



Social media use among adolescents with limited family support: Insights from Uses and Gratifications Theory

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Keywords:</i> social media adolescents broken-home families Uses and Gratifications Theory Indonesia	This study examines social media use among adolescents from broken-home family backgrounds, focusing on how it shapes emotional coping strategies and influences emotional well-being. As social media has become deeply embedded in adolescents' daily lives, it plays an important role in their social and emotional experiences. Drawing on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study explores the motives underlying social media use to fulfill emotional and psychological needs among adolescents experiencing disharmonious family relationships. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed involving 24 Indonesian adolescents who met the study's inclusion criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of participants' everyday social media use. The findings show that social media functions as an emotional coping mechanism, enabling adolescents to regulate emotions and manage personal stress. Scrolling emerged as the most common activity for emotional distraction, while liking, sharing, and commenting served as forms of social validation. Consequently, many participants spent more time engaging with social media than interacting with their families. The emotional connections formed through social media fulfilled needs that remained unmet within their family environments. Among the available platforms, Instagram was the most preferred because its features best accommodated participants' emotional needs and preferences.

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Introduction

Adolescents' ability to manage psychological distress in their daily lives, express emotions, and build interpersonal relationships has been increasingly shaped by the development of social media. Digital platforms have evolved into affective spaces where individuals seek emotional comfort, self-validation, and social support, making social media more than merely a communication tool. Social media provides an environment that enables continuous self-expression and instant responses from social networks through interactive features such as visual posts, private messaging, comments, and social engagement (likes and shares). As boyd (2014) argues, social media has become an integral part of adolescents' social lives, where relationships, identities, and emotions are continuously negotiated in digital spaces. Consequently, users' emotional experiences are increasingly constructed through social media as an alternative social environment rather than solely as a means of communication.

The use of social media for adolescence has become increasingly complex because this developmental stage is characterized by heightened emotional vulnerability, identity exploration, and a strong need for social acceptance. Adolescents actively engage in social interactions to explore their identities and construct meaning in their lives Erikson (1968). Social media facilitates continuous social feedback and serves as an arena where adolescents construct and negotiate their self-representations.

Online interactions may either strengthen or weaken adolescents' emotional experiences depending on their individual social and psychological contexts (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Therefore, adolescents' use of social media should not be understood merely as a form of entertainment but rather as

a social and emotional practice that plays a significant role in identity formation, psychological well-being, and the dynamics of adolescent relationships.

The advancement of digital technology has also transformed communication practices by enabling individuals to produce, manage, and distribute messages independently to broad audiences through internet-based networks. Unlike face-to-face communication, which requires immediate responses, digital communication allows users greater control over message content, delivery, timing, and audience selection. Under these conditions, self-representation can be managed more selectively and reflectively. For adolescents, this environment provides greater opportunities for self-disclosure because communication can be carefully controlled, allowing them to package messages according to their preferences and determine with whom they wish to share them. This new form of communication in the digital era demonstrates that users possess a high degree of autonomy in managing their communicative activities within digital environments (Castells, 2009).

Previous studies have shown that adolescents' patterns of social media use are strongly influenced by family conditions and dynamics. Families characterized by warm, intensive, and harmonious communication differ substantially from families in which communication is limited or where adolescents experience neglect during critical stages of development. The family represents the primary social context in which adolescents receive emotional support, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication skills. This environment shapes how adolescents respond to the outside world and directly influences their developmental trajectories. Adolescents raised in unsupportive family

environments are more likely to experience emotional vulnerability. Such vulnerability becomes even greater when families experience prolonged conflict or when one parental figure is absent. Consequently, adolescents often seek social support beyond the family because of insufficient attention and emotional care. These circumstances arise from unsupportive communication with parents or other significant individuals within their immediate environment. Prolonged stress and feelings of loneliness frequently result in communication patterns characterized by emotional withdrawal or difficulty expressing personal needs among adolescents from disharmonious family backgrounds (Baumrind, 1991).

The need for positive interpersonal relationships and social acceptance constitutes a fundamental human motivation. Individuals naturally strive to establish and maintain stable, positive social bonds, particularly within the family. During adolescence, maintaining these relationships becomes especially important because this developmental period is marked by increased sensitivity to social acceptance and rejection. When emotional closeness, attention, and acceptance are not adequately fulfilled within the family, adolescents frequently seek alternative sources to satisfy these needs. Peer groups, social communities, and digital communication networks often become important relational spaces through which adolescents fulfill their social and emotional needs. This process of seeking social support beyond the family reflects the fundamental need for belongingness and social connectedness, both of which are essential for adolescents' psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Previous research has extensively examined the relationship between adolescents' mental health and social media use, focusing primarily on issues

such as self-esteem, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Several studies have even reported an increased risk of psychological problems associated with intensive social media use. However, these studies generally conceptualize social media as a variable that negatively affects adolescents' well-being. In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to how social media is used by adolescents from disharmonious or broken-home family backgrounds. Therefore, this study specifically investigates how adolescents experiencing family disharmony, parental separation, or broken-home conditions utilize social media in their everyday lives.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the subjective experiences of adolescents from disharmonious family backgrounds in their use of social media. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of adolescents' experiences of using social media in their everyday lives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. This approach facilitated the contextual exploration of participants' emotional experiences within their social and family environments.

