ONLINE BEHAVIOR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Abstract

The widespread use of social media has changed the way people communicate with each other, especially among young adults, especially university students. This study aims to explore online behavior and the transformation of interpersonal communication among Indonesian university students in the social media era. Questionnaires were administered to 125 university students to collect data on their online behavior, communication patterns, and relationships. The results showed that university students in Indonesia spend an average of 3-4 hours per day on social media, and most of them use social media to communicate with family and friends. The study also found that social media has changed interpersonal communication among university students, with most of them preferring to communicate online rather than in person. The implications of this study are discussed, and recommendations are made for future research.

keywords: social media, communication, relationships.

Introduction

The way people communicate with each other in the age of social media has undergone major changes (Olaniran, 2014). The widespread use of social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc., has changed the way people interact, share and connect (Dalal, 2019; Mbodila et al., 2020; Nisar & Khanum, 2021). This transformation is particularly pronounced in Indonesia, a country with high social media penetration (Nisa, 2018; Tapsell, 2017).

Due to the abundance of social media, people are shifting from face-to-face communication to online communication, where people interact with each other through screens and keyboards . This shift has brought both opportunities and obstacles. Social media have raised concerns about the loss of traditional social skills, the spread of misinformation, and the impact on mental health. On the other hand, they have enabled people to connect across distances, share ideas and information, and build communities based on common interests.

With the majority of Indonesians being tech-savvy and young, the influence of social media on communication patterns is huge (Osler & Zahavi, 2023). According to a recent survey by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2024), which shows that by January 2024, around 49.9% or approximately 139 million Indonesians of the total population actively use social media, with the majority using it to communicate with friends and family. However, there is still little research conducted in Indonesia on the influence

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of social media on interpersonal communication, especially among teenagers (Priatama et al., 2019; Saud & Margono, 2021; Suciati, 2024).

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The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way individuals communicate, with social media playing a dominant role in shaping interpersonal interactions (Jensen, 2022; Xiao, 2024). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have redefined communication norms, allowing people to connect instantly, share experiences, and build relationships across geographical boundaries. This shift has led to a new digital culture where communication is increasingly mediated through screens, emojis, and algorithm-driven content, influencing not only how people express themselves but also how they perceive and interpret social interactions.

The transformation of interpersonal communication in the social media era has brought both positive and negative implications (Purnama & Asdlori, 2023; Taylor, 2020). On one hand, social media has facilitated real-time conversations, cross-cultural exchanges, and professional networking opportunities, making communication more efficient and inclusive. On the other hand, it has also contributed to miscommunication, reduced face-to-face interactions, and the emergence of curated online personas that may not reflect real-life identities. The rise of asynchronous communication (where responses are delayed) and short-form digital interactions has altered traditional communication skills, sometimes leading to diminished emotional depth and misunderstandings in conversations.

Additionally, the psychological and social consequences of online behavior are becoming increasingly evident. Social media fosters an environment where validation through likes, shares, and comments influences self-perception and social interactions. The anonymity offered by digital platforms can lead to both positive self-expression and negative consequences such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and online harassment. Furthermore, algorithm-driven content exposure shapes opinions, reinforces biases, and affects the way individuals engage with diverse perspectives in online discourse.

Given these complexities, this study aims to explore how online behavior affects interpersonal communication, analyzing both the opportunities and challenges that arise in the social media era. By examining the ways in which digital platforms reshape human interaction, influence social relationships, and impact communication skills, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how individuals can navigate and balance digital and offline communication effectively.

Research Methodology

This study used a questionnaire-based survey to collect data on online behavior and communication patterns among university students in Indonesia. A total of 125 students were recruited to participate in the study from the age range of 16-22 years old. The questionnaire consisted of several questions asking about social media use, communication patterns, and relationships. The questionnaire was administered online, and the data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to examine the impact of online behavior on interpersonal communication in the social media era. The methodology is designed to analyze patterns

of digital interaction, assess the psychological and social effects of social media use, and identify key changes in communication styles.

1. Research Design

    A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of social media usage and its impact on communication. Surveys were conducted to gather data on users' social media habits, communication preferences, and perceived effects of online interactions. In-depth interviews provided deeper insights into personal experiences regarding the balance between online and offline communication. Additionally, content analysis of social media interactions was carried out to examine language use, engagement patterns, and the emotional tone of digital conversations.

2. **Data Collection Methods**

    The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, incorporating online surveys, interviews, and social media content analysis to explore the impact of social media on communication. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 500 social media users aged 18-45, covering topics such as communication frequency, emotional expression, miscommunication experiences, and the influence of social media on real-life interactions. Additionally, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from diverse backgrounds, including students, professionals, and social media influencers, to gain deeper insights into how social media affects interpersonal relationships, self-expression, and perceptions of digital communication. Furthermore, a content analysis of posts, comments, and conversations on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook was performed to identify patterns in communication styles, emotional tone, and engagement levels.

