Exploring the Positive Impacts of Social Media Engagement among Malaysian Secondary School Students

Halim Ismail, Arifin Mamat, Hasniza Ibrahim, Nazatul Akmar Mokhtar, Muhammad Noor Aiman Zailan

Kulliyyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: halimismail@iium.edu.my, drarifin@iium.edu.my, hasnizaibrahim@iium.edu.my, nazatulakmar@iium.edu.my, matnoman8@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the positive impact of social media engagement on character development among Malaysian secondary school students. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with eight secondary school students from various backgrounds. The findings reveal that when navigated purposefully, social media use significantly contributes to a) students' ability to learn independently, b) build meaningful social relationships, and c) enhance their communication skills. The subthemes for independent learners are 1) goal-oriented, 2) intrinsically motivated, 3) independent learning, 4) reflective thinking, 5) adaptability, 6) lifelong learning orientation and 7) future-oriented learning engagement. The sub-themes for social relationships are 1) strengthening family ties, 2) enhancing peer relationships, and 3) improving teacher-student rapport. As for the communication skills, the sub-themes found are 1) increased confidence, 2) role modelling, 3) communication platform preference and 4) development of social initiative and engagement. These insights underscore the constructive potential of social media in shaping student character and suggest implications for educators, parents, and policymakers to promote positive and educational content in digital spaces actively.

Keywords

Positive Impacts, Social Media Engagement, Malaysian, Secondary School Students

1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of students' lives. Despite the frequent

criticism it receives for its negative impact, there is also a need to examine its constructive roles in character development, particularly in academic support, interpersonal relationships, and communication. The rise of social media has dramatically transformed how secondary school students interact, learn, and perceive themselves. While social media platforms offer numerous benefits and positive impacts, excessive or improper use has been well known to lead to several negative consequences.

Character development refers to the process through which students cultivate moral, intellectual, civic, and performance virtues that guide their ethical decision-making, behaviour, and interactions with others. It involves moral growth (Berkowitz, 2021), self-evaluation, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Integration (Yuan et al., 2025).

Character education, which includes the nurturing of values such as respect, responsibility, empathy, and self-discipline, is a fundamental aspect of the Malaysian education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Social media, when integrated with educational goals and guided by proper digital citizenship principles, can serve as a powerful tool for reinforcing these values. For instance, students engaging in online campaigns, volunteerism, or constructive discourse can develop a stronger sense of civic responsibility and ethical reasoning (Livingstone, 2014).

Furthermore, the Malaysian government's initiatives, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, emphasise holistic student development, including moral and emotional growth alongside academic achievement (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). With increasing internet penetration and smartphone access among youth (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 2023), understanding how social media can support rather than hinder character development becomes increasingly important.

This paper examines the positive impact of social media engagement on the character development of secondary school students, focusing on aspects such as academic support, interpersonal relationships, and communication. Drawing on recent research, this study highlights the positive aspects associated with social media usage in shaping the character and moral values of Malaysian secondary school students. By examining relevant literature and conducting fieldwork interviews, the study aims to highlight social media as a tool for enhancing learning, interpersonal relationships and communication skills among students.

2. Literature Review

Students utilise platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram for collaborative learning, homework assistance, and resource sharing. Social media encourages peer-to-peer support and real-time feedback (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Ahmad & Saad (2023) emphasised the potential of using social media platforms (such as WhatsApp and Telegram) for collaborative homework and peer support. Moderate and purposeful use of social media (e.g., for group study or educational con-

tent) can enhance learning and collaboration (Omar, Hassan, & Bolong, 2021). Goodyear & Armour (2021) have also emphasised that contemporary youth are increasingly utilising social media platforms to access diverse and valuable academic content that supports their cognitive and educational development. Additionally, social media can serve as a valuable source for raising awareness of current affairs, fostering social support, and promoting civic engagement, particularly concerning global issues such as climate change (Parnes, Amort, Calderon-Smith, Chambers, & Musicaro, 2024).

Social media platforms serve as vital spaces where adolescents can express themselves, form meaningful relationships, and participate in community-driven dialogues that contribute to their social development. According to Molyneux et al. (2022), adolescents who actively engage in constructive online interactions often experience greater social support and improved well-being, as these platforms allow for peer validation and the sharing of personal experiences. Similarly, Lim and Omar (2023) found that Malaysian youths utilise social media not only for entertainment but also as a means to maintain social ties, collaborate on academic tasks, and participate in civic activities, highlighting its role in nurturing a sense of belonging and digital citizenship. These findings underscore the potential of social media as a tool for fostering positive social behaviour when used responsibly. These platforms contribute meaningfully to the strengthening of existing social ties while simultaneously broadening users' social networks (Ouvrein, Verswijvel, & Kimpe, 2019). The social support obtained through these interactions has been shown to enhance feelings of connection and reduce experiences of loneliness (Uhls et al., 2017). Supporting this, Vaingankar et al. (2022) reported in their study of individuals aged 15 to 24 in Singapore that social media networks can facilitate positive psychological development through three key mechanisms: cultivating relationships with peers and global communities, active engagement with media content, and opportunities for personal expression.

