International Journal Of Digital Controversies And Social Behaviour

VOL.1-NO.1-2026

P ISSN: xxxx-xxx

E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTROVERSIES ON YOUTH BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an influential part of young people's daily lives, shaping their communication patterns, attitudes, emotional experiences, and social relationships. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X allow young people to exchange information, express opinions, and participate in public discussions. However, social media controversies, including online arguments, viral scandals, misinformation, cyberbullying, celebrity disputes, and politically sensitive debates, can significantly influence youth behaviour. Continuous exposure to controversial content may affect young people's emotional well-being, decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of social norms. Furthermore, online criticism, public shaming, and pressure to follow popular opinions can encourage impulsive responses and aggressive communication. At the same time, controversial discussions can promote critical thinking, awareness of social issues, and participation in constructive dialogue when users evaluate information responsibly. This research examines the impact of social media controversies on youth behaviour, with particular attention to emotional responses, behavioural changes, peer influence, online interactions, and information-sharing practices. The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach to explore existing research published between 2023 and 2026. The research aims to identify the potential risks and positive opportunities associated with controversial social media content and to explain how digital literacy, parental guidance, and responsible platform use may help young people respond more constructively. The study emphasizes the importance of promoting critical thinking, emotional regulation, respectful communication, and responsible digital citizenship among youth.

KEYWORDS: *Social Media Controversies, Youth Behaviour, Digital Communication, Cyberbullying, Emotional Well-being, Peer Influence, Misinformation, Digital Literacy, Online Conflict, Social Networking.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the ways young people communicate, obtain information, develop relationships, and understand the world around them. Digital platforms have become important spaces for entertainment, education, social interaction, political discussion, and personal expression. Levant, R. F., McDermott, R. C., Rabinowitz, F. E., Englar-Carlson, M., Liang, C. T., & Kilmartin, C. (2023). Revealed that, Young people frequently use social media to follow public figures, participate in online communities, discuss social issues, and share personal experiences. Although these platforms provide opportunities for learning and connection, they also expose users to controversies that can influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Social media controversies generally refer to public disagreements, disputes, scandals, accusations, offensive statements, misinformation, and conflicts that attract substantial attention and generate competing opinions. Such controversies may involve celebrities, influencers, educational institutions, political figures, social movements, or ordinary individuals whose actions become widely discussed online. Galea, S., & Buckley, G. J. (2024). Elobrated on, The rapid circulation of controversial information can make these events particularly influential among young users, who may encounter the same dispute repeatedly through posts, videos, comments, memes, and reactions. Research on digital media and adolescent development highlights the importance of understanding not only how frequently young people use social media but also the nature of their online experiences and the social contexts in which those experiences occur (National Academies of Sciences,

Engineering, and Medicine, 2024).One important aspect of social media controversies is their ability to influence emotional responses. Young people may experience anger, sadness, anxiety, embarrassment, excitement, or frustration when exposed to controversial discussions. Lahti, H., Kulmala, M., Lyyra, N., Mietola, V., & Paakkari, L. (2024). Found that, For example, a viral dispute involving a popular influencer may encourage users to support one individual while criticizing another.

As discussions become increasingly emotional, users may post aggressive comments, share unverified accusations, or participate in online arguments without carefully considering the consequences. Repeated exposure to hostile discussions can also normalize disrespectful communication and encourage young people to interpret disagreement as a personal attack. However, emotional reactions differ according to individual personality, family environment, social support, age, and previous experiences. Some young people may respond impulsively, whereas others may evaluate the available information and maintain a balanced perspective. Therefore, social media controversies should not automatically be considered harmful; their influence depends on the content encountered, the user's interpretation, and the circumstances surrounding online participation.Another significant dimension is the influence of peer pressure and online popularity. Young people often observe how friends, classmates, influencers, and other users respond to controversial events. Likes, comments, reposts, and follower counts can make particular opinions appear more socially acceptable or influential. Lakshminrusimha, S., Lubarsky, D. A., Gamber, R. A., & Devaskar, S. U. (2024). Explained, When a controversy attracts widespread attention, young users may feel pressure to express support for a particular side, even when they lack sufficient information about the issue. Some may share controversial content to gain recognition, demonstrate loyalty to a group, or avoid criticism from their peers. Others may remain silent because they fear becoming targets of online harassment. These experiences illustrate how digital environments can shape social identity, conformity, and interpersonal relationships.

The Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health emphasizes the need to consider the complex relationship between online experiences and young people's psychological and social development (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining how controversies affect behaviour both online and offline.Social media controversies may also contribute to the spread of misinformation and the development of inaccurate beliefs. Matias, J. N., Waldrip, C., & Lazer, D. (2026). Elobrated on, During a controversial event, information may circulate before its accuracy has been established. Edited videos, misleading headlines, manipulated images, and emotionally charged claims can influence public perceptions and encourage premature judgments. Young people who lack adequate media literacy skills may find it difficult to distinguish credible information from rumours, satire, and deliberately misleading content. As a result, they may repeat false claims, develop negative attitudes toward individuals or groups, or make decisions based on incomplete information. Algorithmic recommendation systems may further increase exposure to similar opinions and emotionally engaging material, although the effects vary across platforms and individuals. These concerns demonstrate the importance of examining how young users verify information, interpret online discussions, and respond to competing perspectives. The American Psychological Association (2023) recommends an age-appropriate approach to adolescent social media use that considers developmental differences, online content, and the importance of supportive relationships.In addition to

misinformation, social media controversies can affect interpersonal behaviour and communication patterns. Online environments sometimes encourage users to make comments that they would avoid in face-to-face conversations. The distance between users, the possibility of anonymity, and the speed of digital communication may contribute to insulting language, public humiliation, and cyberbullying. Young people involved in controversial discussions may experience hostility from strangers or become targets of coordinated criticism. Such experiences can damage self-confidence, weaken friendships, and discourage participation in online communities. In educational settings, disagreements originating on social media may continue in classrooms, college groups, and personal relationships. Nevertheless, online controversies can also provide opportunities to discuss discrimination, social justice, environmental concerns, and other important issues.

When young people engage respectfully with different viewpoints, these discussions may develop empathy, communication skills, and civic awareness. The central challenge is therefore to distinguish constructive disagreement from harmful forms of online conflict.The significance of this research lies in the growing role of digital communication in young people's social development and everyday decision-making. Families, teachers, educational institutions, policymakers, and social media companies need a clearer understanding of how controversial content influences youth behaviour and which protective strategies may reduce harmful consequences. Digital literacy education can help young people recognize misinformation, assess sources, and understand the consequences of sharing content. Emotional regulation and conflict-resolution skills can encourage thoughtful responses instead of impulsive reactions. Parents and teachers can provide guidance without dismissing young people's online experiences, while platforms can improve reporting mechanisms and reduce the circulation of harmful material. Against this background, the present study examines the impact of social media controversies on youth behaviour through a review of relevant literature published from 2023 to 2026. It explores emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of online controversy and identifies practical strategies for encouraging responsible participation in digital environments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the impact of social media controversies on youth behaviour, particularly their emotional responses, social interactions, decision-making, and online communication practices, and to identify strategies that promote responsible digital engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How do social media controversies influence youth behaviour, emotional well-being, social interactions, and decision-making, and what strategies can help young people respond to controversial online content responsibly?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media controversies have become an important subject in contemporary research because digital platforms influence how young people receive information, form opinions,

and interact with others. Controversies can spread rapidly through short videos, hashtags, comment sections, and online discussions, allowing users to encounter multiple interpretations of the same event. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) examined the relationship between social media and adolescent health, emphasizing that online experiences may produce both benefits and risks depending on the individual, content, and context. This perspective is important because it challenges the assumption that every social media controversy necessarily produces negative behaviour. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2024found that, Some controversies may encourage young people to question existing beliefs, become aware of social problems, and participate in meaningful discussions. Other controversies may promote hostility, emotional distress, and the rapid circulation of misleading information. Youth behaviour is therefore influenced not only by exposure to controversial content but also by the way individuals interpret that content and respond to social reactions. The literature suggests that future research should distinguish between constructive disagreement, emotionally charged debate, and harmful online conflict to develop a more accurate understanding of their behavioural consequences (Galea & Buckley, 2024; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024).Emotional responses represent one of the major dimensions through which social media controversies may influence youth behaviour.