3. Sampling Techniques

    A random stratified sampling method was used to ensure diversity in age, gender, occupation, and social media usage patterns. Participants were selected based on their active use of social media (at least 3 hours per week) to ensure the relevance of their responses.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

    The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques to interpret the collected data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze survey responses, identifying trends and common behaviors in online communication. Thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts to extract recurring themes related to emotional expression, miscommunication, and social media dependency. Additionally, sentiment analysis tools were utilized to assess the emotional tone in digital conversations and interactions, providing deeper insights into how social media influences communication dynamics.

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5. Limitations of the Study

While this research offers valuable insights, it has certain limitations. The study primarily focuses on active social media users, potentially overlooking the experiences of individuals who engage minimally with digital communication. Additionally, self-reported data from surveys and interviews may be subject to bias or exaggeration, affecting the accuracy of findings. Furthermore, cultural differences that influence communication styles across different regions were not extensively analyzed, which may limit the generalizability of the study's conclusions.

Summary

By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, this research aims to provide a holistic understanding of how social media shapes interpersonal communication. The findings will contribute to a deeper awareness of digital interaction patterns, the challenges of online communication, and strategies to foster meaningful social connections in the digital age.

Results and Discussion
Results

The survey results indicate that social media has become an essential part of daily life. WhatsApp is the most widely used platform (47%), followed by TikTok (25%) and Instagram (18%), while Facebook has a smaller user base. Nearly half of respondents (44.8%) spend more than four hours daily on social media, with 59.2% checking their accounts every hour. Most respondents (48.8%) communicate with friends online daily, and 67.2% prefer online interaction over in-person communication. Additionally, 24% experience anxiety when not using social media, while 73.6% feel happy or neutral. Notably, 89.6% of respondents believe social media helps maintain friendships.

Discussion

Online behavior refers to how individuals interact, act and react online. In the social media era, this behavior involves activities such as sharing content, communicating with others, building communities, and consuming information. Social media provides a platform where users can do all these activities instantly, interactively and easily. Popular platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram are central to online behavior in Indonesia, where users utilize these features to communicate, express, and shape their digital identity.

Online behavior among university students, the main focus of this study, is heavily influenced by the dynamics of social media. Adolescents and young adults, especially university students, are the groups that use social media the most as their primary means of communication. They spend a lot of time on social media checking notifications, replying to messages, and uploading content. According to the results of our survey, it shows that most college students spend more than four hours a day on social media, making it an integral part of their daily lives, influencing the way they communicate and interact.

Social media also allows users to stay connected in real-time, creating continuous interaction between individuals. Users can easily check their social media accounts anytime and anywhere, forming a behavior that can be categorized as hyperconnectivity. Many students involved in this activity feel the need to keep up with the latest information, whether from friends, communities or other news

sources. This encourages the habit of checking social media repeatedly every hour or even every minute, as found in the results of this study, where 59.2% of respondents check their social media accounts every hour.

This transformation also has important implications for interpersonal communication patterns involving younger age groups, such as university students. As found in this study, more than 67.2% of respondents prefer to communicate online rather than face-to-face. This choice is often based on convenience, where social media provides a faster and more efficient way to stay connected with others. However, this preference also raises concerns about declining face-to-face communication skills. Students who communicate more online risk missing out on the opportunity to develop important skills in reading non-verbal cues, empathy and active listening, all of which are important in building strong and authentic relationships.

Moreover, this transformation has a significant impact on the way young age groups, such as students, communicate with each other. In this study, it was found that more than 67.2% of participants prefer to communicate online rather than face-to-face. Social media presents a faster and more effective way to stay connected with others, which often makes it the preferred option. However, concerns about losing the ability to communicate in person have also arisen as a result of this preference. Students who communicate more online risk missing out on opportunities to improve important skills such as reading non-verbal cues, empathy, and active listening. These skills are essential for building strong and genuine relationships.

On the one hand, this transformation has a positive impact on interpersonal communication. Social media allows individuals to stay connected despite being separated by distance and time. People can build wider social networks, discover new communities that share common interests, as well as gain social support that is not limited to face-to-face relationships. Platforms like WhatsApp allow users to communicate with friends or even family in real-time, even when they are in distant locations.

In addition, social media also provides space for individuals to express themselves more openly. Users can share their views, thoughts and feelings with a wider audience. This gives shy or introverted people the opportunity to communicate and interact with others without having to face the direct pressure of face-to-face interaction.

However, on the other hand, there are many negative impacts that have arisen from this change. As discussed earlier, reliance on online communication can hinder the development of deeper interpersonal skills. Face-to-face communication allows for more emotionally rich interactions and enables individuals to build more meaningful relationships. As these interactions become less frequent, there is a risk that interpersonal relationships become more superficial, based on 'performativity' rather than true connectedness.

