



The Impact of Social Media on Adolescents' Self-Regulation and Empathy: A Literature Analysis of Social Psychology and Digital Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impact of social media on adolescents' self-regulation and empathy by reviewing 25 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024. Utilizing a qualitative literature review method and thematic content analysis, the research explores patterns and outcomes drawn from recent empirical findings in social psychology and digital behavior. The results reveal a dual impact of social media use. Regarding self-regulation, 13 studies (52%) reported negative outcomes such as decreased attention control, increased impulsivity, and dependence on online validation. Conversely, 8 studies (32%) found that certain digital tools, like habit-tracking apps or reflective content, can enhance self-monitoring and emotional control. For empathy, 10 studies (40%) indicated positive effects—such as increased affective empathy through exposure to online social campaigns—while 9 studies (36%) showed negative effects, like emotional desensitization and reduced cognitive empathy due to diminished face-to-face interaction. The remaining articles presented mixed results. Contextual factors such as interaction type (active vs. passive use), platform characteristics, age, and parental mediation were found to moderate the psychological outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of promoting mindful, purposeful social media use and call for collaborative strategies involving educators, parents, and policymakers to support adolescents' emotional development in digital spaces.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 2025/06/23

Accepted: 2025/06/28

Published: 2025/06/30

KEYWORDS

Adolescents;
Social Media;
Self-Regulation;
Empathy;
Digital Behavior.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

- Conception and design of the study;
- Acquisition of data;
- Analysis and interpretation of data;
- Manuscript preparation;
- Obtaining funding

Cites this Article : Sahab, Arfia Salsa Aulia; Nurdin, Muhammad Nur Hidayat; Ismail, Ismalandari. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on Adolescents' Self-Regulation and Empathy: A Literature Analysis of Social Psychology and Digital Behavior. **Competitor: Jurnal Pendidikan Kepeleatihan Olahraga**. 17 (2), p.2096-2107

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, social media has emerged as one of the most influential forces shaping human interaction, identity development, and behavioral norms. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat have not only revolutionized the way people communicate but have also profoundly influenced the psychological development of adolescents, a group that is especially susceptible to environmental and social stimuli. According to recent data, over 90% of adolescents globally have access to



smartphones and use social media platforms regularly, with an average daily screen time exceeding three hours (Pew Research Center, 2022).

This digital revolution offers various benefits, including increased access to information, enhanced opportunities for self-expression, and the ability to connect with global communities. However, these platforms are also associated with significant psychological consequences, particularly for adolescents navigating identity formation, emotional regulation, and interpersonal empathy (Crone & Konijn, 2018). In light of these shifts, psychological and educational stakeholders must explore the profound implications of digital environments on adolescent development.

Two key psychological constructs frequently discussed in adolescent development are self-regulation and empathy. Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in pursuit of long-term goals, often involving impulse control, emotional regulation, and attentional focus (Duckworth & Steinberg, 2015). Empathy, on the other hand, encompasses the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, which is fundamental to forming prosocial behaviors and sustaining interpersonal relationships (Decety & Cowell, 2015).

While these traits are partially biologically determined, they are also malleable and significantly influenced by environmental factors, one of which is digital interaction. Numerous studies have suggested that social media can impair adolescents' ability to self-regulate due to constant exposure to instant gratification, distractions, and online validation mechanisms (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020). Concurrently, the depersonalized nature of online communication may dampen emotional sensitivity and reduce empathic concern, as it lacks the non-verbal cues and shared physical context that nurture human empathy (Reinecke et al., 2018).

On the contrary, some research has indicated that when used positively, social media may enhance empathic engagement by exposing adolescents to diverse perspectives, narratives of social justice, and online communities centered on emotional support (Michikyan et al., 2014). Thus, the influence of social media is neither entirely detrimental nor wholly beneficial; it is shaped by the manner and context in which it is used.

Given this complexity, the primary issue addressed in this literature analysis is to explore how social media usage affects the development of self-regulation and empathy among adolescents. More specifically, the study aims to: (1) Identify patterns and correlations between the intensity and type of social media usage with levels of self-regulation and empathy, (2) Evaluate theoretical models from social psychology and behavioral science that explain these correlations, and (3) Assess the mediating factors such as gender, culture, platform characteristics, and parental involvement that modulate these effects.

This issue is urgent in light of increasing concerns regarding adolescent mental health, rising levels of online aggression and cyberbullying, and deteriorating attention spans—all of which have been linked to social media overuse and poor self-regulation (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Likewise, diminished empathy has been identified as a contributing factor to the normalization of hate speech and reduced civic engagement among youth (Konrath et al., 2011).

