



## **Building Social Networks in the Digital Era: The Subjective Experience of Students' Experiences in Building Relationships through Social Media**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Interpersonal relationships in the digital age are increasingly mediated by social media platforms, influencing how individuals connect and engage. Existing research has highlighted social media's role in communication, but limited attention has been given to students' subjective experiences in forming relationships online. This study explores university students' lived experiences in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships through social media. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews with 10 university students revealed key themes: the superficiality of digital connections, challenges in maintaining emotional closeness, and contrasts between online and face-to-face relationships. These findings illuminate the complexities of virtual communication and its impact on relational dynamics. Practical implications suggest fostering digital literacy and strategies for nurturing meaningful connections in online spaces, particularly within academic contexts.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The increasing role of social media in shaping interpersonal relationships has become a significant research focus, particularly within the context of university students (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). Social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok have revolutionized communication, enabling individuals to connect beyond physical boundaries (Ali-Saleh et al., 2022). However, while these platforms facilitate frequent interactions, questions remain about the quality and depth of relationships formed online. Current studies predominantly examine the functional aspects of social media, such as its impact on accessibility and frequency of communication, but fewer explore its emotional and relational complexities. For university students, this gap is especially critical, as they often navigate the challenges of distinguishing authentic connections from superficial, virtual engagements in their developmental years. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the subjective, lived experiences of students in building and maintaining relationships through social media, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how digital interactions shape modern social bonds.

While prior research highlights the influence of social media on mental health and communication patterns (Almela-Baeza et al., 2021), the findings are often mixed, with some studies emphasizing enhanced connectivity (Alnasser et al., 2020) and others reporting feelings of isolation and emotional dissatisfaction. These contradictions underscore the need for research that delves deeper into individuals' subjective experiences to understand the emotional implications of digital relationships more comprehensively. Quantitative approaches, though valuable for identifying usage trends and broad impacts, frequently overlook the nuanced, personal experiences that define how users perceive their digital interactions. This study seeks to fill this critical gap through a

phenomenological approach, prioritizing the exploration of how university students perceive and emotionally navigate their online connections.

The importance of addressing this gap is further reinforced by the increasing ubiquity of social media in daily life, which amplifies its impact on students' emotional well-being and social dynamics (Chitra et al., 2022). While frameworks such as social capital and networked individualism have provided useful insights into social media's role in connectivity, they fall short of capturing the subjective realities of students' experiences in digital spaces. This study moves beyond these frameworks by employing qualitative methodologies to uncover the depth of emotional and relational experiences unique to this demographic.

In response to these challenges, this research contributes to the growing literature by focusing on the lived experiences of university students in building and maintaining relationships through social media. It employs a phenomenological approach to capture the emotional and relational nuances of digital interactions, providing insights into the authenticity and depth of these relationships. By doing so, this study not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers practical implications for fostering healthier digital interactions, particularly within academic and developmental contexts.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of university students in building interpersonal relationships through social media (Jameel dkk., 2019). The phenomenological design was chosen due to its ability to provide deep insights into the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attach to their social interactions in the digital environment. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding phenomena as they are experienced by participants, offering a rich, detailed account of how individuals perceive and make sense of their social worlds.

The primary focus of phenomenological research is on the meanings participants assign to their experiences, rather than on the quantification or measurement of variables. This approach is particularly relevant for this study, which seeks to investigate how students navigate the complexities of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships via social media platforms. Through a phenomenological lens, this research aims to reveal the essence of students' social media experiences and how these experiences influence their emotional well-being and social connections. To ensure rigor and alignment with the research objectives, a pilot interview was conducted with two participants to test and refine the interview guide. Feedback from these interviews was used to adjust the phrasing and sequencing of questions, ensuring clarity and depth during data collection.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation—building relationships through social media (Kahraman dkk., 2020). The inclusion criteria required participants to be university students aged between 18 and 24 years, actively using at least two social media platforms, and having substantial experience in forming interpersonal relationships through these digital channels, both in academic and social contexts.

A total of 10 participants were involved in the study, representing a diverse range of academic disciplines within a public university in Jakarta. The group consisted of 5 male and 5 female students, with an average age of 21 years. Participants were not selected based on specific social media habits but rather on their active use and experience with maintaining relationships through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. The exclusion criteria included students who were not active on social media or had limited interaction in online spaces. Demographic information was collected to contextualize the findings and explore any potential variations in the experiences of students based on their social media usage patterns. Data saturation was determined when no new themes emerged after

the eighth interview. The final two interviews were used to confirm the stability and consistency of identified themes, ensuring comprehensive coverage of participants' experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet, comfortable setting to ensure participants felt at ease sharing their thoughts. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, narrative responses about the participants' use of social media in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The questions explored topics such as the participants' perceptions of online relationships, the emotional impact of social media interactions, and the differences between virtual and face-to-face communication.

Additionally, informal observations were conducted in both physical and digital environments to complement the interview data. Observations in digital spaces focused on participants' activity in social media groups (e.g., WhatsApp class groups) and their engagement with posts or interactions on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and the data were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a key method in phenomenological research that identifies and interprets recurring themes or patterns within the data. The analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with the transcription of interview data and initial immersion in the text. Next, meaningful segments were identified and coded, followed by the grouping of codes into broader themes. Each theme was refined through multiple stages of analysis, ensuring that the final themes authentically represented the participants' lived experiences.

