



Beyond Passive Use: A Qualitative Study of Malaysian Youth Aged 16–18 and Their Motivations for Social Networking Site Use

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ABSTRACT

Social media has emerged as a universal force that profoundly affects the lives of youth. It provides new possibilities for connection, communication, and self-expression through the rise of digital media platforms. Based on Uses and Gratification Theory, this study aims to understand the underlying motivations for youth to use social networking sites (SNS). Semi-structured interviews were held with twenty Malaysian youth aged 16-18 years, examining their use of social networking sites (SNS) and exploring their motivations for using SNS. Thematic analysis revealed four themes explaining youths' motivations for using SNS, related to parental governance and self-regulation, emotional regulation, entertainment, and social comparison. The findings reframe youth from being passive, vulnerable consumers of social media into active, highly strategic, and self-regulating agents. It shows that youth simultaneously utilize social media for hedonic needs such as escapism and mood management from stress and functional needs including informational searches and acquiring soft skills such as public speaking through observational learning.

Keywords: *Youth, Uses and Gratification, Well-being, Social Media, Motivation*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern digital era, social media has emerged as a universal force that profoundly affects the lives of people all over the world, especially youth. Youth are now immersed in a digital world that provides new possibilities for connection, communication, and self-expression through the rise of social media platforms. There is no denying that the digital revolution has improved lives, but there are worries about what may happen to today's youth in terms of their growth and well-being (Sumadevi, 2023).

Social media platforms expose younger generations to life beyond their immediate peers and family groups. They have emerged as spaces for sharing their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This activity significantly influences their perceptions of self and mental well-being (Desjarlais, 2022).

Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X, to mention some, serve as platforms to facilitate social support and connection, which may lead to benefits such as promoting self-esteem and diminishing loneliness. However, these platforms expose risks, such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and privacy concerns. These consequently associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Desjarlais, 2022).

Excessive use of social media has been linked to issues such as depression, addiction, and disrupted sleep patterns (Victor et al., 2024; Dhir et al., 2021). These concerns highlight the pressing need for strategies to address the adverse effects of social media usage among youth. However, social media also possesses positive effects, such as building social connections, supporting friendships, and reducing loneliness (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

Despite these documented risks and benefits, the underlying motivations that drive Malaysian youth to use social networking sites (SNS) and how these specific motivations influence their overall well-being remain unclear. There is a critical need to reframe youth not as passive consumers but as active, strategic agents who consciously choose media to satisfy their social and psychological needs. This study aims to investigate social media usage among youth in Malaysia by conducting semi-structured interviews with a group of youth aged 16 to 18 years old. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to examine how Malaysian youth use social networking sites (SNS), explore their motivations for using SNS, and investigate how these motivations influence their well-being. The findings can be used to understand social media literacy among youth particularly in identifying best practices and opportunities for fostering the well-being of youth in social media use. Additionally, this study

advances our understanding of digital literacies among youth and the consequences of their everyday practices.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY AND YOUTH SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The theoretical framework of this article is based on Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, a media paradigm that evaluates users' motivations for media access and usage (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016). Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), pioneered by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973), remains a foundational framework in media and communication research. The theory explains why individuals choose specific media and how these choices are shaped by social and psychological needs. In the context of social media, this approach remains highly relevant because users are no longer passive receivers of information but active participants who consume, interact with and produce content within digital networks (Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; Dhir & Tsai, 2017).

Recent studies have expanded to reflect the interactive, visual and participatory nature of social networking sites (SNSs). For example, youth may use social media not only to obtain information or entertainment, but also to maintain friendships, seek social validation, express identity and manage how they are perceived by others (Throuvala et al., 2019; Jarman et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023).

Furthermore, recent scholarly developments have introduced new elements to the U&G framework in order to address the unique affordances of digital platforms. One of the most important shifts is the movement from users as media consumers to users as content producers. Shao's (2009) typology explains this shift by distinguishing between consuming, participating and producing. "Consuming" refers to passive viewing or reading for information and entertainment; participating refers to interacting with others through likes, comments and sharing, while "producing" refers to creating and uploading self-generated content for self-expression, identity formation and self-actualisation (Shao, 2009). This distinction is important for youth social media research because adolescents and young adults do not only use SNSs to observe others; they also actively construct their own online presence through posts, images, videos and interactions (Yang et al., 2021; Seidman et al., 2025).

In addition, contemporary research argues that social media use should not be measured only through general indicators such as time spent online. Yang et al. (2021), through the Multidimensional Model of Social Media Use (MMSMU), suggest that researchers should consider the type of activity, the user's motivation and the communication partner involved. This means that interactive communication with close friends may have different implications for well-being compared with public broadcasting, passive scrolling or interaction with weak ties. Similarly, studies on social

media well-being show that the outcomes of SNS use depend on whether users engage with social media for positive enhancement, relationship maintenance, emotional compensation or social comparison (Dutt, 2023; Mittal & Rani, 2024; Bhatiazevi, 2024).

Another important development is the emphasis on psychological needs such as belonging and self-presentation. The Dual-Factor Model suggests that much SNS use is driven by two major needs: the need to belong and the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). The need to belong refers to the desire for social connection, acceptance and inclusion, while self-presentation refers to the desire to manage one's public image and influence how others perceive the self. These two needs are especially relevant among youth, as adolescence is a critical period for identity development, peer approval and social comparison (Wong & McLellan, 2023). Therefore, U&G provides a meaningful framework for examining how youth use social media to negotiate belonging, visibility and identity in online spaces.

