

The Transformation of Student Social Interaction in the Digital Era: An Analysis from a Contemporary Sociological Perspective

Moh. Syarif Putra Nurdin^{*}, Melcian Febrilia Pagalu²

^{1,2}Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia

Email: ¹⁾ mohsyarifputranurdin@gmail.com, ²⁾ pagalumelcian@gmail.com

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered social interaction patterns worldwide, with university students representing a demographic particularly immersed in these transformations. This study examines the transformation of student social interaction in the digital era from a contemporary sociological perspective, focusing specifically on the Indonesian higher education context while situating these dynamics within broader global trends. The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has reconfigured patterns of interaction, social engagement, and the construction of social relationships among university students. This research aims to analyze how digital environments reshape forms of communication, social bonding, and identity formation within student communities in Indonesia, a context characterized by high social media penetration and a young, digitally native population. Using a qualitative approach based on literature review and conceptual analysis, this study draws upon contemporary sociological theories of network society, reflexive modernity, and digital sociality to interpret current interactional dynamics. The findings indicate that student interactions are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, resulting in shifts from face-to-face communal relations toward network-based connectivity. While digital media expand access to information and social networks, they also contribute to fragmented interactions, performative identities, and the redefinition of collective belonging. The study concludes that the transformation of social interaction in the digital era reflects broader structural changes in late modern society, where technology becomes an integral dimension of everyday social life. This research contributes to sociological discourse by contextualizing student social practices within contemporary theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: Digital Sociality, Higher Education, Network Society, Social Interaction, Social Transformation

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally transformed patterns of social interaction among university students. Social media and digital communication platforms have shifted how students establish relationships, maintain social ties, and construct social presence in both academic and personal contexts. van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that contemporary social structures are increasingly shaped by platform-based digital networks rather than physical proximity.

Table 1. Key Dimensions of Student Digital Interaction

Dimension	Traditional Interaction	Digital Interaction
Communication	Face-to-face dominant	Network-based and mediated
Social Bonding	Physical community	Online and hybrid networks
Identity	Direct social presentation	Curated digital identity

The table 1 illustrates that digital transformation affects not only the ways students communicate but also how social bonds and identity are constructed. These shifts highlight the relevance of analyzing



student social interaction within a contemporary sociological framework, focusing on mediated communication, evolving relational patterns, and identity formation in higher education contexts, while also reflecting broader changes in the social and cultural environment that influence students engagement, self-expression, and collective relationships.

Despite the growing body of literature on social media and student life, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. First, while existing studies predominantly examine social media's effects on academic performance (Concepcion, 2025; Junejo, 2022; Rabaani & Indriyani, 2024) or its utility as a pedagogical tool (Perez et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025), they often treat digital interaction as a functional variable rather than a sociological phenomenon embedded in broader structural transformations. Second, much of the current research focuses on psychological or educational outcomes such as digital well-being, learning attitudes, or subjective wellbeing (Concepcion, 2025; Junejo, 2022) without adequately theorizing how digital platforms reconfigure the social architecture of student communities themselves.

Third, studies examining youth social interaction patterns (Azahra et al., 2024; Sitinjak et al., 2025; Yuniarto et al., 2025) tend to remain descriptive, lacking engagement with contemporary sociological frameworks that can explain why and how these transformations occur within late modernity. Fourth, critical perspectives on how platform capitalism and racialized structures intersect with student digital practices remain underdeveloped in the literature (McMillan Cottom, 2020), particularly outside Western contexts. Finally, while van Dijck et al. (2018) platform society thesis provides a macro-level foundation, empirical research rarely operationalizes these insights to analyze the micro-dynamics of student sociality. These gaps indicate a need for research that bridges empirical observation with robust sociological theory, specifically addressing how digital environments fundamentally reshape social bonding, identity construction, and collective belonging among university students.

This study offers three distinct contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it moves beyond functionalist or psychological approaches by grounding the analysis in contemporary sociological theory specifically Castells' network society, Giddens' reflexive modernity, and emerging frameworks of digital sociality thereby providing a conceptual apparatus to interpret student interaction as a manifestation of broader structural shifts in late modern society. Analytically, whereas previous studies treat digital and face-to-face interaction as separate domains or mere variables (Dewa & Seto, 2025; Sitinjak et al., 2025), this research examines their dialectical relationship, demonstrating how platform-mediated connectivity transforms the very nature of communal relations, from physical co-presence to network-based sociality.

