

Exploring Online Student Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Social Media Usage, Motivations, and Barriers

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ABSTRAK

Transisi ke pembelajaran daring telah mengubah cara mahasiswa membangun dan memelihara hubungan, menjadikan media sosial sebagai alat penting untuk interaksi antar teman sebaya. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana mahasiswa membentuk hubungan daring, motivasi mereka, dan tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam komunikasi digital. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan mahasiswa S1 yang mengandalkan media sosial untuk keterlibatan akademis dan sosial. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa terutama menggunakan WhatsApp untuk komunikasi, dengan dukungan akademis sebagai pendorong awal untuk hubungan. Seiring waktu, hubungan ini berkembang melalui pengalaman bersama, interaksi timbal balik, dan dukungan emosional. Namun, tantangan seperti salah tafsir pesan, kurangnya isyarat non-verbal, dan perbedaan budaya menghadirkan hambatan bagi interaksi daring yang efektif. Studi ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya mengintegrasikan peluang keterlibatan sosial terstruktur dalam lingkungan pembelajaran daring dan menyoroti perlunya pendekatan hibrida yang menyeimbangkan interaksi digital dan tatap muka. Wawasan ini memberikan implikasi berharga bagi pendidik, universitas, dan platform pembelajaran digital dalam membina konektivitas dan kesejahteraan mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: Media Sosial, Hubungan Daring, Komunikasi Digital, Interaksi dengan Teman Sebaya, Pembelajaran Daring

ABSTRACT

The transition to online learning has reshaped how students build and maintain relationships, making social media an essential tool for peer interaction. This study examines how students form online relationships, their motivations, and the challenges they face in digital communication. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students who relied on social media for academic and social engagement. The findings reveal that students primarily use WhatsApp for communication, with academic support serving as the initial driver for connection. Over time, these relationships evolve through shared

experiences, reciprocal interactions, and emotional support. However, challenges such as misinterpretation of messages, lack of non-verbal cues, and cultural differences present barriers to effective online interactions. The study underscores the importance of integrating structured social engagement opportunities within online learning environments and highlights the need for a hybrid approach that balances digital and face-to-face interactions. These insights provide valuable implications for educators, universities, and digital learning platforms in fostering student connectivity and well-being.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Relationships, Digital Communication, Peer Interaction, Online Learning

A. INTRODUCTION

Building social relationships is an essential aspect of students' academic and personal development. Social interactions contribute to students' emotional well-being, cognitive growth, and collaborative learning experiences (Ferrer & Fugate, 2010). Relationships foster communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skills, all of which are crucial for academic success and social adaptation (Lee et al., 2017). Traditionally, these relationships are built through face-to-face interactions in classrooms, campus activities, and social events. However, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered this dynamic by shifting learning environments online, thereby reshaping

how students connect and communicate.

The transition to online learning created both opportunities and challenges for relationship formation among students. Social media has played a significant role in bridging the gap between students by enabling them to engage in informal discussions, collaborate on academic projects, and share personal experiences (Ellison et al., 2010). However, online interactions differ from traditional face-to-face communication, as they lack non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions (Kumar et al., 2017). This shift raises questions about how effectively students can build and maintain relationships in a digital learning environment.

Moreover, while studies on social media and online learning have largely focused on academic performance and engagement (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015), less attention has been given to how students develop social relationships through these platforms. Given the increasing reliance on digital communication, understanding how students form and maintain relationships in virtual spaces is essential for improving online education experiences. This research explores the ways in which students utilize social media to build relationships, the factors that influence their interactions, and the challenges they encounter in maintaining meaningful connections.

This study contributes to existing literature by examining the nuances of relationship-building in online learning contexts, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike previous research that broadly discusses Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), this study focuses specifically on the role of social media in fostering peer relationships among students. By investigating

students' motivations, preferred communication platforms, and barriers to interaction, this research provides valuable insights into the evolving nature of student relationships in digital learning environments.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Relationship Development

CMC refers to digital interactions facilitated by technology, where messages are transmitted through text, audio, or video (Kumar et al., 2017). Compared to face-to-face communication, CMC lacks physical presence and nonverbal cues, making relationship formation more dependent on textual and symbolic exchanges (Pratiwi & Si, 2014). Despite these limitations, CMC enables relationship-building by facilitating frequent interactions, self-disclosure, and shared experiences (Gehlbach et al., 2016).