The participants consisted of 24 adolescents aged 16–19 years who were purposively selected based on the following criteria: they had experienced disharmonious family relationships and were active users of social media. The study was conducted in East Java, Indonesia. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' experiences.

The study was conducted with honesty, objectivity, and strict adherence to research

ethics. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect their privacy and to prevent any potential harm while ensuring that the research findings remained credible, ethically sound, and accountable.

Results and Discussion

Social media as a communication tool

Adolescents who experience parental separation or ongoing family conflict often require emotional support beyond their immediate family to fulfill their psychological needs. Social media provides opportunities for both contextual and situational psychological support through digital interaction. Its unrestricted communication features and access to diverse sources of information have made social media an integral part of adolescents' everyday lives. This close relationship with digital platforms offers various benefits depending on how individuals use them. One important consequence is its influence on adolescents' mental health, which reflects the broader social conditions surrounding media use Odgers and Jensen (2020).

Within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), adolescents actively and deliberately select media to satisfy their psychological and social needs. Their motivations for using social media include fulfilling affective needs, constructing personal identity, achieving social integration, and relieving emotional tension. These motivations are facilitated by user-friendly platform features that align with adolescents' daily activities and provide easy access to information from multiple sources. Communication needs that remain unmet within the family environment can therefore be compensated for through interactions with others within digital networks. Accordingly, audiences actively

use social media in ways that correspond to their psychological conditions in order to achieve particular forms of gratification (Kad, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974).

The Uses and Gratifications perspective is particularly relevant for understanding social media practices among adolescents who experience poor family communication or inadequate parental attention. Faced with challenging and constantly changing social environments, these adolescents frequently perceive social media as a more comfortable space for interacting with the outside world. Social media platforms are intentionally designed to provide convenience and comfort that are often absent from face-to-face interactions. Consequently, adolescents' moods and self-esteem may be influenced by digital interactions, as symbolic indicators such as likes, comments, and other forms of online engagement function as social feedback with significant emotional consequences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Uses and Gratifications Theory explains how individuals actively use media to satisfy their personal needs and desires. Originally proposed by Kad and Gurevitch in 1959, the theory argues that media audiences do not passively receive information; instead, they actively select media content according to their own needs and motivations. In contemporary digital environments, social media has the potential to strengthen social connectedness, reduce feelings of loneliness, and provide safe spaces for vulnerable populations. However, these outcomes largely depend on users' patterns of media use and their capacity for emotional regulation (McAlister, 2024).

The development of digital network technologies has created new forms of public space through social media, where individuals establish relationships, interact with others, and present their identities to wider audiences. Unlike conventional

public spaces, these networked publics are characterized by technological affordances that enable content to be searchable, persistent, replicable, and scalable. Within this environment, adolescents gain opportunities to share personal experiences, interact with peers, and obtain social recognition from digital communities. Their lived experiences become increasingly intertwined with digital environments, creating a perception that online content closely reflects their own realities. As a result, adolescents often discover communities with shared interests and experiences, allowing them to construct and negotiate their social identities within networked public spaces (boyd, 2014).

According to Ellison, social media enables users to expand access to information and establish new social networks while simultaneously strengthening emotional ties with individuals who share close social relationships. These interactions generate social resources that are acquired through online social and affective connections. Effective communication within digital environments fosters a sense of belonging to particular communities through trust, social support, and continuous interaction. Consequently, social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as a mechanism for developing social capital by providing emotional support, access to information, and valuable social connections that benefit individuals in their everyday lives (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Fifteen of the twenty-four participants in this study acknowledged that they spent more than three hours per day scrolling through social media. For these adolescents, social media served primarily as a means of diverting attention from situations they perceived as emotionally uncomfortable in their daily lives. They reported that social media fulfilled important emotional needs by providing entertainment, information,

and opportunities for interaction. Communication within their immediate families was often perceived as inadequate, whereas social media provided emotional experiences that they were unable to obtain at home. Participants also emphasized that digital platforms offered diverse content that was relevant to their developmental stage. By contrast, family members often responded negatively, particularly among adolescents whose parents had separated. Consequently, these adolescents described their daily struggles as considerably more complex than those experienced by peers living with both parents.