Young people can experience anger, anxiety, embarrassment, frustration, and social pressure when they encounter online arguments, public criticism, or controversial allegations. Olivera-Figueroa, L. A., Papastamatelou, J., Unger, A., Jimenez-Torres, G. J., Cuebas López, K. A., López-Córdova, N. M., & Barkil-Oteo, A. (2023). Elobrated on,These reactions may become stronger when the controversy involves a person they admire, a group to which they belong, or an issue connected with their personal values. The Office of the Surgeon General (2023) highlighted concerns about the relationship between social media experiences and youth mental health, emphasizing the importance of safe and supportive digital environments. Similarly, Galea and Buckley (2024) discussed the need to interpret evidence about adolescent social media use carefully rather than assuming that all online engagement produces the same psychological effects. Emotional responses can influence behaviour by encouraging impulsive comments, repeated checking of updates, arguments with peers, or withdrawal from online communities. Nevertheless, some young people may use controversial discussions to express their concerns, seek social support, or develop a better understanding of complex issues. The psychological impact also depends on the frequency of exposure, the severity of the controversy, and the availability of emotional support. These findings indicate that emotional well-being should be considered alongside behavioural responses when examining the impact of social media controversies on youth.Peer influence is another important factor in understanding the relationship between social media controversies and youth behaviour. Digital platforms provide visible indicators of popularity, including likes, shares, comments, views, and follower numbers. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, & US Department of Health and Human Services. (2021). Explained,These indicators may influence how young people judge the acceptability of opinions and the social status of individuals involved in controversial events.

When a dispute becomes widely discussed, users may feel pressure to support a popular position or criticize a person who has become the target of public disapproval. Some young

people may share posts without independently evaluating their accuracy because they want to maintain friendships, gain recognition, or avoid exclusion from their peer groups. This behaviour reflects the importance of social identity and the desire for acceptance during adolescence and early adulthood. The American Psychological Association (2023) recommends considering adolescent developmental needs when evaluating social media experiences and encouraging appropriate guidance for young users. Lahti et al. (2024) also investigated problematic social media situations and the competencies required to address them, supporting the importance of developing skills for responsible online participation. However, peer influence can also produce positive outcomes when young people encourage one another to reject harassment, correct misinformation, and participate in respectful discussions. Consequently, the influence of controversial content depends partly on the norms established by online communities and friendship groups.Cyberbullying and aggressive communication are significant concerns associated with controversial online discussions. During a social media controversy, users may criticize individuals through insulting comments, humiliating memes, threatening messages, or the repeated sharing of private information. Such behaviour can intensify when users believe that their comments will receive approval from others or when large numbers of people participate in public criticism. Young people who become targets of online hostility may experience embarrassment, isolation, fear, or difficulties maintaining relationships with classmates and friends. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) identified online harassment and the need for effective protective measures as important considerations in understanding adolescent social media experiences. Lahti et al. (2024) further examined problematic situations that adolescents encounter online and the competencies needed to prevent or manage them.