While the intersection of social media, adolescent psychology, and behavioral outcomes has attracted scholarly attention, several gaps persist in the literature. Firstly, much of the existing research has examined social media's impact on either self-regulation or empathy in isolation, rather than viewing these constructs as interrelated components of adolescent psychosocial development. This is a critical oversight given that emotional regulation is often a prerequisite for prosocial behaviors such as empathy.

Secondly, prior studies are frequently quantitative and focus heavily on usage metrics (e.g., hours per day, number of apps used), neglecting the nuanced content and context of interactions—such as whether adolescents are passive scrollers or active content creators (Nesi et al., 2017). There is also a dearth of cross-cultural studies that consider how sociocultural norms influence digital behavior and its psychological outcomes.

Lastly, most frameworks used in earlier research are rooted in individual psychology and often lack the integrative lens of social psychology, which emphasizes the relational and contextual nature of human development. This limitation reduces our understanding of how social media not only affects internal states (e.g., emotional control) but also social dynamics (e.g., empathy, peer interaction).

This study presents a novel contribution by conducting a qualitative and integrative literature review that bridges insights from social psychology, digital behavior theory, and developmental psychology. The novelty lies in:

Interdisciplinary Synthesis: Incorporating theories such as Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the General Aggression Model, and the Online Disinhibition Effect to understand digital interactions more holistically (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Suler, 2004; Bandura, 2001).

Dual Focus on Self-Regulation and Empathy: Rather than examining each independently, this study explores the dialectical relationship between the two and how they are co-influenced by social media.

Contextual Analysis: Focusing not just on how much adolescents use social media, but on how and why they use it, considering platform types (visual vs. textual), interaction style (anonymous vs. personal), and content exposure (toxic vs. constructive).

Behavioral Interventions: Identifying strategies that parents, educators, and policymakers can adopt to harness social media's positive aspects while mitigating risks.

To address these questions, this article analyzes a curated selection of empirical studies published in the last ten years, drawing from Scopus-indexed and nationally reputable journals. The literature is examined through the lenses of cognitive-emotional development, digital behavior typologies, and social learning frameworks.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, we will outline the theoretical background related to self-regulation, empathy, and digital behavior. Second, we present a synthesis of empirical findings from studies conducted between 2014 and 2024, categorizing them based on positive versus negative effects. Third, we discuss mediating and moderating variables influencing outcomes. Lastly, we offer practical recommendations for stakeholders and directions for future research.

In an era where adolescents are both the architects and the subjects of digital culture, it becomes imperative to understand how these tools affect their inner lives and

outer relationships. By examining both the light and shadow of social media, this study hopes to contribute to a more balanced, evidence-based discourse and to support the psychological well-being of youth in a digital age.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literature review using thematic content analysis grounded in social psychology, cognitive-behavioural theory, and digital media studies. The objective is to identify, analyze, and synthesize empirical findings related to the impact of social media on adolescent self-regulation and empathy. This integrative design allows for a multidimensional understanding of behavioral responses to digital environments, especially among teens navigating psychosocial development (Williams & Merten, 2021).

Table 1.
Research Design

Component	Description
Research Type	Qualitative Literature Review
Analytical Approach	Thematic Content Analysis
Theoretical Framework	Social Psychology, Cognitive-Behavioral Theory, Digital Media Studies
Research Objective	Examine literature on social media's effects on self-regulation and empathy.

This study systematically searched academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, PubMed, and Sinta (S1-S3). Searches were conducted using Boolean keyword combinations in English and Indonesian, such as "social media AND adolescent self-regulation", "digital behavior AND empathy", and "teenager emotional development AND social media". Only peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 were selected. This strategy ensured a comprehensive collection of recent and high-quality literature (Zhang et al., 2021).

Table 2.
Data Sources and Search Strategy

Database	Document Type	Year Range	Language
Scopus, PubMed	Peer-reviewed journals	2014-2024	English
ScienceDirect	Systematic reviews, studies	2014-2024	English
Google Scholar	Empirical studies	2014-2024	English/Indonesian
Sinta (S1-S3)	National journal articles	2014-2024	Indonesian

The selection process followed strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure research quality and relevance. Included studies were published in English or Indonesian, focused on adolescents aged 12-18, and investigated self-regulation and/or empathy to social media use. Only peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals (Scopus Q1-Q4 or Sinta 1-3) were considered. Excluded were studies on adults/young children, non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., blogs, opinion pieces), and articles unrelated to the psychological aspects of social media use (Lee & Cho, 2020).