The analysis aimed to capture the essence of the participants' perceptions and experiences with social media, with particular attention paid to the emotional and relational aspects of their interactions. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of both explicit and implicit meanings embedded in the participants' narratives, which were then interpreted in relation to the research questions. NVivo software was used to assist with the organization and coding of data, but the analysis remained primarily qualitative and interpretative.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines for conducting research with human participants. All participants provided informed consent before participation, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research process, and participants' identities were protected by assigning pseudonyms in all written records. Confidentiality of all data was strictly upheld, with access to the data restricted to the research team only. All data were stored securely and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

The study adhered to ethical standards in research, including respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and the use of data solely for research purposes. Participants were also provided with debriefing information at the end of the study, ensuring that they understood the objectives and outcomes of the research.

## **RESULTS**

### **Social Media as a Complement to Face-to-Face Interactions**

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is the perception of social media as a supplementary tool for maintaining relationships, rather than a replacement for face-to-face communication. Many participants expressed the view that while social media facilitated contact and kept connections active, it could not replicate the depth and authenticity of in-person conversations.

One participant emphasized this distinction, stating, "Social media is great for staying updated, but it's not where I go to talk about something personal or deep." (P3) Another participant explained:

"Social media is more for just keeping in touch. It's good for reminding someone you exist, but it can't replace personal face-to-face conversations where you really connect." (P4)

This sentiment was echoed across interviews, suggesting that digital interactions were often perceived as insufficient in providing the emotional closeness that face-to-face encounters could offer. Although students acknowledged the convenience of social media, they were aware of its limitations in fostering meaningful, deeper relational exchanges.

### **Shallow Depth of Relationships Online**

A second key theme that emerged was the perceived shallowness of online relationships. Participants frequently described interactions on platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok as being more superficial compared to those in face-to-face settings. As one participant articulated:

"Sometimes, it's just likes and comments. There's no real conversation, no deep discussion. It's like we're all just checking off boxes." (P2)

The reliance on short comments, reactions, and casual updates was seen as inhibiting more profound interpersonal connections. The rapid and often transactional nature of online communication was felt to limit opportunities for participants to engage in meaningful dialogue, leading to a sense of emotional distance despite regular contact.

### **Emotional Impact of Social Media**

Participants noted both positive and negative emotional impacts resulting from their social media interactions. On one hand, receiving likes and positive feedback on posts seemed to boost their self-esteem, as expressed by one participant:

"When I post something and get a lot of likes, it makes me feel confident. It's like validation, even though it's just from an image or status update." (P5)

However, social media also introduced feelings of inadequacy or anxiety, particularly when participants compared their lives to those of their peers. For example, several students revealed that seeing their friends' social media posts, such as vacation pictures or accomplishments, often led to feelings of jealousy or sadness:

"Sometimes, when I see my friends going on trips or doing something fun, I feel like I'm missing out. It makes me feel a bit lonely." (P6)

This emotional duality—feeling both uplifted and stressed by social media—was a recurring theme across interviews, suggesting a complex relationship with the emotional effects of digital social interactions.

### **The Role of Social Media in Psychological Well-Being**

Lastly, the data highlighted the significant role of social media in the psychological well-being of students. While some participants acknowledged that social media helped them feel connected to others, especially in times of physical or emotional isolation, others reported that online interactions could exacerbate feelings of loneliness or stress. One participant shared:

"Even though I have lots of friends on social media, sometimes I feel like I'm alone. You can't really feel someone's presence through a screen. I don't think social media can replace real-life support." (P9)

For some, the virtual nature of their connections created a sense of emotional detachment, leading to increased anxiety, particularly in academic contexts. Participants mentioned that during stressful periods, like exams, the lack of genuine support from online connections sometimes heightened their feelings of isolation.

The findings of this study reveal that while social media offers valuable opportunities for maintaining and extending social networks, it also introduces significant challenges related to the

depth of interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being. The duality of social media's impact on students' emotional lives—both positive and negative—points to the complexity of digital communication in shaping social experiences. Students clearly navigate a tension between convenience and superficiality, suggesting that while social media is an essential tool for social connectivity, it cannot fully substitute for the emotional depth and authenticity found in face-to-face interactions.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal the nuanced and complex nature of university students' experiences in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships through social media (Karimian dkk., 2024). The analysis uncovered that, while social media offers a convenient platform for staying connected, students often perceive these online interactions as less authentic and emotionally fulfilling compared to face-to-face relationships (Lai dkk., 2023). This disconnect, however, does not mean that online relationships lack value; rather, students view them as complementary to their offline social networks, with distinct emotional and social dynamics.

