs, motivational content, and occasional academic-related updates.
3. **Impact on Academic Life:** The majority of students reported that social media had a neutral impact on their academic life. While it provides easy access to academic resources and learning materials, it can also lead to distractions. Respondents highlighted the potential for both positive and negative effects: social media can aid in learning, but excessive usage, especially of entertainment content, can lead to procrastination.
4. **Social Media in Communication:** Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Zoom, played a significant role in communication with friends and lecturers. They facilitated group discussions, task coordination, and staying updated with academic schedules. However, the use of social media for communication also introduced challenges, such as the potential for misunderstandings and identity crises when mimicking social media personalities.
5. **Advantages and Disadvantages for Academic Purposes:** Respondents identified clear advantages of using social media for academic purposes. Social media provides easy access to information, helps with time management, and aids in finding academic resources. However, respondents also noted the disadvantages, such as the risk of distractions and the potential spread of unreliable information.

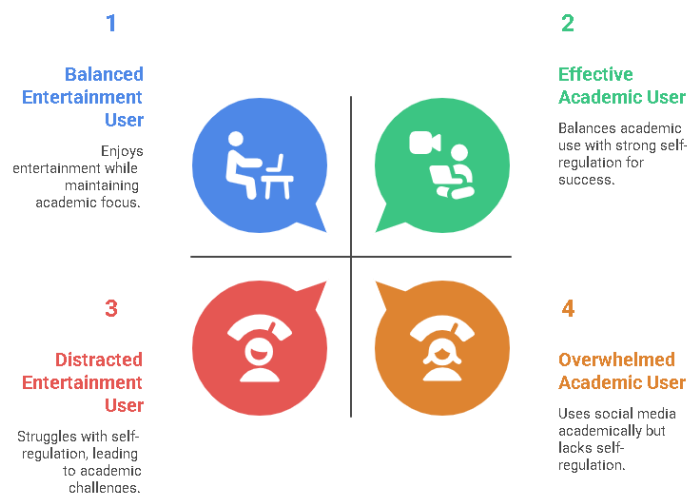
The findings from the questionnaire suggest that social media plays a dual role in the academic lives of university students. On one hand, it offers opportunities for academic enrichment through easy access to learning materials, academic communities, and discussion platforms. For instance, students reported using YouTube for educational videos and WhatsApp for group discussions, which aligns with the positive impact of social media highlighted in previous studies (Santoveña-Casal, 2019). Social

media platforms like TikTok and Instagram also serve as sources of motivation, self-branding, and informal learning, contributing positively to students' personal and academic development (Alhumaid et al., 2023).

However, the responses also reveal that social media can be a significant source of distraction. Several students mentioned that they often found themselves spending time on entertainment-related content, which led to procrastination and time mismanagement. This observation is supported by recent findings from Adjei and Asante (2020), which emphasized that excessive use of social media, especially for non-academic purposes, can negatively affect academic focus and performance.

The neutral impact of social media on academic performance, as reported by many respondents, suggests that its effects are highly dependent on the individual's ability to self-regulate and manage time effectively. Students who use social media for academic purposes, such as searching for academic articles, attending online lectures, and engaging with educational content, experienced more positive outcomes. On the other hand, those who used it primarily for entertainment, or spent excessive time scrolling through non-academic content, faced challenges in managing their academic responsibilities.

Social Media Use and Academic Performance



The results also highlight the importance of social media in maintaining communication with lecturers and peers, especially in the context of online learning. Platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom have become integral to academic interactions, providing a space for students to exchange information and stay updated on class schedules and assignments. This trend is consistent with the increasing reliance on digital communication tools in modern education (Manca, 2020).

In conclusion, the findings from this study suggest that while social media can enhance academic engagement by providing access to valuable resources and facilitating communication, its potential for distraction cannot be overlooked. The challenge lies in finding a balance between using social media as an academic tool and preventing it from hindering academic productivity. Further research could explore the specific strategies students use to manage their social media usage and its impact on academic success.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research confirm that social media holds a dual function in the academic and personal lives of university students. On one side, social media provides access to educational resources, facilitates academic communication, and encourages self-development through various content. However, its role as a distraction remains undeniable, especially when students are drawn into entertainment content, which often leads to procrastination and reduced academic focus. The results also emphasize that the impact of social media largely depends on how students manage their time and intentions when engaging with these platforms. Students who can balance academic and personal usage

tend to experience more positive outcomes, while those who lack self-regulation are more vulnerable to the negative effects.

Beyond these general observations, this study offers a unique contribution by contextualizing the Uses and Gratifications Theory within the lived experiences of Indonesian university students—an underexplored demographic in current digital communication research. The qualitative insights highlight culturally specific engagement patterns that extend existing theoretical models by emphasizing communal values, academic collaboration, and social belonging as key motivators in digital behavior. From a practical standpoint, the findings provide actionable implications for higher education institutions. Universities can integrate digital literacy programs that not only teach responsible online communication but also promote reflective and purpose-driven engagement on social media. Educators may design assignments or learning activities that harness social media's interactive potential while mitigating its distractive aspects. Policymakers in the education sector should also consider developing institutional guidelines that balance digital accessibility with students' mental well-being.

Despite its strengths, this study acknowledges several limitations. The reliance on self-reported data through open-ended questionnaires may restrict the depth of observation compared to in-person interviews. Additionally, the sample is limited to two Indonesian universities, which constrains the generalizability of the findings across broader academic and cultural settings. Future research should expand participant diversity, employ longitudinal designs, and explore comparative analyses across regions or disciplines to enhance the robustness of theoretical and practical implications. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of digital communication scholarship by offering a nuanced understanding of how university students navigate social media as both a tool for academic empowerment and a source of distraction, underscoring the importance of digital literacy and intentional engagement in higher education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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