Cimperman highlights that effective use of digital technologies can lead to experiences of co-presence, where users feel emotionally closer to each other despite their physical

distances (Cimperman, 2023). Several studies support the idea that CMC can cultivate intimacy through mechanisms like self-disclosure and active engagement. Jiang et al. emphasize the critical role of self-disclosure in establishing relational closeness across different media contexts, noting that the nature of disclosure in CMC can promote deeper relational intimacy than its face-to-face counterpart (Jiang et al., 2010). This is further corroborated by Tidwell and Walther, who assert that CMC participants often engage in intimate exchanges that can lead to hyper personal relationships—intensifying feelings of affection and closeness through the medium (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

3.2 Social Media and Online Relationship Formation

Bate & Amrullah (2022) highlight that social media provides a safe space for individuals to express themselves, build a supportive atmosphere, and foster positive and constructive discussions.

Social media platforms provide an avenue for students to establish and maintain relationships through

interactive communication features. WhatsApp, Instagram, and other platforms allow users to engage in real-time messaging, group discussions, and content sharing (Dong et al., 2021). Research indicates that social media can complement offline interactions by fostering collaboration and social bonding (Bedua et al., 2021).

Social media engagement enhances relationship formation by providing accessibility, immediacy, and multimodal communication options, such as text, images, videos, and voice notes (Hameed et al., 2022). The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) elucidates the rationale behind individuals' engagement with social media, positing that users actively seek out these platforms to fulfill various psychological needs and desires, including information-seeking, social bonding, and entertainment. UGT underscores the premise that media users are not passive consumers but rather decision-makers who utilize these platforms based on their specific needs and gratifications (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Studies have found that students use social media not only for academic

purposes but also to maintain emotional connections with peers, creating online communities that provide social support and belongingness (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

3.3 Interpersonal Relationships and Motivations

Jackson-Dwyer (2013) identifies six factors that influence relationship formation: proximity, similarity, physical attraction, reciprocal liking, complementarity, and competence. In online settings, similarity and reciprocal liking are the most significant drivers of relationship development (Kaptein et al., 2014). Shared academic interests, common values, and mutual support contribute to the deepening of online relationships among students (Seshabela et al., 2020).

Interpersonal relationship theories, such as Social Exchange Theory, highlight that individuals form relationships based on perceived benefits and costs. Peer relationships serve as a critical factor in enhancing academic motivation. Liu et al. discuss how perceived peer support positively impacts students' interests and subjective well-being at school,

indicating that robust peer relationships can indirectly influence academic achievement through improved self-concept (Liu et al., 2022). Additionally, Bi et al. highlight that adolescents acknowledged and supported by peers tend to develop greater academic aspirations. Their findings suggest that negative peer relationships can lead to decreased academic performance due to reduced motivation, emphasizing the importance of positive peer interactions in promoting self-esteem and a motivated approach to learning (Bi et al., 2022).

Recent studies indicate that students are more likely to form online relationships when they perceive their peers as approachable, responsive, and emotionally supportive (Fujita et al., 2018). Emotional reciprocity and shared humor have also been identified as key elements in fostering closeness in virtual interactions, particularly in peer-to-peer collaborations and study groups (Seibel, 2019).

C. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach, which, according to (Pathak

et al., 2013), focuses on understanding research queries through a humanistic or idealistic perspective. Qualitative methods aim to explore individuals' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions, producing non-numeric data that offer deep insights into social phenomena.

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how students build relationships through social media in online learning environments. As described by (Rahardjo, 2017), a case study is an intensive, narrative, and in-depth scientific activity conducted to understand a program, incident, or activity at various levels, including individuals, groups, institutions, or organizations. This method enables a comprehensive exploration of students' experiences and perspectives on digital communication and relationship formation.

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who had actively engaged in online learning and social media interactions. As (Bungin, 2011) notes, purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative

research to identify informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research questions. The study involved six undergraduate students from two academic cohorts (2020 and 2021) who had been enrolled in online university courses for at least one year and actively used social media for academic and social interactions. Participants were recruited through academic networks and student forums, ensuring voluntary participation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Google Meet to collect data on students' experiences in forming relationships, motivations, communication styles, and challenges. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, with consented responses transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, involving three interconnected processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Transcribed interviews were systematically coded to identify key themes related to online relationship formation, motivations, communication strategies, and barriers. The coded data were then organized into thematic

matrices for pattern recognition and comparison, providing a structured approach to understanding the role of social media in student interactions.

D. RESULTS

5.1 Early Relationship Formation Through Social Media

As students entered university during the pandemic, they relied heavily on social media to establish interactions and relationships with their peers due to the lack of face-to-face interactions. WhatsApp emerged as the primary platform for initiating friendships, particularly for academic discussions and information exchange.