The primary contribution of this study is its ability to answer the central research questions by exploring how students subjectively experience their social media relationships (Li & Meng, 2023). Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on general patterns of usage or the negative psychological outcomes of social media, this research highlights the deeper emotional responses students have to digital interactions, and how these responses shape their understanding of social connection. Through the lens of phenomenology, the study demonstrates that while social media offers opportunities for connection, it also presents challenges in creating relationships that are perceived as truly meaningful or authentic. Students express ambivalence, navigating between the benefits of accessibility and the limitations of shallow interactions (Myers & Cowie, 2019). These findings provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how students emotionally engage with their digital networks and the implications these relationships have for their well-being.

When compared with existing literature, these findings align with the works of Turkle (2011) and Ellison et al. (2007), which suggest that social media offers a paradoxical mix of enhanced connectivity and emotional distance. However, while Turkle discusses the loneliness and isolation that can stem from online interactions, this study provides a more balanced view, recognizing that social media plays an important role in maintaining connections, especially for students who may feel geographically or socially distant from their peers. The findings also expand on the notion of "networked individualism" (Wellman, 2001), which describes how people create personalized networks based on their individual needs. Students in this study report that while they engage in digital interactions frequently, these relationships often lack the depth that face-to-face interactions can provide (Raza dkk., 2020). This resonates with the concept of "weak ties" in social network theory, where online relationships are often viewed as less emotionally connected, yet still valuable for maintaining broad social networks. The current study contributes to this body of work by emphasizing the emotional dimensions of digital relationships and the subjective meanings students attribute to them, which have been less explored in the literature.

### **Explanation of the Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study provide important insights into how students perceive and interpret their interpersonal relationships through social media (Sathar dkk., 2020). From a social perspective, the findings indicate that while social media can expand social networks, the relationships formed are often perceived as less profound, limiting the emotional connection between individuals. The practical implications of these findings can be used to design interventions that support the psychological well-being of students, such as programs that help them manage their social media usage and build more meaningful relationships (Svicher dkk., 2021). In a cultural and social context, these findings reflect how the younger generation navigates the digital world, facing challenges in maintaining the depth of interpersonal relationships in an ecosystem that increasingly relies on virtual communication. From a professional standpoint, these findings provide a better understanding for educators and counselors in higher education to design activities that encourage more face-to-face interactions, while still

appreciating the convenience offered by social media. Overall, this study serves as a bridge to understanding the complexities of social relationships in the digital world within the context of students, who are becoming more connected through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok.

### **Study Limitations**

Although the findings of this research offer in-depth insights into the experiences of students, there are several limitations to consider. One of them is the limited number of participants, as the study focused only on 10 students from a single university in Jakarta. While the data collected is quite detailed, the results may not be fully generalizable to the entire student population in Indonesia or abroad. Additionally, the study employed a semi-structured interview approach, which, while providing rich subjective understanding, is still dependent on how students convey their experiences, which may be influenced by factors such as selective memory or the desire to provide socially desirable answers. Lastly, this study focused on the emotional and relational aspects connected to social media, thus not considering in-depth external factors that may influence students' social interactions, such as economic conditions, race, or cultural backgrounds that could impact how they use social media.

### **Prospective Statement for Future Research**

The findings of this study open up avenues for further research exploring the role of social media in a broader social context, such as how cultural and social differences affect how students interact digitally (Tkáčová dkk., 2021). Future research could expand the sample to include a variety of universities with more diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and investigate the differences in experiences between older and younger students, or between students from different academic programs. Furthermore, in-depth studies on the role of gender or cultural identity in building online relationships could provide a more complex understanding of the dynamics of digital relationships. In addition, the use of more advanced technologies, such as AI-based data analysis to assess patterns in digital communication, could complement these findings and provide a broader dimension to the study of social relationships in the digital era. Further research could also examine the long-term impact of social media usage on students' psychological well-being and explore ways to improve the quality of their online interactions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how university students experience and navigate interpersonal relationships through social media, focusing on the subjective meanings they attach to these digital interactions. The findings revealed that while social media facilitates connection, the relationships formed are often perceived as less deep and emotionally fulfilling compared to face-to-face interactions. Despite the convenience of maintaining online contact, many students reported challenges in fostering meaningful connections and felt that online relationships were more superficial. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and emotional dynamics of digital communication, addressing gaps in previous research on the quality of relationships formed through social media. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. For students, it is essential to develop a balanced approach to social media use, emphasizing the importance of supplementing online interactions with meaningful face-to-face connections. Workshops or awareness campaigns could help students recognize the limitations of digital relationships and equip them with strategies to foster deeper, more authentic interactions.

Educators and university counselors could play a pivotal role by integrating digital literacy and emotional resilience training into the curriculum. These programs should focus on helping students manage the emotional impacts of social media, such as feelings of inadequacy or isolation, and promote the development of interpersonal skills that can enhance both online and offline relationships.

For policymakers, the study highlights the need to promote responsible social media use through public education initiatives and guidelines that encourage healthy digital practices. Policies aimed at regulating social media platforms to ensure user well-being—such as reducing addictive features or promoting digital detox campaigns—could also be beneficial in addressing some of the challenges identified in this research. Future research could explore the impact of different social media platforms on relational depth, or examine the role of cultural and demographic factors in shaping students' online experiences. Furthermore, expanding this research to include a broader sample could provide valuable insights into the diversity of experiences across different academic and social contexts.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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