In the context of youth, social media functions as a major developmental site where adolescents and young adults explore identity, maintain peer relationships and seek validation. Social interaction remains one of the most common motivations for SNS use, as young people use these platforms to stay connected with friends, participate in peer conversations and avoid social exclusion. Wong and McLellan (2023) explain that adolescents' motivation to use SNSs is closely related to psychological needs, including connection, autonomy and self-expression. Similarly, social media participation allows youth to feel "in the loop" with peer culture, trends and online communities, particularly through interactive features such as comments, shares, challenges and group-based engagement (Falgoust et al., 2022).

Self-expression and identity exploration are also central motivations for youth social media use. SNSs provide young users with spaces to express their opinions, display interests, experiment with different personas and shape their public identity. However, this process is often linked to the desire for feedback and validation. Jarman et al. (2021) found that appearance-related motivations are significant predictors of social media engagement among adolescents. Youth may seek likes, comments and responses as forms of ego validation, particularly in relation to physical appearance and self-image. While such feedback can provide temporary confidence, it may also increase vulnerability to body dissatisfaction, comparison and lower well-being when users become overly dependent on external approval (Jarman et al., 2021).

Entertainment, distraction and passing time are also important gratifications in youth social media use. Many adolescents use SNSs to reduce boredom, escape stress or fill unstructured moments in their daily routines. Dhir and Tsai (2017) found that process gratifications, such as entertainment, escape and passing time, are stronger predictors

of Facebook use intensity among adolescents and young adults than content-based gratifications such as information seeking. This suggests that youth social media use is often driven less by informational needs and more by emotional, habitual and recreational motives. However, when these motives become excessive or compulsive, they may contribute to problematic patterns of use (Kircaburun et al., 2018; Throuvala et al., 2019).

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND EFFECTS TOWARDS WELL-BEING

Previous studies indicate that the use of social media often leads to negative consequences rather than benefits for users (He, 2023; Lee & Mohamad, 2022). However, research also highlights the benefits of social media use (Omar & Azmi, 2024; Abdul Manaf et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2022; Marciano & Viswanath, 2023; Parent, 2023)

Gao et al. (2022) discovered that individuals with higher motivation to use social media tend to achieve higher well-being, reflecting honest self-presentation and leading happier lives. This assertion is supported by Parent (2023), who claimed adolescents' well-being is enhanced when they establish quality relationships, develop self-presentation skills, and receive positive feedback from friends. Similarly, a study by Vornholt and De Choudhury (2021) argued that university students use social media platforms to mitigate mental health issues related to campus life, seeking help through self-disclosure to connect with peers.

Kaur et al. (2021) identified that social media motivations, such as self-disclosure, social comparison, and privacy concerns, are related to online subjective well-being. Their study argues that social comparison is the only factor that can shift from well-being to ill-being, resulting in social media fatigue. In contrast, self-disclosure was found to enhance well-being, while privacy concerns tend to contribute to social media fatigue.

Recent studies have also highlighted the role of dysfunctional mechanisms such as fear of missing out (FoMO), emotional compensation and problematic social media use (PSMU). Throuvala et al. (2019) explain that adolescents may use social media to cope with emotional difficulties, loneliness or unmet psychological needs. In this context, FoMO can become a strong motivational factor because young users may feel pressured to remain constantly connected in order to avoid exclusion from peer interactions. Kircaburun et al. (2018) similarly found that motivations such as meeting new people, presenting a popular self and passing time are associated with problematic social media use among university students. These findings show that youth motivations for social media use can become harmful when social media is used primarily to escape negative emotions, compensate for offline dissatisfaction or maintain an idealised online image.

The distinction between enhancement and compensation motives is particularly important in understanding the relationship between social media use and youth well-being. Enhancement motives refer to using social media to strengthen existing relationships, maintain social support and enrich offline connections. These motives are often associated with more positive outcomes, including social capital and subjective well-being (Mittal & Rani, 2024; Bhatiasevi, 2024). In contrast, compensation motives involve using social media to escape loneliness, manage insecurity or replace unsatisfactory offline relationships. Such motives may increase vulnerability to lower life satisfaction, problematic use and emotional dependence on SNSs (Throuvala et al., 2019; Dutt, 2023; Seidman et al., 2025). This supports the view that the effects of social media are shaped not only by the frequency of use, but also by the underlying reasons for engagement.

Some scholars have also introduced the idea of control as an emerging motivational factor in youth social media use. From this perspective, young users may use SNSs to regulate their perceptual experiences, manage social impressions and maintain control over how they are represented in an always-on digital environment. This is closely connected to self-presentation, identity management and the desire to shape one's social visibility online (Wong & McLellan, 2023; Seidman et al., 2025). For youth, the ability to edit, curate and control online content can be empowering, but it may also create pressure to constantly manage one's image and monitor others' responses.

Previous literature shows that social media use has complex implications for youth well-being, producing both positive and negative outcomes depending on users' motivations, practices and social contexts.