When meaningful social connections are not adequately established within the family, adolescents tend to seek them through social media. Beyond facilitating information exchange within networked publics, social media also enables what Papacharissi describes as affective publics, in which emotions become central to digital communication. Emotional exchanges occur as users create, share, and respond to messages containing personal experiences, feelings, and repeated emotional expressions. Through comments, shared posts, and ongoing online conversations, individuals develop emotional resonance and a sense of connectedness with others. In this way, social media creates affective spaces where users build solidarity, experience emotional closeness, and receive continuous social recognition (Papacharissi, 2015).

Face-to-face communication often fails to fulfill adolescents' emotional needs, particularly among those who have experienced parental separation. Consequently, many adolescents seek alternative sources of emotional fulfillment by spending more time on social media. The sense of comfort created within digital platforms offers unique advantages for these adolescents. Social interactions and

connections established through social media provide immediate feedback that tends to enhance their affective well-being. The considerable amount of time they devote to social media represents a meaningful exchange for the emotional satisfaction they receive after experiencing the communication void left by those from whom they expected emotional support, particularly their parents and immediate family.

Adolescents from non-intact families often experience limitations in emotional acceptance, openness, and psychological security within their immediate family environment. As a result, many of these unmet emotional needs are fulfilled through social media. Their ability to express emotions freely is frequently constrained within the domestic setting due to prolonged family conflict, limited communication, and the absence of one parent. These circumstances often create uncertainty and hesitation in interpersonal communication. By contrast, social media provides accessible relationships, age-relevant information, accepting communities, and emotionally expressive symbols such as emojis, all of which compensate for the emotional connectedness that has been lacking in their family relationships.

Participants consistently reported that mood regulation was the primary factor influencing the amount of time they spent on social media. The challenges of everyday life frequently led them to use social media as a means of calming themselves and restoring emotional comfort. They expected that temporary emotional relief obtained through entertaining online content would generate more positive emotional experiences. For adolescents who experience limited support within their immediate environments, social media may function as a temporary emotional refuge where they seek comfort, reduce feelings of sadness and loneliness,

and cultivate emotional well-being through engagement with preferred content and online communities (Kad et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Social media as a source of adolescent connectedness

Adolescence represents a transitional developmental period characterized by rapid psychological, biological, and social changes, making adolescents particularly vulnerable to environmental pressures. During this stage, they become increasingly sensitive to uncertainty, social rejection, and interpersonal conflict. Compared with children and adults, adolescents respond more intensely to social evaluation and emotional experiences because of the unique characteristics of their developing social and emotional systems. Consequently, pressures originating from school, family, peer relationships, and other social environments are often experienced more intensely (Steinberg, 2014).

For adolescents whose parents have separated, these developmental challenges become substantially more complex. The emotional security normally provided by the presence and support of both parents is diminished by the absence of one parent, prolonged parental conflict, or divorce, creating forms of psychological distress that differ from those experienced by adolescents from intact families. Although these family circumstances remain beyond adolescents' control, they are nevertheless required to bear their emotional consequences. Most participants in this study described themselves as feeling more comfortable using social media because they perceived the challenges they faced as fundamentally different from those of their peers. They viewed the world as harsher and increasingly relied on social media as a means of distraction and emotional coping.

Fourteen participants reported that they experienced stronger interpersonal relationships through social media than within their own families. Digital platforms enabled them to maintain more intensive communication with individuals who were perceived as more attentive and emotionally supportive, particularly members of communities with shared interests. Their sense of connectedness emerged through common experiences and mutual interests. When family relationships became unsatisfactory or emotionally unavailable, participants sought alternative ways to establish meaningful interpersonal connections, with social media representing the most accessible option. Female participants in this study were generally more likely than male participants to express their emotions through social media. They explained that discussing personal problems directly with family members often reactivated painful memories, while negative responses reinforced feelings of rejection. Although social media is not a value-neutral environment, participants perceived it as a space where they could express themselves more freely while accessing the entertainment and emotional support they desired. In this sense, social media enabled them to remain socially connected without confronting the emotionally demanding dynamics associated with face-to-face family interactions characterized by fractured relationships.

Interactive features such as likes, comments, and shares also functioned as symbolic indicators through which adolescents evaluated themselves. These forms of social feedback shaped how participants perceived their own self-worth based on the responses of others. Receiving numerous positive reactions made adolescents feel appreciated, accepted, and socially valued, whereas negative responses

often generated feelings of embarrassment, rejection, and diminished self-confidence. Because adolescence is a critical period of identity formation, evaluations received through digital environments exerted a significant influence on participants' self-esteem. Consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, social recognition emerged as one of the principal gratifications sought through social media use. Attention received from other users represented an important form of acknowledgment that many participants rarely experienced within their offline family relationships, particularly those from broken or non-intact families. Feelings of belonging were reinforced through symbolic interactions such as likes, comments, and shares, which enhanced social gratification while simultaneously improving mood and fostering a greater sense of emotional security.