Table 3.
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
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Language	English, Indonesian	Other languages
Population	Adolescents (12-18 years)	Adults, early childhood
Content Focus	Self-regulation, empathy, and social media	Unrelated psychological constructs
Source Type	Scopus/Sinta journals (peer-reviewed)	Blogs, opinions, non-peer-re

The data collection followed a systematic protocol aligned with PRISMA guidelines. Articles were first identified through database searches using defined keywords. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text assessments. Eligible studies were documented by extracting key metadata, including authorship, year, objectives, methods, and main findings. The PRISMA Flow Diagram was utilized to transparently visualize the selection process (Page et al., 2021).

Table 4.
Data Collection Process

Step	Description
Identification	Keyword-based search in databases
Screening	Abstract and title review
Eligibility	Full-text review
Inclusion	Metadata extraction of relevant articles

The data extraction process involved systematically coding key variables from each selected study. Using thematic analysis, researchers classified variables such as type of social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), dimensions of self-regulation (impulse control, emotional regulation, attention focus), and empathy (affective, cognitive). Duration, frequency, and style of digital interaction (active vs. passive) were also noted. NVivo software was employed for manual thematic coding to ensure consistency and accuracy across data points (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Table 5.
Data Extraction and Coding

Variable Category	Examples
Social Media Type	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook
Self-Regulation	Impulse inhibition, emotion control, focus
Empathy	Affective empathy, cognitive empathy
Usage Pattern	Duration, intensity, active vs. passive

This study utilized thematic content analysis to identify and interpret recurring themes across selected studies. Key impacts of social media were categorized as either positive or negative. The analysis further explored how usage context (e.g., platform type, interaction style) influenced psychological outcomes. To ensure validity, peer debriefing was conducted with experts in adolescent psychology and digital behavior. Inter-rater reliability was assessed when coding was performed by multiple reviewers, ensuring consistency and reducing bias (Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 6.
Data Analysis Technique

Analysis Step	Description
Thematic Categorization	Positive vs. Negative Impacts
Contextual Analysis	Link media usage patterns to psychological effects
Validation Methods	Peer debriefing and inter-rater reliability

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Overview of Included Studies

A total of 25 peer-reviewed articles were included in this literature analysis, all published between 2014 and 2024. The studies were selected based on their relevance to the psychological impact of social media on adolescents, specifically focusing on self-regulation and empathy. Among the selected articles, 14 were quantitative, 7 were qualitative, and 4 utilized mixed-method approaches. All studies were conducted within the Indonesian context, offering culturally relevant insights into adolescent digital behavior. The included studies varied in sample size, methodological rigor, and digital platforms examined (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook). A summary of the key characteristics of the studies is presented below:

Table 7.

Overview of Included Studies

Study Type	Number of Studies	Year Range	Country
Quantitative	14	2014-2024	Indonesia
Qualitative	7	2015-2023	Indonesia
Mixed-Methods	4	2016-2024	Indonesia

Impact of Social Media on Self-Regulation

The reviewed studies revealed both negative and positive effects of social media on adolescent self-regulation. On the negative side, frequent exposure to digital distractions significantly reduced attention control, leading to academic disengagement and multitasking overload. Adolescents also developed a dependence on external validation, such as likes and comments, which shaped their behavior and emotional stability. Moreover, impulsivity increased due to the constant stimulation from fast-paced content, often weakening their ability to delay gratification. However, positive impacts were also noted. Some adolescents exhibited improved self-awareness by engaging with reflective content such as mental health campaigns or mindfulness videos. Additionally, access to self-monitoring tools, including digital journaling and habit-tracking apps, supported goal-setting and behavior regulation.

Table 8.

Impact of Social Media on Self-Regulation

Theme Category	Description
Negative Impact	Distraction, external validation, impulsivity
Positive Impact	Self-awareness via content, self-monitoring tools

Impact of Social Media on Empathy

The findings highlight both detrimental and constructive effects of social media on adolescent empathy. On the negative side, reduced face-to-face interaction and reliance on text-based messaging diminished cognitive empathy, as adolescents struggled to interpret emotional cues without non-verbal communication. Furthermore, repeated exposure to verbal aggression and cyberbullying led to emotional desensitization, reducing sensitivity to others' suffering. Conversely, positive outcomes were evident in adolescents who engaged in online social campaigns, which increased their affective

empathy by exposing them to diverse personal stories and global issues. Participation in emotional support communities, such as mental health forums, also fostered compassion and understanding among peers facing similar challenges.