Although studies such as Gao et al. (2023) have examined the relationship between social media motivation and well-being, existing research has not sufficiently explained how youth themselves understand and negotiate these motivations in their everyday social media practices. Much of the existing literature identifies broad motivational categories such as connection, entertainment, self-disclosure, information seeking and social comparison, but less is known about how these motivations operate simultaneously in the lived experiences of adolescents, particularly within the Malaysian context. Moreover, many studies focus on general youth populations or university students, while less attention has been given to youth aged 16–18, who are in a transitional stage of identity development, peer dependence, parental governance and increasing digital autonomy.

This study therefore addresses this gap by examining the motivations that drive Malaysian youth aged 16–18 to use social networking sites and how these motivations are linked to their perceived well-being. Rather than treating well-being as a general outcome of social media use, this study explores the motivational processes through

which youth use social media for emotional regulation, entertainment, social comparison, self-regulation and functional purposes. By applying Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study contributes to the literature by reframing youth not merely as passive or vulnerable users, but as active and strategic agents who use social media to satisfy particular social, emotional and psychological needs.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand the underlying motivations of Malaysian youth for using social networking sites (SNS). In this study, the term “youth” refers specifically to adolescents aged between 16 to 18 years. This age group was chosen because they spend more time on social media and tend to have various social media accounts (Victor et al., 2024). The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews.

A total of 20 participants aged 16 to 18 years were selected for this study. The participants consisted of both male and female youth who actively used social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X. The primary selection criterion was active engagement with SNSs, as the study focused on youth motivations and experiences in using these platforms. The sample size was considered appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study because the aim was to generate an in-depth understanding rather than statistical representation.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. This method was selected because the participants were minors, and access to this group required careful recruitment through trusted networks and institutional permissions. Snowball sampling is useful when identifying suitable participants is difficult, as it allows initial participants or contacts to refer other individuals who meet the study criteria (Makwana et al., 2023). To begin recruitment, the researcher contacted a school in Nilai, a suburban city in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Information about the study was provided to the school and shared with potential participants. Students who met the inclusion criteria were then encouraged to share the study information with other eligible participants, creating a snowball effect in the recruitment process.

However, because snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all Malaysian youth. The 20 participants do not represent the full diversity of Malaysian youth in terms of geography, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, schooling experience or patterns of digital access. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as qualitative insights into the experiences of the participants involved in this study, rather than as representative evidence of all Malaysian youth.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted physically between January and February 2025. This method allowed the researcher to ask guided questions while also giving participants the flexibility to explain their personal experiences in greater depth. To uncover their motivations for using SNS, participants were asked about their reasons for using social media and describing a recent experience about online sharing. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to support systematic analysis.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia Ethics Committee before the interviews were conducted. Since the participants were minors, permission was also obtained from the participating school, and informed consent was secured from both parents and participants. Before the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. These procedures were important to ensure that participants clearly understood the concept of consent and their rights throughout the research process.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher adopted Clarke and Braun's six-phase approach to thematic analysis, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts and interpret the meanings attached to their motivations for using SNSs.

FINDINGS

A total of 20 students were involved in this study. The students were interviewed at their school with permission obtained from the school authorities. The participants were selected from diverse backgrounds, specifically in terms of ethnicity, to ensure variation in the findings. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of participants in this study.

Table 1: Demography of participants

Label	Age	Race
P1	17	Malay
P2	18	Malay
P3	17	Chinese
P4	17	Iban
P5	17	Indian
P6	16	Indian
P7	16	Malay
P8	18	Malay
P9	16	Indian
P10	17	Malay
P11	18	Malay
P12	18	Malay
P13	17	Chinese
P14	16	Malay
P15	17	Chinese
P16	17	Malay
P17	16	Chinese
P18	17	Malay
P19	16	Malay
P20	16	Indian

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. From the interviews, four key themes were identified inductively through thematic analysis, as shown in Table 2 below, to address the aim of the study which is to understand the underlying motivations that drive youth to use social networking sites that contribute to their overall well-being.

Table 2: Inductive Themes

Label	Themes	Research Objectives
T1	Parental Governance and Self-Regulation	Motivations for youth to use SNS
T2	The Interplay of Emotion, Connection, and Belonging	
T3	Entertainment and Information	
T4	Comparison and Motivation	

Based on the inductive themes in Table 2, the findings indicate that themes T1, T2, T3, and T4 address the research objective by explaining youth motivations for using SNS, which are related to parental governance and self-regulation, emotional regulation, entertainment and social comparison.

Parental Governance and Self-Regulation

The analysis found that parental governance and self-regulation were the most dominant themes. This theme explores the distinction between parental monitoring strategies and the students' self-management of their social media usage.

From a U&G perspective, parental governance and self-regulation reveal that youth social media use is not entirely impulsive or passive. Instead, participants' engagement with SNS is shaped by a gradual movement from external regulation to internal regulation. At the early stage, parents function as gatekeepers who control access, time and exposure. However, as adolescents become more familiar with social media, they begin to internalise these rules and develop their own strategies for managing their use. This reflects the active audience assumption in U&G, where users are viewed as active agents who selectively choose media platforms, content and forms of engagement to satisfy particular needs and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). This interpretation is further supported by recent social media research, which suggests that youth do not merely consume SNS content, but actively participate, produce, curate and regulate their online presence according to their social, emotional and psychological needs (Shao, 2009; Yang et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023; Seidman et al., 2025). Thus, parental governance can be understood as an early external structure that gradually develops into self-regulation, digital autonomy and more conscious decision-making in youth SNS use.

There are three subthemes under Theme 1, namely rules and structure at home, awareness on social media, and self-regulation on social media.