Instagram was the social media platform most frequently chosen by the participants. This preference reflected adolescents' active efforts to satisfy their needs for information and entertainment through a platform they perceived as most compatible with their interests and daily experiences. In line with the Uses and Gratifications perspective, audiences are not passive recipients of media content; rather, they actively select media that best satisfies their psychological and social needs. For the participants in this study, Instagram offered a comprehensive range of features that supported these needs. Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, making opportunities for self-expression particularly important. Instagram enables users to express their interests, lifestyles, and personalities through photographs, videos, Stories, and Reels. These features allow adolescents to construct desired self-images and receive feedback from their online audiences. Such interactions play

an important role in identity formation, as adolescents continuously evaluate their self-concepts through the responses they receive from others.

Another important function of social media use among adolescents was maintaining relationships with peer groups and communities. Sustaining social interaction with friends and remaining actively involved in communities represented important ways of preserving their social presence within these groups. Social connectedness was not limited to face-to-face encounters but was maintained through features such as Stories, comments, and direct messages. The need to experience belonging within peer groups had particularly positive implications for adolescents who experienced instability and emotional challenges within non-intact family environments.

From the Uses and Gratifications perspective, media are selected because they provide opportunities to relieve emotional tension through entertainment and information while simultaneously offering psychological relaxation. Instagram fulfilled these functions by providing creative and entertaining content that helped participants reduce boredom and temporarily escape the pressures of everyday life. Short-form videos, music, and trending content were readily available within the platform, enabling adolescents to select content that matched their personal preferences and emotional needs.

Participants also used Instagram to satisfy their need for social surveillance. Several informants explained that keeping up with current information, particularly developments within their peer communities, was highly important. Remaining informed about emerging issues and youth trends enabled them to maintain relevance within their social environments and avoid feeling left behind. Access to

culturally and socially relevant information allowed participants to remain connected to positive peer environments despite facing greater personal challenges than many of their peers.

Social recognition, participation, and interactivity emerged as additional gratifications that adolescents obtained through Instagram. These three dimensions contributed substantially to participants' overall satisfaction with the platform. Nine participants reported that they did not simply consume content passively; instead, they frequently reshared posts that closely reflected their own experiences and emotions. Within the Uses and Gratifications framework, sharing behavior can be interpreted as an attempt to obtain social recognition while simultaneously expressing one's identity. By resharing content that resonated with their personal experiences, participants communicated aspects of themselves that they found difficult to express directly. Many described how emotional experiences that were overlooked or unsupported within their families could instead be represented through content available on social media. This perceived correspondence between digital content and their lived experiences provided participants with an opportunity to communicate their emotions indirectly and without conditions. New media provide additional forms of gratification, including social recognition, participation, and interactivity (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The findings of this study support this perspective, demonstrating that adolescents' practices of sharing content extend beyond information exchange to include the communication of personal meanings and emotional experiences.

Through sharing, participants expressed feelings that they believed accurately represented their everyday lives. For many of them, sharing emotionally

relevant content also functioned as an important coping strategy for reducing anxiety and achieving emotional relief.

Conclusion

Adolescents from disharmonious family backgrounds use social media as a form of compensation for the communication and emotional support that they do not receive within their households, particularly from members of their immediate families. Participants in this study reported feeling more comfortable communicating through social media, which served as a substitute for the interpersonal communication that was absent from their family relationships. Consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, adolescents were not passive consumers of media; rather, they actively selected social media platforms that best satisfied their specific emotional, psychological, and social needs. When parents provided limited attention, experienced separation, or failed to prioritize positive communication with their children, adolescents increasingly relied on activities such as scrolling through social media to compensate for these unmet needs. Building interactions within digital environments became meaningful because social media fulfilled communication needs that were not adequately met within the home. Thus, social media functioned not merely as a source of entertainment but as an important medium through which adolescents compensated for deficiencies in their everyday communication experiences.

Instagram emerged as the platform most frequently preferred by the participants, suggesting that its features closely matched adolescents' developmental and communicative needs. The platform provided opportunities for greater self-expression while facilitating friendship

formation, social networking, and peer support. Furthermore, Instagram offered emotional validation through interactive features that enabled participants to feel acknowledged, accepted, and connected with others who shared similar experiences. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the central proposition of Uses and Gratifications Theory that media users actively select communication platforms according to their individual needs and desired gratifications. Practically, the study demonstrates that social media has evolved into an increasingly important communication tool that fulfills adolescents' emotional and social needs in their everyday lives, particularly for those from disharmonious family backgrounds.

This study was limited to adolescents whose communication needs were insufficiently fulfilled within their immediate family environments. Future research should involve broader participant characteristics, include adolescents from more diverse family contexts, and examine a wider range of social media platforms to provide a more comprehensive understanding of adolescents' digital communication practices.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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