These concerns indicate that digital communication skills should include respectful disagreement, privacy protection, conflict resolution, and the ability to disengage from harmful discussions. At the same time, it is important to recognize that criticism of an opinion or public action does not automatically constitute cyberbullying. Researchers must distinguish between legitimate disagreement, offensive communication, targeted harassment, and repeated abusive behaviour. This distinction enables a more balanced assessment of how social media controversies affect young people's interpersonal conduct.The circulation of misinformation is another important mechanism through which social media controversies may influence youth behaviour. During widely discussed events, information is often shared before its accuracy has been independently established. Misleading headlines, edited videos, false accusations, and emotionally persuasive claims may influence how young people interpret events and evaluate the individuals involved. Users may also encounter repeated messages supporting a particular position, which can create the impression that the position is universally accepted. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) emphasized the importance of digital media literacy, transparency, and improved research into social media's effects on young people. Effective digital literacy requires users to check original sources, compare independent reports, distinguish evidence from opinion, and consider whether a post has been manipulated or presented without context. These skills are particularly important when controversial content encourages immediate emotional reactions or demands that users take sides. Critical thinking can reduce the likelihood of sharing unverified claims and can support more thoughtful decision-making. Furthermore, controversial discussions can become useful educational experiences when teachers

encourage students to compare arguments, identify logical errors, and evaluate evidence. Therefore, the influence of social media controversies depends partly on whether young users possess the knowledge and skills needed to interpret online information responsibly.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a qualitative, literature-based methodology to examine the impact of social media controversies on youth behaviour. The research relies on secondary information obtained from academic publications, research articles, institutional reports, and scholarly literature published between 2023 and 2026. Relevant materials are identified through Google Scholar and academic or institutional publishing platforms using search terms such as social media controversies, youth behaviour, adolescent mental health, cyberbullying, online conflict, misinformation, and digital literacy. The selection process prioritizes publications that directly address young people's social media experiences, emotional responses, interpersonal relationships, decision-making, and online communication. Sources that provide general information about social media without a clear connection to youth or behavioural outcomes are given lower priority. Selected materials are reviewed to identify recurring themes, differences in findings, and potential relationships between controversial online content and behavioural responses. Particular attention is given to evidence concerning psychological well-being, peer influence, harassment, misinformation, and constructive digital participation. Institutional reports are included where they provide authoritative assessments or recommendations relevant to the research question. The study does not involve direct recruitment of participants, interviews, questionnaires, or experimental procedures. Consequently, its findings represent a synthesis and interpretation of existing literature rather than new empirical observations. The methodology is designed to provide a structured understanding of the topic while recognizing that the effects of social media vary according to individual characteristics, cultural contexts, and the nature of online experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study follows a qualitative descriptive research design to present an organized account of how social media controversies may influence youth behaviour. This design is suitable because the research aims to describe the experiences, concerns, and behavioural patterns discussed in existing literature rather than test a specific intervention. It provides an accessible framework for examining emotional reactions, social interactions, online communication, and information evaluation. The descriptive design also allows the study to identify similarities and differences between published findings without claiming that every observed relationship represents a direct causal effect. The literature is interpreted in relation to the central research question, ensuring that the discussion remains focused on the behavioural consequences of controversial social media content.The research uses a structured process to identify relevant publications. Searches are conducted using combinations of keywords related to social media controversies, adolescent development, online harassment, emotional well-being, peer influence, and digital literacy. Google Scholar is used as a discovery tool, while publisher websites and recognized institutional sources are consulted to verify publication details and relevance. The principal publication window is 2023–2026, with priority given to research published within this period. Sources are assessed

according to their relevance to the research question, credibility, methodological transparency, and contribution to understanding youth behaviour. When a publication discusses social media generally, it is included only when its findings or recommendations offer a meaningful connection to controversial content or the behavioural mechanisms examined in this study.The study includes scholarly articles, research reports, and institutional publications that discuss young people's social media experiences and related behavioural or psychological outcomes. Priority is given to credible, traceable sources that explain their evidence or research procedures. Publications concerning cyberbullying, online conflict, misinformation, adolescent mental health, and responsible digital participation are particularly relevant. Sources are excluded when their publication details cannot be verified, when they provide insufficient information about their claims, or when they do not meaningfully address the research question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study uses thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the selected publications. The process begins with reviewing the relevant sources and noting statements concerning controversial social media content, youth responses, and associated behavioural outcomes. Similar observations are grouped into broader categories, including emotional well-being, peer pressure, cyberbullying, misinformation, and digital literacy. Each category is then examined to identify how different authors explain the relationship between online experiences and youth behaviour. This procedure allows the study to summarize a broad range of literature within a manageable analytical framework. The resulting themes are interpreted in relation to the research objective and question rather than treated as independent or unrelated issues.A comparative analysis is conducted to examine similarities and differences between the selected sources. For example, some publications emphasize the potential risks associated with online harassment, harmful content, and repeated exposure to distressing discussions, whereas others emphasize social connection, learning, and opportunities for constructive participation. The analysis considers differences in research methods, population groups, and the outcomes being examined. It also distinguishes between evidence of association and evidence of causation. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) provides an important basis for this balanced interpretation by recognizing both potential benefits and harms of adolescent social media experiences. Comparing different perspectives helps prevent oversimplified conclusions about the effects of controversial content.The final stage integrates the identified themes into an overall explanation of how social media controversies may influence youth behaviour. Emotional reactions and peer influence are considered alongside platform characteristics, information quality, and individual digital literacy.