Subtheme: Rules and Structure at Home

Participants shared that they followed structured routines set by their parents. For example, participants explained how their parents regulated their screen time.

"Every night I must hand my phone to my mom... depending on tuition... I give it about 20 minutes after it ends (Participant P1)."

"They usually check my screen time...and say, 'try to reduce your screen time.' They said that during study time, I should not keep my phone near me because it could become addictive (Participant P5)."

However, variations in parental approaches were also evident. Some participants highlighted that their parents monitored their phone usage more casually, as illustrated by P9 and P12.

"If my mom sees me always with my phone and not doing my homework, she gets angry. But if all the work is done, and I'm on my phone, my mom doesn't get mad (Participant P9)."

"When exams are near, if I use my phone too long, my parents will nag (Participant P12)."

Although mobile phone use was guided by parental supervision, most participants reported owning a mobile phone at an early age. Participants further indicated early exposure to the digital environment, including online applications and social media platforms.

"I have had my own phone since Year 5 (Participant P3)."

"In Standard Five, my grandmother gave me a phone to use (Participant P7)."

"I've had a phone for a long time already, it was in Standard Four. But at that time, it was only WhatsApp and Instagram (Participant P8)."

This suggests that early device ownership, even within structured parental control, plays a critical role in normalising digital engagement from a young age.

This subtheme can be interpreted as a form of externally guided gratification management. While participants may seek entertainment, peer connection or relaxation through social media, parental rules regulate when and how these gratifications can be obtained. In U&G terms, this shows that gratification seeking among adolescents does not occur in isolation but is negotiated within family structures and parental expectations. This reflects the active audience assumption of U&G, where media users are understood as purposeful and selective in their media choices, although these choices may still be shaped by social context and external regulation (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Parental control therefore shapes the boundaries of media use and helps transform unrestricted gratification seeking into more disciplined, selective and self-regulated engagement.

Subtheme: Awareness on Social Media

While some participants described social media use as shaped by parental routines, others demonstrated a heightened awareness of their own usage patterns. Participants also recognised the potential negative effects of excessive social media consumption.

For instance, P2 and P18 explicitly acknowledged the addictive nature of social media use.

"There are many interesting videos... sometimes I scroll for a long time... but that is not good actually (Participant P2)."

"In terms of Instagram, I feel guilty. Because I'm addicted to watching. Even though I want to use that time for other things, I'm kinda addicted, you know?" Instagram's algorithm only shows videos I want to see (Participant P18)."

In addition, participants framed their social media use within a moral and religious context, emphasising the need to avoid harmful content.

"Social media has both good and bad sides. But as Muslims, we know what's halal and haram. If we come across something inappropriate, just remove it (Participant P7)."

"I feel guilty because I've become addicted to my phone. The phone has brought me to bad habits where it makes me late for prayers (Participant P14)."

Another participant also explained how excessive social media use affected their emotional well-being.

"If I use (social media) way too much and spend too much time on social media, I think it can affect my mood. Err... I don't know. Sometimes it's like... it makes me feel stressed (Participant P17)."

This subtheme indicates that adolescents are not passive consumers of social media but demonstrate reflexive awareness of its potential risks, including addiction, moral implications, and emotional consequences. This suggests an emerging capacity for self-regulation. Participants' awareness of addiction, inappropriate content, emotional disturbance and religious or moral boundaries indicates that they are able to evaluate the consequences of SNS engagement. In U&G theory, users are understood as active and purposeful media users who are capable of identifying their needs, selecting media to fulfil those needs and assessing the gratifications obtained from media use (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Korhan & Ersoy, 2015). The participants' responses support this assumption because they not only describe their use of social media, but also reflected on whether such use was beneficial, excessive or harmful.

Subtheme: Self-regulation on Social Media

Participants demonstrated self-regulatory behaviours by consciously managing their social media use. This is illustrated by participants P4 and P6:

"If I'm having a bad day, I don't post, even if I'm happy, I don't post (Participant P4)."

"I once advised netizens who posted negative comments about certain football teams (Participant P6)."

Some respondents actively employed strategies to reduce screen time, such as prioritising tasks before social media use, filtering content, exercising self-control, modifying phone display settings, and disabling notifications.

"I finish my work before using the phone (Participant P9)".

"I made my phone screen black and white to spend less time on it. Now I've turned off notifications because I'll keep clicking and end up spending too much time on IG (Participant P10)."

"If I have homework or assignments, I don't use it (social media) much because I need to finish them (Participant P12)."

"I don't follow celebrities because I'm the type of person who, if I really like someone, I'll search for everything about them, even their background, and I feel that it's distracting. So, I just control myself (Participant P16)."

This finding reframes youth from being passive or vulnerable users to strategic users who attempt to maximise the benefits of SNS while minimising distraction, guilt and overuse. In line with U&G theory, these practices demonstrate that youth are not merely exposed to media effects, but actively make choices about their media use based on perceived needs, consequences and desired gratifications (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Korhan & Ersoy, 2015). This also supports recent social media research which argues that the outcomes of SNS use depend not only on time spent online, but also on the type of activity, motivation and level of user control involved (Yang et al., 2021; Throuvala et al., 2019; Dutt, 2023). Theoretically, this subtheme extends U&G by showing that youth are not only gratification seekers, but also gratification regulators who consciously manage their SNS practices to balance enjoyment, responsibility and well-being.