Several participants initially formed relationships out of necessity, such as clarifying schedules or collaborating on coursework. One student recalled:

"I had not attended classes for a week because I missed the schedule announcement. Then, someone messaged me on WhatsApp saying, 'You also haven't attended classes, right?' From there, we started chatting, helping each other, and became close friends." (Student 1)

Similarly, another participant shared how he began interacting with classmates when coursework became more challenging:

"In the first semester, I worked alone. But in the second semester, things got harder, and I needed people to discuss with. I observed who seemed active in Google Meet and messaged them on WhatsApp. That's how I started forming friendships." (Student 2)

For some participants, friendships developed through academic group assignments. Being placed in the same study group facilitated initial interactions, which gradually expanded beyond coursework to personal discussions and shared interests. One participant stated:

"We were assigned to the same group for an assignment. At first, we only discussed coursework, but after a while, we started talking about hobbies and daily life. That's how we became close." (Student 3)

5.2 Variety of Messages in Student Relationships on Social Media

Initially, student interactions on WhatsApp centered around academic matters such as assignments, exams, and class schedules. Over time, as relationships deepened, the nature of conversations expanded to include casual discussions, social gatherings, and even personal concerns. This shift was driven by the need for social interaction and a sense of belonging in an online learning environment.

One participant described how an academic-focused group gradually transformed into a social space:

"We started as a study group, but now we discuss everything—where to meet, what's trending, even relationship advice."
(Student 4)

Another participant mentioned that sharing personal experiences and frustrations through social media strengthened their friendships:

"Sometimes, we vent about difficult professors or unfair grading. It feels good to have a space to talk about it with friends who understand." (Student 5)

5.3 Factors Contributing to Relationship Intimacy

Continuous daily communication was a significant factor in developing deeper relationships among students. As conversations evolved beyond academics, students became more open about their personal lives, leading to stronger emotional bonds. The ability to express themselves without fear of judgment and the presence of shared interests created an environment conducive to meaningful friendships.

One participant noted:

"I feel comfortable with my friends because they always give positive feedback. If I have a problem, I can share it without fear of being judged." (Student 4)

Another explained how humor played a key role in building relationships:

"I enjoy being friends with people who get my jokes. Having the same sense of humor makes our bond stronger." (Student 6)

In addition to humor and emotional support, common values and perspectives also contributed to relationship intimacy. Students who shared similar opinions on topics such as politics, religion, and social issues

reported feeling a stronger sense of connection. One participant stated:

"We understand each other because we share similar views on many things. That's why our friendship has remained strong." (Student 5)

5.4 Barriers to Building Relationships Through Social Media

Despite the advantages of online interactions, students encountered several challenges in forming and maintaining relationships through social media. One common barrier was the lack of non-verbal cues, which sometimes led to misunderstandings. Without facial expressions and vocal intonations, messages could be misinterpreted, causing unintended conflicts.

"If I don't use emojis, my message might sound rude even though I don't mean it that way." (Student 3)

Another challenge was cultural differences, particularly for students who relocated to a new city for university:

"I come from a different region, so sometimes I worry that my way of

speaking might be misinterpreted. That's why I prefer to clarify things in person." (Student 1)

Additionally, students noted that maintaining relationships exclusively through social media could sometimes feel impersonal. While digital platforms facilitated communication, they lacked the depth and warmth of face-to-face interactions. This limitation sometimes led to weaker connections compared to in-person friendships.

5.5 Impact of Online Relationships on Academic and Social Well-being

Students who successfully formed online relationships reported positive outcomes in both academic and social aspects. Peer support systems played a crucial role in reducing academic stress, improving motivation, and enhancing overall learning experiences. Having friends to discuss coursework and share insights made learning more engaging and less isolating.

"Having a study group helped me stay on track. Whenever I struggled with coursework, I knew I had friends who could help." (Student 2)

Beyond academics, online relationships contributed to students' emotional well-being by providing a sense of belonging. The ability to share thoughts, seek advice, and engage in social activities through digital platforms helped students cope with the challenges of online learning. However, some students highlighted the risks of over-reliance on social media for maintaining friendships:

"I enjoy chatting online, but sometimes I feel like we should meet in person more often. It's different from just texting." (Student 5)

This observation suggests that while online relationships are valuable, a hybrid approach—balancing online and offline interactions—may be optimal for sustaining long-term friendships.

E. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with previous research on the role of social media in facilitating relationship-building among students. Consistent with the Social Information Processing Theory, students were able to develop meaningful connections despite the absence of face-to-face interactions.

The gradual deepening of online relationships through frequent messaging and shared experiences supports the idea that individuals can form strong social bonds through computer-mediated communication.

The results also reflect the principles of Uses and Gratifications Theory as students utilized social media to fulfill various needs, including academic support, social belonging, and emotional comfort. WhatsApp, as the most frequently used platform, provided accessibility, real-time interaction, and a sense of connectedness that helped students navigate the challenges of online learning. The ability to seamlessly transition from academic discussions to personal conversations further reinforced the strength of these digital connections.