Contextually, by synthesizing insights from critical platform studies (McMillan Cottom, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018) with empirical observations of student behavior, this study bridges the gap between macro-level digital transformation and micro-level interactional practices. Unlike existing literature that focuses predominantly on educational outcomes or psychological effects, this research foregrounds social transformation itself as the primary object of inquiry which analyzing how students navigate the tension between expanded connectivity and fragmented interaction, between performative digital identities and authentic self-presentation, and between networked individualism and collective belonging. In doing so, it contributes to sociological discourse by offering a theoretically grounded, conceptually nuanced understanding of how digital technology has become constitutive of everyday social life in higher education contexts.

2. Literature Review

The rapid development of digital technologies and social media has significantly transformed the ways students interact. University students increasingly rely on digital platforms to establish and maintain social relationships, resulting in communication patterns and social ties that extend beyond traditional face-to-face interactions. A recent study by Junejo (2022) indicated that social media significantly influences student interaction patterns, facilitating broader connections while also presenting challenges such as reduced face-to-face communication.

From a contemporary sociological perspective, van Dijck et al. (2018) provide a foundational framework for understanding how social life is increasingly structured through platform-based digital networks rather than purely physical interactions. This perspective helps explain how students navigate social relations, balance online and offline engagement, and construct both individual and collective identities within higher education contexts.

Digital transformation affects not only communication practices but also the formation of social bonds and identity (Apdillah et al., 2022). Students adapt the ways they present themselves, manage relationships, and cultivate a sense of belonging through digital communities. Interactions increasingly mediated through digital platforms create dynamic and complex relational patterns, shaping ongoing identity negotiation. Analyzing these phenomena within a contemporary sociological framework offers a comprehensive understanding of how digital transformation impacts student social interaction, engagement, and identity formation.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary data analysis and digital content review. Given that no fieldwork was conducted, the research relies on publicly available information relevant to student social interaction in the digital era. The study is designed to examine patterns, dynamics, and trends in student interactions without direct observation or primary data collection, ensuring alignment with ethical and practical considerations.

3.1. Data Collection

Data were gathered from multiple credible secondary sources to ensure relevance and academic rigor. These sources include peer-reviewed academic articles, official university reports, and publicly accessible digital media content such as social media platforms and online forums frequently used by university students. The selection of materials was guided by criteria of credibility, relevance to student social interaction, and recency of publication to maintain contemporaneity. All data were systematically collected, organized, and categorized to facilitate subsequent thematic analysis, ensuring transparency, traceability, and methodological consistency throughout the research process.

3.2. Data Analysis

Analytical procedures involved thematic coding and comparative analysis to identify recurring patterns related to mediated communication, flexible social networks, and identity formation among university students. Patterns of interaction were categorized according to digital platforms, modes of communication, and the nature of social ties. The study further contextualizes these findings within contemporary discussions of platform-based digital networks, particularly drawing on Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), linking empirical observations to current sociological perspectives. This approach allows for comprehensive insights into how digital transformation affects communication, social relations, and identity formation in higher education. By structuring the method in this way, the study

ensures reproducibility, transparency, and alignment with academic standards, providing a robust foundation for interpreting the transformation of student social interaction in a digital context.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Results

4.1.1. Result 1: Daily Social Media Usage (Figures)

A recent survey-based study of 372 university students found that 58.3% of respondents used social media daily, while 18.3% used it often (4-6 times/week), 14.8% occasionally (1-3 times/week), and 8.6% rarely (<1 time/week). These findings highlight the centrality of digital platforms in student communication, academic collaboration, and social engagement.

Table 2. Daily Social Media Use Among University Students (Survey, 2025)

Frequency of Social Media Use	% of Total
Daily	58.3%
Often (4-6 times/week)	18.3%
Occasionally (1-3 times/week)	14.85
Rarely (<1 time/week)	8.6%

Source: Concepcion, Social Media Use and Its Effects on Student' Digital Well-Being and Academic Performance: A Survey-Based Study (2025)

4.1.2. Result 2: Dimensions of Student Digital Interaction

Beyond usage frequency, the study identifies key dimensions of digital interaction shaping student communication, social bonding, and identity expression.