The Interplay of Emotion, Connection, and Belonging

The second theme highlights the interrelationship between emotion and social connection in participants' social media use. This theme examines participants' subjective and internal experiences, particularly their emotional responses and interactions, revealing how peer connections shape their engagement with social media.

This theme reflects two major U&G needs: affective needs and social integrative needs. Participants used SNS not only to communicate with others, but also to manage emotions, maintain a sense of belonging and regulate their emotional states. From a U&G perspective, affective needs are fulfilled when adolescents use social media for pleasure, emotional relief, entertainment or comfort, while social integrative needs are fulfilled when SNS help them sustain friendships, participate in peer interactions and avoid social disconnection (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974). The findings therefore suggest that emotional well-being and social connection are closely intertwined in youth SNS use. Social media becomes meaningful not simply because it provides content, but because it enables adolescents to feel connected, recognised, and emotionally supported. This supports previous literature which argues that youth use SNS to maintain relationships, seek social validation, express identity and fulfil psychological needs such as connection, belonging and self-expression (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Throuvala et al., 2019; Jarman et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023). Thus, this theme shows that SNS function as both an emotional resource and a social space through which youth negotiate their sense of well-being.

There are four subthemes under Theme 2, namely: emotions emerging through social media, preference for real-life interaction over digital life, connections influenced by social media, and social media as a tool for connection.

Subtheme: Emotions emerged through social media

Participants described social media as a space where emotions are actively experienced, shaped, and regulated through everyday engagement. Positive emotional responses were frequently reported, particularly in relation to browsing content and maintaining connections with peers.

"Social media makes me happy. So, I think we don't need a therapist since there's social media. I mean, when we scroll and see meaningful quotes, we can feel better (Participant P9)."

"Scrolling through TikTok (FYP) makes me feel happy. It's because those videos are likely relatable to me. They feel connected to my current life (Participant 11)."

"I feel happy with them, and I feel like if I post about them, it's like making an appreciation post for them (Participant P17)."

Participants also recognised that the positive emotions derived from social media are often temporary yet still serve an important role in emotional coping and mood regulation.

"When I'm sad, I'll post sad songs on WhatsApp statuses that only I can see. After two hours of posting, I start to feel better (Participant P6)."

"It helps me when I have a bad day—I'll watch funny videos (on social media). A bad day means feeling down because sometimes I feel left out by my friends, I feel happy only while watching them, and then I feel okay on my own again (Participant P13)."

In some cases, emotional fulfilment was also derived from prosocial interactions, such as supporting others through platform features.

"When people go live to sell items, I support them by giving 'gifts'. I feel happy because I get to do something good for others (Participant P14)."

Overall, this subtheme suggests that emotional experiences on social media are dynamic. This subtheme can be interpreted through the gratification of emotional regulation. Participants' use of funny videos, relatable content, sad songs and motivational quotes shows that SNS function as an affective resources. From a U&G perspective, this reflects affective and tension-release needs, where media is used for pleasure, emotional relief, escape, relaxation and mood management (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Rather than passively consuming content, youth actively select SNS materials that help them recover from sadness, boredom, stress or loneliness. This demonstrates the movement from gratifications sought to gratifications obtained: participants seek emotional relief and obtain temporary comfort, distraction or mood improvement through SNS use. This finding also supports previous studies which suggest that adolescents may use social media to cope with emotional difficulties, loneliness or unmet psychological needs, although such use may become problematic when emotional compensation turns into dependence or excessive use (Throuvala et al., 2019; Dutt, 2023).

Subtheme: Preference for Real-Life Interaction over Digital Life

Participants expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interaction over engagement within digital environments. Rather than viewing social media as a primary space for meaningful connection, they positioned real-life interaction as more authentic, enduring, and emotionally significant. Participants disclosed that they preferred direct, in-person communication over interaction within the digital world.

"I think I prefer real life. Because we'll turn off social media one day, but real life is forever (Participant P9)."

"I choose real life, because in real life, people can know us more deeply. On social media, people only see us on the screen (Participant P12)."

Although participants use SNS for connection, their preference for face-to-face interaction shows that they critically evaluated the limits of online gratification. This is theoretically important because it challenges the assumption that youth are fully dependent on digital interaction. Instead, participants distinguish between mediated connection and deeper interpersonal connection. From a U&G perspective, SNS may satisfy immediate social integrative needs by helping adolescents maintain contact, participate in peer conversations and avoid social disconnection (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Wong & McLellan, 2023). However, the findings suggest that online interaction does not fully replace the emotional richness, authenticity and continuity of offline relationships. This indicates that youth are reflexive users who recognise both the usefulness and limitations of SNS. Therefore, social media functions as a supplementary space for connection rather than a complete substitute for face-to-face relationships.

Subtheme: Connections Influenced in Social Media

Participants reported that their engagement with social media was shaped by social influences, particularly from peers and family members. Rather than adopting social media independently, many participants were introduced to and encouraged to use these platforms through their immediate social networks.

"I learned about Instagram from my friends in primary school. They all had Instagram accounts. I created my account because I wanted to follow them since others did, I wanted too as well (Participant P2)."

"My friend made my Instagram account, introduced it to me. It felt nice seeing my friends have accounts (Participant P11)."

"I created Instagram account during Form 1 because I wanted to follow my primary school friends (Participant P16)."