Table 9.
Impact of Social Media on Empathy

Theme Category	Description
Negative Impact	Reduced cognitive empathy, desensitization due to cyberbullying
Positive Impact	Increased affective empathy via social campaigns, emotional support groups

Contextual Factors Influencing Outcomes

The psychological effects of social media on adolescents are significantly influenced by contextual factors. One key variable is the interaction style—passive users (e.g., scrolling without engagement) are more likely to experience reduced empathy and poor self-regulation, whereas active users (e.g., content creators or discussion participants) often report higher self-awareness and social connectedness. Platform characteristics also shape outcomes: TikTok, with its emphasis on visual emotional expression, tends to stimulate emotional empathy, while Instagram fosters image-based social comparison, potentially increasing self-doubt. Additionally, moderating variables such as age, gender, duration of use, and parental supervision were identified as critical in determining the direction and intensity of social media's psychological impact.

Table 10.
Contextual Factors Influencing Outcomes

Contextual Factor	Influence on Outcomes
Interaction Style	Passive = reduced empathy; Active = awareness
Platform Type	TikTok = empathy; Instagram = comparison
Moderating Variables	Age, gender, usage duration, parental control

Visualization of Study Outcomes

To better illustrate the distribution of findings, a visual representation of the 25 analyzed studies was created. The results show that 10 studies (40%) reported predominantly positive impacts, 11 studies (44%) identified negative impacts, while 4 studies (16%) presented mixed outcomes, where both benefits and drawbacks of social media were discussed. When categorized by dimension, self-regulation was more frequently associated with negative effects, whereas empathy showed a slightly higher incidence of positive development. These patterns are summarized in the following table.

Table 11.
Visualization of Study Outcomes

Dimension	Positive Impact	Negative Impact	Mixed Impact
Self-Regulation	8 (32%)	13 (52%)	4 (16%)
Empathy	10 (40%)	9 (36%)	6 (24%)

Illustrative Quotes from Qualitative Studies

To enrich the thematic analysis, this section presents representative quotes extracted from qualitative studies that capture adolescents' reflections, emotions, and

behavioral changes related to social media use. These firsthand accounts illustrate the nuanced impact of digital engagement on psychological development. For example, some participants reported increased emotional expression and connectivity, while others described heightened anxiety and self-comparison. Such narratives provide valuable context behind statistical findings and highlight the subjective realities of adolescent digital life.

Table 12.
 Illustrative Quotes from Qualitative Studies

Theme	Participant Quote
Emotional Expression	"Posting my thoughts on TikTok helps me feel less alone when I'm anxious."
Social Comparison	"Scrolling Instagram makes me feel like I'm always behind everyone else."
Empathy Development	"Reading stories of people's struggles online made me more understanding."
Impulsivity	"Sometimes I can't stop checking notifications even when I'm doing homework."

These quotes reinforce the emotional depth behind behavioral trends observed in the literature.

Synthesis and Interpretation

The synthesis of findings across the 25 selected studies reveals several consistent patterns. First, active social media use (e.g., engaging in discussions or creating content) is more likely to support empathy and self-awareness, while passive consumption (e.g., scrolling without interaction) tends to correlate with impulsivity and emotional withdrawal. Additionally, studies using qualitative methods often emphasize emotional nuance and social context, whereas quantitative studies tend to highlight behavioral metrics such as screen time and self-control scores. Cultural context also played a role: Indonesian-based studies frequently emphasized the role of family supervision and religious values in moderating online behavior. These patterns suggest that both usage style and socio-cultural environment significantly influence psychological outcomes.

Table 13.
 Synthesis and Interpretation

Pattern/Factor	Consistent Finding
Usage Style	Active use = positive; Passive use = negative
Methodological Approach	Qualitative = depth/context; Quantitative = measurement
Cultural Context	Family/religious values buffer negative effects.

Discussion

The present review highlights the complex and multifaceted impact of social media on adolescents' self-regulation and empathy, drawing upon contemporary literature from social psychology and digital behavior studies. As digital platforms continue to evolve, their psychological influence on youth becomes increasingly significant, with both developmental risks and growth opportunities coexisting in dynamic digital environments.

Social Media and Self-Regulation: A Double-Edged Sword

The findings of this review reaffirm previous research that identifies social media as both a source of cognitive overload and a tool for self-monitoring and reflection (Crone & Konijn, 2018). Several studies emphasize that adolescents with heavy screen time, particularly those engaging in passive scrolling, show reduced inhibitory control and shorter attention spans (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Nesi et al., 2018). The constant availability of notifications, likes, and algorithm-driven content promotes instant gratification, which undermines the adolescent's ability to delay gratification—an essential function of self-regulation (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

However, self-regulation is not uniformly deteriorated by digital engagement. Research also shows that adolescents who use structured digital tools (e.g., habit-tracking apps, mindfulness content) can enhance self-monitoring skills and develop greater personal agency (Turel & Bechara, 2016). This aligns with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which underscores the role of observational learning and self-reflective processes in behavior regulation, especially in digital spaces where role models are abundant (Bandura, 2001).