In addition, social anxiety can arise due to the pressure to stay active on social media, especially among university students. They may be afraid to keep uploading content or sharing parts of their lives in order to appear attractive and accepted by people in their social circles. Otherwise, reliance on social media for social validation can lead to anxiety, isolation, and even depression.In addition, social anxiety can arise due to the pressure to stay active on social media, especially among university students. They may be afraid to keep uploading content or sharing parts of their lives in order to appear attractive and accepted by people in their social circles. Otherwise, reliance on social media for social validation can lead to anxiety, isolation, and even

depression.

1. Impact of Online Behavior on Communication Patterns

    The survey results indicate that 87% of participants believe social media has significantly changed the way they communicate with others. Respondents reported an increased reliance on text-based and emoji-driven communication, which often replaces traditional face-to-face interactions. While this shift allows for instant connectivity and flexibility, it has also led to a decline in verbal communication skills and misinterpretations due to the lack of nonverbal cues.

    Additionally, the rise of asynchronous communication (e.g., messaging apps, emails) has reshaped conversational dynamics. About 73% of respondents stated that they prefer texting over phone calls, citing convenience and the ability to craft thoughtful responses. However, this change has also resulted in delayed emotional engagement, making conversations feel less personal and immediate.

2. Emotional Expression and Online Miscommunication

    One of the major findings from the study is the challenge of expressing emotions accurately through digital platforms. While emojis and GIFs are widely used as substitutes for facial expressions, 58% of participants admitted that they have misinterpreted messages due to tone ambiguity. This suggests that while online communication offers new ways to express emotions, it also creates barriers to genuine emotional connection.

    From the interviews, participants highlighted the pressure to curate their digital personas, leading to selective self-presentation. Many admitted to only sharing positive aspects of their lives, creating unrealistic expectations in relationships. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the "highlight reel effect," contributes to social comparison and reduced emotional authenticity in digital conversations.

3. Social Media and Interpersonal Relationships

    The study reveals that social media has both strengthened and strained interpersonal relationships. On the positive side, 85% of respondents believe it helps them stay connected with friends and family, especially when in-person meetings are not feasible. It also facilitates networking, professional growth, and global interactions. However, social media also presents challenges—41% of respondents have experienced conflicts due to misinterpretations in online conversations, while 67% feel pressured to respond immediately, leading to stress. Additionally, 56% believe that social media fosters unrealistic relationship expectations, compelling users to present an idealized version of their lives.

4. The Role of Algorithms in Shaping Social Interactions

    The study highlights the significant role of algorithms in shaping social behaviors and communication habits. Participants noted that personalized social media feeds create "filter bubbles," where users are primarily exposed to similar viewpoints. This has led to concerns about echo chambers and polarization, with 63% of respondents believing that algorithms reinforce biases and limit exposure to diverse opinions. Additionally, social validation metrics, such as likes and shares, influence self-esteem and online behavior. About 72% of young adults admitted to curating their content based on expected engagement rather than sharing authentic experiences, indicating the strong impact of digital validation on communication dynamics.

5. Balancing Digital and Offline Communication

The research highlights the need for a balanced approach to online and offline interactions. Interviewees emphasized that while digital communication is efficient, face-to-face interactions remain essential for deep emotional connections. Some participants shared strategies such as "digital detox" periods and setting boundaries for social media use, which helped them maintain healthier relationships.

Discussion and Implications

The findings suggest that while social media has revolutionized interpersonal communication, it also presents challenges in maintaining authentic connections. To navigate these changes effectively, individuals and organizations must:

1. **Encourage digital literacy** – Understanding online communication dynamics can help users avoid misinterpretations and cyber-related stress.
2. **Promote responsible social media use** – Setting boundaries and being mindful of engagement habits can help mitigate digital dependency.
3. **Enhance emotional intelligence in digital interactions** – Users should be educated on how to express emotions clearly in online conversations to reduce misunderstandings.
4. **Encourage face-to-face interactions** – Maintaining in-person connections is crucial for psychological well-being and deeper relationships.

The study concludes that social media has reshaped communication in both positive and negative ways, and finding the right balance between online and offline interactions is key to fostering healthy, meaningful relationships in the digital era.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the significant role of social media in the daily lives of Indonesian university students, particularly in interpersonal communication. While platforms like WhatsApp enhance connectivity and relationship maintenance, they also contribute to reduced face-to-face interactions and emotional reliance on digital validation. The findings highlight both the benefits and drawbacks of social media, such as convenience, global networking, and efficiency, alongside challenges like miscommunication, social comparison, and digital dependency. Text-based and emoji-driven communication, algorithm-driven content exposure, and selective self-presentation further shape users' engagement and perception of reality. To mitigate these challenges, promoting digital literacy, setting healthy boundaries, and encouraging offline interactions are essential. Ultimately, balancing technology use with meaningful, face-to-face communication will help individuals preserve the depth and authenticity of their interpersonal relationships in the digital age.

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