In addition to peer influence, participants also identified their siblings as important enabler of exposure to social media.

"Because of my friends. Social media was popular back then. Also, my sister (Participant P12)."

"My older siblings introduced me to social media, but my friends introduced me to TikTok (Participant P19)."

This subtheme reflects the social integrative function of SNS. Participants' decision to join Instagram, TikTok or other platforms was often influenced by peers and siblings, showing that social media adoption is embedded in relational networks rather than being an individual choice alone. The motivation is not merely technological curiosity, but the desire to belong, participate and remain socially visible within peer culture. In U&G terms, platform adoption becomes a way of satisfying the need for inclusion, peer affiliation and social participation during adolescence (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). This finding supports previous literature which argues that youth use SNS to maintain friendships, seek social validation, express identity and stay "in the loop" with peer conversations and online communities (Throuvala et al., 2019; Falgoust et al., 2022; Wong & McLellan, 2023). Therefore, joining SNS can be interpreted as a socially motivated act through which adolescents negotiate belonging, visibility and acceptance within their everyday peer networks.

Subtheme: Social Media as Tools of Connection

Participants highlighted that one of the primary motivations for adopting social media was to maintain and sustain social connections with peers and their wider social environment. Social media was frequently described as a tool for reconnecting, staying updated, and engaging in sustained interpersonal interactions.

"I used social media to reconnect with old school friends (Participant P4)."

"To know what my friends are up to, since everyone's studying in different places. So, I just watch their stories on Instagram (Participant P8)."

"Usually, when they like my post, I'll like theirs back (Participant P16)."

"For me, social media is useful because it allows me to know what happens around me on a daily basis. Sometimes people talk about trends and so on, so I feel the need to know so that I don't fall behind the people around me (Participant P19)."

"I only joined social media so I wouldn't feel left out, like when sometimes my friends talk about new things on social media, but I don't know about them (Participant P20)."

This indicates that social media functions as a key platform for maintaining social connectedness. Beyond direct communication, participants engage in light interactions, such as liking and viewing content, which serve as meaningful forms of social bonding. This reflects the role of social media in facilitating and sustaining relational ties despite physical distance.

At the same time, participants demonstrated that their reliance on social media for connections remained flexible. While social media helped them stay updated and socially engaged, it was not indispensable. Some participants reported temporarily disengaging from social media to focus on their academic.

"Now, I delete IG and TikTok on school days. I only re-download them on weekends (Participant P10)."

"Sometimes I delete social media when I want to focus on my studies. So, I don't really mind when I don't have social media (Participant P17)."

"I won't say it's important, it's just something to fill the gap I have. If I don't have social media, life will be socially different, but I'll be okay (Participant 20)."

The use of SNS to reconnect with old friends, view stories, exchange likes and stay updated demonstrates that social connection does not always require deep or direct interaction. Light forms of engagement can still produce social gratification because they allow youth to maintain awareness of others, signal relational presence and remain connected to their peer networks. From a U&G perspective, these practices reflect social integrative needs, where SNS are used to sustain relationships, maintain social contact and avoid disconnection from peer culture (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Wong & McLellan, 2023). However, participants' ability to delete or temporarily avoid social media also shows that SNS are treated as tools rather than necessities. This suggests a balanced form of social gratification, where youth use

social media to support relationships without becoming fully dependent on it for social existence. Therefore, this subtheme reinforces the view of youth as active and reflexive users who are able to use SNS for connection while still recognising the need for distance, control and offline balance.

Entertainment and Information

The third theme centers on entertainment and information-seeking practices among participants. This theme highlights how participants engage with social media as a platform for leisure, information acquisition, and personal development.

This theme shows that youth SNS use is driven by both hedonic and functional gratifications. Entertainment reflects affective and tension-release needs, as participants use SNS for enjoyment, relaxation, escape and passing time. In contrast, information seeking and skill development reflect cognitive and personal integrative needs, as SNS allow youth to acquire knowledge, improve abilities and build confidence in their everyday lives (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Theoretically, this theme demonstrates that youth do not use SNS only for leisure. They also use them as a flexible learning environment where entertainment, knowledge and self-improvement overlap. This supports the U&G view that young users are active and selective in their media use, choosing platforms and content according to the gratifications they seek and the practical value they obtain from SNS engagement (Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; Yang et al., 2021).

There are two subthemes under Theme 3, namely: social media as a source of entertainment and social media as an educational and informational tool.

Subtheme: Social Media as Source of Entertainment

The findings revealed that the participants used social media primarily as a source of entertainment, where it served as a space for relaxation, stress relief, and daily escapism. Participants described engaging with social media content to unwind and lessen academic pressure. The forms of entertainment identified were diverse, including K-pop, parody videos, cooking content, memes, and others.

"I think I use about 30% of my time on social media for entertainment. I am mostly interested in dark humour, like life jokes in social media. Sometimes during my free time I watch videos, scroll through TikTok and Instagram (Participant P5)."

"I share funny comedy meme reels to release my stress and tension from studying, it feels relatable to me (Participant P9)."

"Usually, I open social media because I'm bored. Since I've finished all my work, I like watching relatable life content, memes, parodies, and POV videos (Participant P10)."

"I use TikTok and Instagram to watch cooking videos (Participant P14)."

"I use social media for three main purposes: first, entertainment (Participant P18)."