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Empathy

Empathy, both affective and cognitive, has been deeply affected by the digital transition. One of the most prominent risks is the decline in face-to-face interaction, leading to reduced exposure to non-verbal cues essential for interpreting emotional states in others (Konrath et al., 2011). This can impair cognitive empathy, especially among adolescents who rely primarily on text-based messaging and image-based communication (Reinecke et al., 2018).

Conversely, certain aspects of social media facilitate empathic development. Adolescents exposed to online narratives of adversity, activism, or mental health awareness may develop heightened emotional sensitivity and moral concern (Michikyan et al., 2014). Participation in online support groups and prosocial communities has also been associated with improved empathic responses (Seabrook et al., 2016). This phenomenon supports Decety and Cowell's (2015) view that empathy can be cultivated not only through physical proximity but also through exposure to emotionally charged digital content.

Interaction Style and Platform Design: A Critical Moderator

A key theme in this review is the distinction between active and passive social media use. Active engagement, such as content creation, peer dialogue, and advocacy participation, tends to foster self-awareness and social connectedness. Passive consumption, however, is associated with lower mood, increased comparison, and reduced empathy (Verduyn et al., 2017). This dichotomy reinforces the idea that digital behavior style, not merely screen time, determines psychological outcomes.

Platform design also matters. For instance, Instagram's emphasis on aesthetic and social validation promotes appearance-based self-worth and can lead to emotional dysregulation (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). In contrast, platforms like TikTok, where humour, storytelling, and emotional disclosure are common, may foster affective

resonance and peer empathy. Thus, platform affordances should be considered in policy and educational guidelines.

Cultural and Developmental Considerations

Cultural context plays a pivotal role in mediating the effects of social media. Studies from Indonesia, for example, reveal that religious values, parental supervision, and collectivist norms influence how adolescents interpret and respond to digital experiences (Hamdani et al., 2020). Adolescents in environments with strong family engagement and digital literacy support tend to display better emotional control and less vulnerability to online peer pressure.

Developmentally, early adolescents (12–15 years) are more susceptible to the emotional volatility of social media, while older adolescents may develop critical thinking and adaptive strategies. This is consistent with neuroscientific evidence that suggests that the prefrontal cortex—responsible for impulse control and empathy—is still maturing during adolescence (Steinberg, 2015).

Educational and Clinical Implications

The review suggests that interventions aimed at improving adolescent well-being should consider both digital literacy and emotional intelligence. Schools can integrate media mindfulness programs that teach students to evaluate digital content critically, regulate their online behavior, and recognize manipulative design features. Clinicians working with adolescents should also assess digital behavior patterns as part of psychosocial evaluations and tailor therapy to include self-regulation training in online contexts.

Parental involvement remains a critical buffer. Evidence suggests that co-engagement with media, such as discussing online experiences with parents or teachers, can mitigate the negative impact of social media and promote more empathetic digital behavior (George & Odgers, 2015).

Limitations of Current Research

Despite growing scholarly attention, current research still presents limitations. First, many studies rely on self-reported data, which are subject to recall bias and social desirability. Second, there is insufficient longitudinal data to assess the causal relationship between social media usage and psychological traits over time. Third, cross-cultural studies remain limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. Future research should prioritize long-term designs, incorporate biopsychosocial frameworks, and consider intersectionality (e.g., gender, socio-economic status, rural-urban gaps).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should explore: (1) Emotion regulation strategies embedded in digital tools, (2) Artificial Intelligence's role in shaping adolescent behavior via algorithmic personalization, (3) The impact of short-form video content (e.g., reels, shorts) on cognitive attention and empathy, and (4) Digital empathy training modules for adolescents in schools.

Such inquiries can help evolve a more balanced narrative, recognizing that technology, when critically and mindfully used, can support rather than hinder adolescent development.

CONCLUSION

In summary, social media presents both risks and resources for adolescent psychological development. While it can challenge self-regulation and dilute face-to-face empathetic experiences, it also holds potential to enhance emotional awareness, social inclusion, and self-reflection, especially when used mindfully. The key lies in intentional usage, educational scaffolding, and informed platform design. This review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the digital adolescence landscape and calls for collaborative action among parents, educators, clinicians, and policymakers to cultivate healthy digital ecosystems for future generations.

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