Table 3. Dimensions of Student Digital Interaction

Dimension	Observed Change	Implication for Students
Communication Mode	Shift from physical to digital channels	Faster, broader connections
Social Bonding	Hybrid online-offline ties	Flexible relational networks
Identity Expression	Emphasis on curated online presence	New forms of self-presentation

This table summarizes the structural aspects of digital interaction, providing a clear framework for understanding changes in student social behavior in higher education.

4.2. Discussion

The results reveal a significant transformation in student social interaction. Digital platforms have become central not only for communication but also for shaping relational networks and identity formation. The move towards hybrid interaction allows students to maintain wider social ties, manage their social presence online, and actively negotiate identities.

The finding that 58.3% of students use social media daily aligns with contemporary perspectives on platform-based digital networks. van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that contemporary social life is increasingly structured and mediated through digital platforms. The high daily usage of social media (58.3%) from Concepcion (2025) demonstrates how students' routines, peer support systems, and relational dynamics are now digitally embedded. This is consistent with Junejo (2022), who indicated that social media significantly influences student interaction patterns, facilitating broader connections while also presenting challenges such as reduced face-to-face communication.

From a sociological perspective, three main implications emerge from the synthesized literature:

1) Communication efficiency

Digital platforms enhance the speed, reach, and flexibility of interaction. Concepcion (2025) examined social media use and its effects on students' digital well-being and academic performance, while Perez et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2025) investigated social media's utility as a pedagogical tool. These studies treat digital interaction as a functional variable in educational contexts, demonstrating that platforms have become integral to academic communication and coordination alongside social purposes.

2) Relational flexibility

Hybrid online-offline networks support diverse peer connections and social support. Azahra et al. (2024) and Sitinjak et al. (2025) examined youth social interaction patterns, finding that students navigate both physical and digital spaces in maintaining relationships. Rabaani and Indriyani (2024) studied social media's effects on academic performance, while Dewa and Seto (2025) examined digital and face-to-face interaction as domains of student social life. These studies collectively indicate that students maintain relationships across multiple modalities, creating flexible networks that combine online and offline elements.

3) Identity negotiation

Students actively curate online personas, influencing social recognition and sense of belonging. van Dijck et al. (2018) provide a foundational framework for understanding how social life is increasingly structured through platform-based digital networks, including how individuals present themselves and manage relationships within these spaces. McMillan Cottom (2020) offers critical perspectives on how platform capitalism and racialized structures intersect with digital practices, though this remains underdeveloped in student-focused literature. The emphasis on curated online presence reflects what Azahra et al. (2024) and Sitinjak et al. (2025) describe as the ongoing identity work students perform across digital platforms.

Overall, the discussion integrates empirical data from Concepcion (2025) with sociological theory from van Dijck et al. (2018), illustrating the opportunities and challenges of digitally mediated student interaction in higher education. The three implications highlight how communication efficiency, relational flexibility, and identity negotiation represent key dimensions of this transformation, though each requires further empirical investigation to fully understand its dynamics across different student populations and contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the transformation of student social interaction in the digital era. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms have become central to daily communication, influencing not only the frequency and mode of interactions but also the ways in which social networks are maintained and personal identities are constructed. A significant proportion of students engage with social media on a daily basis, reflecting the integration of digital tools into both academic and social routines. The analysis highlights that these digital interactions are multi-dimensional: they facilitate rapid communication, enable the formation of hybrid online-offline social networks, and allow students to actively manage and present their identities in virtual spaces. The results illustrate a shift in the nature of student socialization, suggesting that contemporary higher education experiences are increasingly mediated through technology, creating both opportunities and challenges for interpersonal relationships, peer support, and community engagement.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes that understanding student behavior in the digital era requires an integrated perspective that considers communication patterns, social bonding, and identity formation. Future research should explore several areas. Studies using interviews and observation could help us understand how students really feel about their online social lives, including the stress of being always connected. Researchers could also compare students from different countries, universities, and backgrounds to see how factors like money, gender, or where they live affect their digital experiences. Longer-term studies could track students through university and beyond to see how their online habits change over time. More work is needed on how universities can better support students who spend so much time online, including programs that teach healthy digital habits or create opportunities for real-world connection. Finally, researchers should examine how social media platforms themselves, including their design and algorithms, shape the way students interact and build relationships.

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