These findings indicate that entertainment-oriented use of social media is closely linked to emotional regulation and mood management. Participants actively seek content that is enjoyable, relatable, and engaging.

Entertainment-oriented SNS use should be interpreted as more than simple leisure. From a U&G perspective, entertainment functions as a form of tension release, mood repair and emotional recovery. Participants turn to memes, humour, K-pop, cooking videos and relatable content to relieve boredom, academic stress and emotional fatigue. This suggests that entertainment is a purposeful gratification sought by youth to manage everyday pressures rather than a passive or meaningless activity. In this sense, SNS provides an affective resource through which adolescents can temporarily escape stress, restore their mood and experience emotional balance (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Therefore, entertainment use may contribute to well-being when it provides relaxation, enjoyment and emotional relief, although it may become problematic if it develops into excessive, compulsive or uncontrolled use (Throuvala et al., 2019; Kircaburun et al., 2018; Lee & Mohamad, 2022).

Subtheme: Social Media as Educational and Informational Tool

Participants also described using social media as a resource for education and information-seeking. Social media platforms were perceived as accessible and flexible learning environments that support both formal and informal knowledge acquisition.

"Usually, before exams, I watch videos on social media to study. That's because when I study, I prefer using videos because I can't just rely on reading books alone (Participant P7)."

"I think IG is the best for learning. There's a lot of content that teaches us how to learn and manage time (Participant P9)."

"When it comes to educational content, I watch it on TikTok, such as world history or videos on how to write an essay for STPM (Participant P11)."

"I use it to learn new things. Sometimes, my social media shows educational content that I can actually learn from (Participant P18)."

These findings indicate that social media functions as an informal learning environment, where participants actively seek knowledge that is relevant, accessible, and aligned with their preferences.

Participants also reported using social media as a platform for developing practical skills that could benefit their future personal and professional growth. Rather than solely consuming content, they engaged with social media as a learning resource to acquire and improve specific skills and competencies.

Participants highlighted the use of video-based platforms such as YouTube to observe, learn, and practise various skills, especially in communication and self-presentation. For instance:

"I started learning to be an emcee by watching YouTube on how they use their tone (Participant P7)."

"I used to be quiet and not good at socialising, so I learned how to communicate through YouTube (Participant P18)."

This subtheme reflects cognitive gratification. Participants use SNS to obtain current information, exam-related content, random facts, study techniques and educational videos. The use of SNSs also represents a higher-order form of gratification because participants use SNS not only to consume information, but also to improve themselves. Learning public speaking, communication and self-presentation through platforms such as YouTube reflects personal integrative gratification, this finding challenges the view of SNS as merely distracting or harmful. Instead, it shows that youth actively use digital platforms to support learning in ways that are accessible, visual and aligned with their preferred learning styles. From a U&G perspective, SNS satisfies cognitive needs by enabling users to acquire information, knowledge and understanding (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974). This also demonstrates that adolescents are not passive consumers of online content, but selective users who choose specific platforms and formats according to their learning needs and practical goals (Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; Yang et al., 2021). In this sense, SNS functions as an informal and flexible learning environment, where formal education is supplemented by short-form, visual and video-based content that youth find relevant, immediate and easy to access.

Comparison and Motivation

The fourth theme centred on comparison and motivation. This theme captures participants' internal reflections as they navigate social media, particularly in relation to how they evaluate themselves in comparison to others. Participants described engaging in social comparison, where exposure to others' lives led to reflection on their own achievements and progress. These comparisons sometimes served as a source of motivation, encouraging self-improvement. However, such comparisons could also give rise to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and perceived shortcomings, particularly when participants felt unable to match the standards presented by others online. This highlights the dual nature of social comparison, which functions as both a motivational driver and a potential source of psychological strain.

This theme is theoretically significant because it shows that social comparison is not a one-dimensional process. SNS can produce negative self-evaluation, envy and feelings of inadequacy, but they can also generate motivation, gratitude and self-improvement. From a U&G perspective, social comparison can be understood as part of self-presentation and self-evaluation, where youth use others' posts as reference points for interpreting their own identity, progress and aspirations. This reflects personal integrative needs, as adolescents may compare themselves with others to assess their confidence, status, attractiveness, achievements or future possibilities (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). At the same time, this subtheme shows that the effects of social comparison depend on how youth interpret and manage what they see online. When comparison creates pressure or inadequacy, it may contribute to ill-being; however, when it encourages reflection, gratitude or aspiration, it may support motivation and self-development (Jarman et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023). Therefore, social comparison should not be treated only as a risk, but as an ambivalent gratification process that can produce both emotional vulnerability and personal growth.

There are two subthemes under Theme 4, namely: feelings of inadequacy and personal fulfilment.

Subtheme: Inadequacy Feelings

Some participants reported experiencing discomfort when exposed to others' representations of daily life on social media. These encounters often triggered feelings of inadequacy, particularly when participants perceived others as having more fulfilling or successful lives.

"When I see people's daily life updates on WhatsApp status, I get this feeling like 'only they have a life' (Participant P4)."

"I'm the quiet type. When I see my extroverted friends, they always seem to get to join many programmes. So, I feel that if I were extroverted too, I might be able to be like them (Participant P8)."