However, despite these benefits, the study also highlights the limitations of online relationships. The absence of non-verbal cues often led to misunderstandings, which aligns with the findings of previous studies on the challenges of digital communication. Adano and Bunn discuss the limitations

of online environments, highlighting that genuine human connections often require physical presence to fully actualize (Adano & Bunn, 2024). Emotional barriers, such as the difficulty in conveying tone and intent, were frequently mentioned by participants, emphasizing the need for students to develop digital literacy skills to enhance the effectiveness of their online interactions.

Moreover, the role of similarity in relationship formation was evident. Students who shared academic struggles, common interests, or similar perspectives were more likely to form close relationships. This aligns with (Wong et al., 2018), who noted that shared values significantly contribute to relationship commitment, emphasizing that alignment in beliefs and goals is critical for long-term loyalty. This finding suggests that online learning environments should encourage collaborative activities that facilitate peer bonding. Instructors and educational institutions could enhance student engagement by designing interactive online courses that promote teamwork and social interaction,

helping students build stronger networks in digital spaces.

The study also contributes to the discussion on the hybrid nature of modern relationships. While social media played a crucial role in sustaining friendships, many students expressed the need for offline interactions to further strengthen their bonds. This aligns with research by (Baym, 2015) which suggests that online and offline interactions complement each other rather than function as separate entities. Hybrid learning models, which combine online and face-to-face interactions, could provide an optimal balance for students to maintain relationships formed through digital platforms while benefiting from in-person engagement. Research suggests that students often find traditional offline classes more engaging than online ones, as they facilitate more effective interpersonal interactions essential for learning (Daulatabad et al., 2022). However, integrating online resources with offline teaching can significantly enhance pedagogical outcomes by fostering autonomous learning (Lin & Chen, 2023). This blended approach is

especially crucial in higher vocational education, where the combination of online and offline methods is seen as a key factor in teaching reform (Wang, 2024).

Additionally, the findings indicate that online friendships may serve as a bridge to deeper offline relationships. Some participants noted that initial online interactions led to face-to-face meetings once restrictions were lifted. This suggests that social media can act as a preliminary stage in relationship-building, providing students with an avenue to establish trust and familiarity before transitioning into more meaningful offline connections.

Lastly, the impact of online relationships on academic success and well-being cannot be overlooked. Peer interactions provided emotional and academic support that contributed to reduced stress and improved motivation. This underscores the importance of designing online learning systems that foster not only academic collaboration but also social connectivity. Universities and educators should consider incorporating structured peer support programs and

virtual communities to enhance student well-being and promote long-term relationship-building in digital learning environments.

Future research could explore how different social media platforms influence student relationships in various academic settings. Additionally, a comparative analysis between online-only students and those who transition into hybrid or offline learning could provide deeper insights into the long-term sustainability of digital friendships in education.

F. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the critical role of social media in facilitating relationship-building among students in an online learning environment. The findings indicate that digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, serve as essential tools for students to connect, collaborate, and form meaningful social bonds. Students relied on these interactions for both academic and emotional support, reinforcing the idea that peer relationships contribute to overall student success and well-being.

Despite the advantages of online relationships, challenges such as emotional barriers, miscommunication, and the absence of non-verbal cues were evident. These findings emphasize the need for students to develop digital communication skills to navigate online interactions effectively. Furthermore, educators and institutions should consider integrating structured social engagement opportunities within online learning frameworks to foster community-building and mitigate the sense of isolation that students may experience.

Another key takeaway from this research is the interplay between online and offline interactions. While social media provided an avenue for initial relationship formation, many students expressed the need for in-person meetings to strengthen these connections. This suggests that future educational models should adopt a hybrid approach that balances digital and face-to-face interactions, ensuring that students benefit from both modes of communication.

The implications of this study extend beyond student relationships,

offering insights for universities and online learning platforms. Institutions should explore ways to enhance digital community-building initiatives, such as virtual mentoring programs, group projects, and peer discussion forums, to improve student engagement and retention. Additionally, fostering a supportive online environment that encourages inclusivity, and meaningful interactions will be essential in shaping the future of digital learning.

Future research should examine how different social media platforms influence student interactions across various academic disciplines and cultural contexts. A comparative study between fully online students and those in hybrid learning settings could provide further insights into the long-term sustainability of online relationships. Additionally, exploring how personality traits and communication styles affect online relationship-building would offer valuable perspectives on optimizing digital learning experiences.

By understanding how students navigate online relationships, educators and institutions can better design

learning environments that promote both academic success and social well-being. As digital learning continues to evolve, fostering meaningful

connections among students will remain a crucial factor in enhancing their overall educational experience.

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