FINDINGS

The literature reviewed indicates that social media controversies may create emotionally intense experiences for young users, particularly when discussions involve public criticism, personal values, popular figures, or peer relationships. Exposure to aggressive comments and repeated conflict may contribute to frustration, anxiety, embarrassment, or anger in some circumstances. These emotions may influence online behaviour by encouraging impulsive responses, arguments, repeated engagement with controversial posts, or avoidance of online

spaces. However, the reviewed evidence does not establish that all young people experience these effects or that controversy alone causes psychological difficulties. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) emphasizes the importance of considering the characteristics of individual users and the wider context of their social media experiences. The findings therefore suggest that emotional responses should be understood as potential outcomes shaped by the type of controversy, the user's personal circumstances, and the availability of social support.A second major finding concerns the potential influence of controversies on peer relationships, social identity, and communication practices. Popular online disputes can encourage young people to take sides, repeat the opinions of influential users, or judge others according to their participation in a particular debate.In some cases, these patterns may contribute to misunderstandings, hostile comments, and strained relationships. Cyberbullying and public humiliation present additional concerns when disagreements develop into targeted or repeated abuse. Lahti et al. (2024) identify problematic social media situations and the competencies needed to address them, supporting the importance of teaching young people how to manage difficult online interactions. At the same time, the literature suggests that online discussions can encourage solidarity, awareness, and constructive engagement when users communicate respectfully. The key finding is that peer influence does not always produce harmful behaviour; its consequences depend partly on the expectations, values, and communication practices of the online community.

CONCLUSION

Social media controversies are an important area of research because they create opportunities for communication and awareness while also presenting challenges for youth behaviour. The present study examined the possible effects of controversial online content on emotional responses, peer relationships, communication practices, and decision-making. The reviewed literature suggests that public disputes, online harassment, emotionally charged content, and misinformation can influence how some young people interpret events and interact with others. However, these effects are not uniform, and social media controversies should not automatically be regarded as harmful. Their consequences depend on the nature of the content, individual circumstances, social relationships, and the ability to evaluate information critically. A balanced understanding must therefore recognize both the risks of harmful online interactions and the potential benefits of constructive digital engagement.The study recommends strengthening digital literacy education in schools, colleges, and universities so that young people can identify unreliable information, assess sources, and understand the consequences of sharing controversial material. Educational institutions should also promote emotional regulation, respectful disagreement, conflict resolution, and responsible online communication. Parents and teachers can support young people by discussing online experiences openly and offering guidance without automatically dismissing their concerns. Social media platforms should provide accessible reporting systems, improve responses to harassment, and promote greater transparency about content recommendation practices. Young users should be encouraged to pause before reacting to provocative posts, avoid spreading unverified allegations, protect personal information, and seek support when online conflict becomes distressing. These recommendations emphasize shared responsibility rather than placing the entire burden on young people.This study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and does not include surveys, interviews, experiments, or direct observation of youth behaviour. Its conclusions therefore cannot establish the prevalence of

particular behavioural outcomes or demonstrate that social media controversies independently cause them.

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