However, for some participants, these feelings of inadequacy were not solely negative but could be transformed into a source of motivation for self-improvement. Rather than remaining passive, they reinterpreted upward comparisons as encouragement to strive for better outcomes. For instance:

"When I see a video where people become successful, I feel like, 'Can I not be like that?'. Like when they get a good results, and mine are bad. So, I feel kind of jealous sometimes. So, I should work harder to get to their level (Participant P19)."

These findings highlight the dual role of social comparison in shaping emotional experiences, where exposure to others' achievements may evoke both negative self-evaluation and motivational responses.

This subtheme shows the risk of social comparison as a negative gratification outcome. Participants may initially seek connection, inspiration or information through SNS, but exposure to idealised representations of others can produce feelings of inadequacy, envy and self-doubt. This reflects a gap between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. While youth may enter SNS for social or motivational reasons, the actual outcome may include negative self-evaluation and lower self-esteem. From a U&G perspective, this demonstrates that media use does not always produce the intended gratification, as the meaning and effect of SNS engagement depend on how users interpret and internalise the content they encounter. This finding supports previous literature which shows that social comparison can shift SNS use from well-being to ill-being, particularly when users compare themselves with idealised images, achievements or lifestyles presented online (Jarman et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023). Therefore, this subtheme demonstrates how SNS use may become emotionally harmful when upward comparison is internalised as a personal deficiency rather than interpreted as a selective or curated online representation.

Subtheme: Personal Fulfillment

Some participants reported a sense of personal fulfilment and emotional stability, even when exposed to others' content on social media. Rather than engaging in negative comparison, these individuals maintained a grounded sense of self and positive interpretations of others' posts.

Participants also indicated that social media could serve as a source of positive motivation, particularly through following inspirational figures.

"I followed Colehairlesscat on Instagram. For me, he gives the most motivation (Participant P1)."

"I don't like comparing myself to others. I am who I am (Participant P9)."

"I don't feel anything negative when I see other people's posts (Participant P13)."

"Sometimes I see sad videos from people showing that their parents don't love them or something like that. But for me, I'm very thankful that my parents love me. And I know, I'm loved (Participant P19)."

These findings suggest that not all social comparison processes lead to negative outcomes. In contrast, this subtheme shows that comparison can also be interpreted adaptively. Some participants expressed self-acceptance, gratitude and motivation when viewing others' content, suggesting that the effect of comparison depends on how youth interpret what they see. From a U&G perspective, this supports the active audience assumption because participants are not automatically harmed by exposure to others' posts. Instead, they actively evaluate, filter and reinterpret content according to their own sense of identity, emotional stability and personal goals (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Korhan & Ersoy, 2015). This indicates that social comparison is not always associated with inadequacy or ill-being; it can also become a source of reflection, inspiration and self-improvement when users engage with content in a selective and emotionally balanced way (Kaur et al., 2021; Wong & McLellan, 2023). In this way, SNS can support personal fulfilment when youth interpret others' achievements or lifestyles as motivation rather than as evidence of personal failure.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings show that Malaysian youth's motivations for using SNS are multidimensional. The four themes demonstrate that youth use social media to satisfy regulatory, emotional, social, cognitive, hedonic and self-evaluative needs. Importantly, the findings move beyond the assumption that youth are passive recipients of social media effects. Instead, participants appear as active users who seek specific gratifications, evaluate the outcomes of their engagement and develop strategies to manage the risks associated with SNS use. Parental governance and self-regulation show how youth learn to control access and exposure; emotion, connection and belonging demonstrate the affective and social value of SNS; entertainment and

information reveal the integration of pleasure and learning; while comparison and motivation highlight the dual role of SNS in shaping self-evaluation and personal growth. Together, these findings suggest that youth well-being is not determined by social media use alone, but by the motivations, interpretations and self-regulatory practices that shape how SNS is used in everyday life.

In the context of U&G, this study reframes youth SNS use as a process of negotiated gratification. The findings show that Malaysian youth aged 16–18 are not merely gratification seekers, but also gratification regulators who actively manage the benefits and risks of SNS use. This supports the U&G assumption that media users are active agents who selectively choose platforms, content and forms of engagement to satisfy particular social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Their engagement with social media is shaped by emotional needs, peer connection, learning, self-presentation, social comparison, parental governance and self-regulation. These motivations reflect multiple U&G needs, including affective needs, cognitive needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension-release needs (Katz et al., 1973; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Wong & McLellan, 2023). The findings also support contemporary social media research which argues that SNS outcomes depend not only on time spent online, but also on users' motivations, activities, communication partners and level of control (Yang et al., 2021; Dutt, 2023; Seidman et al., 2025). This extends U&G by showing that youth media use is not only about satisfying needs, but also about evaluating consequences, setting boundaries and balancing online gratifications with offline responsibilities and well-being.

This study does not claim to represent all Malaysian youth. The sample consisted of twenty participants aged 16–18 who were recruited through snowball sampling from a school-based context in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. As snowball sampling relies on referral networks, the sample may reflect the characteristics of the participants' social circles and may exclude other youth with different backgrounds, locations or social media practices. Therefore, the findings should be understood as context-specific qualitative insights rather than statistically generalisable conclusions. Future studies may expand the sample across different Malaysian states, school types and socioeconomic backgrounds to provide a broader understanding of youth motivations for SNS use.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Nazihah Ibni Hajar (Conceptualization, Writing, Analysis, Resources)

Mohd Faizal Kasmani (Writing, Analysis)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Artificial Intelligence tools were used only to assist in data organization and writing support.

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