Active engagement on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter enables students to learn how to communicate concisely and creatively. Students develop digital literacy, which is a key 21st-century skill (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Some studies have also found that social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, are used by students for collaborative projects, promoting clarity, coordination, and timely communication. These skills directly transfer to real-world teamwork and professional interaction (Al-Khalidi, 2021). Socially anxious individuals find online communication more manageable due to its asynchronous nature and the absence of nonverbal cues, which allows them to express emotions and communicate more effectively (Pierce, 2009). Social media platforms offer a dynamic environment where students can engage in discussions, share their opinions, and receive immediate feedback, thereby enhancing their ability to articulate ideas clearly and confidently. For example, Alghamdi and Ahmad (2023) found that university students who actively used platforms such as Instagram and Twitter demonstrated improved written communication skills and the ability to adapt

their language to different audiences. Likewise, a study by Tan and Yusof (2022) on Malaysian secondary school students revealed that frequent participation in group chats and online academic forums encouraged the use of polite language, persuasive techniques, and collaborative dialogue, contributing to better oral and written communication competencies. These findings suggest that, when guided appropriately, social media can serve as an effective supplementary tool for enhancing students' communication skills. Based on the literature review, there is a need to explore the role of social media as a tool for enhancing learning, social and communication skills among students.

3. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight secondary school students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to explore the positive impact of social media engagement on character development among secondary school students. These students were selected from both the upper and lower secondary levels, comprising three females and five males. The significant benefit of these interviews is that the researchers can get thick, rich data (Creswell, 1998) and are aimed at answering questions related to "how" and "why"—data that would not have been easily obtainable from the use of a survey questionnaire. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the consent of both the parents and students.

Content analysis of these interviews was conducted to identify common patterns, main themes, and subthemes that emerged from the qualitative data, as reflected in the informants' verbal responses (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). ATLAS.ti was utilised to organise and manage the coded data, allowing for easy retrieval and comparison of themes across interviews. The technique utilised to establish the validity and credibility of the data is member-checking, as suggested by McKim (2023).

4. Findings

The study's findings, based on the interview responses, revealed several main themes indicating that social media use can contribute positively to character development by encouraging students to become more self-directed learners, fostering positive interpersonal relationships, and enhancing their communication skills, as illustrated in Figure 1.

4.1. Theme 1: Self-Directed Learners

Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok were identified as major contributors to knowledge acquisition among the students interviewed. These platforms were commonly utilised at various stages of the learning process, for example, as preparation before learning a new topic, during homework completion, and in preparation for examinations. While ChatGPT was also cited as an additional reference source, it was not classified as a social media platform. Subjects most frequently mentioned included Mathematics, Science, History, and Fundamentals of Com-

puter Science. Students referred not only to local video content but also to international sources, reflecting a diverse range of learning materials.
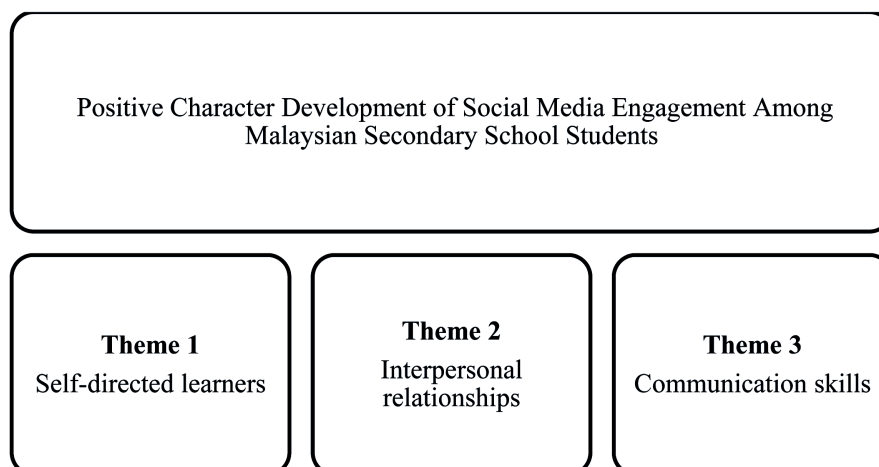
Figure 1. Main themes of positive character development of social media engagement among Malaysian secondary school students.

Interestingly, one student expressed a particular interest in exploring a subject through content from a neighbouring country, Indonesia. All students reported feeling enjoyment and a sense of fulfilment when they were able to learn effectively through these online channels.

"*At this school, there are two academic streams: RBT* (*Design and Technology*) *and ASK* (*Fundamentals of Computer Science*). *ASK focuses more on coding. However, in Malaysia, there are not many videos that help me understand coding, so I refer to international content, particularly from Western countries, for related coding topics.*" (Student B)

"*As for me, I always look for science experiments. If the experiment is interesting, I'll watch it.*" (Student A)

"*I really enjoy mathematics because on social media, I can easily and quickly learn methods for solving problems. The videos I refer to are local.*" (Student D)

"*IPS* (*Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial/Social Knowledge*) *is a subject area in Indonesia, and in Malaysia, it is somewhat equivalent to Bahasa Malaysia, Geography, and History. While Malaysia has fields like accounting, Indonesia has branches such as IPS.*" (Student C)

Interview findings also revealed that the use of social media can lead to positive academic outcomes, as it encourages the development of self-driven and competitive learners. The following are the subthemes for positive traits of self-directed learning as illustrated in Table 1:

1) Goal-oriented: Students set their learning objectives and develop strategies to achieve them.

"*In my case, my class teacher is often occupied with external duties. As a result, our lessons tend to fall behind, so I use social media to study on my own.*" (Student B)

Table 1. Sub-themes for self-directed learning.

Subtheme	Description
1) Goal-Oriented	Students set their own academic goals and determine appropriate strategies to achieve them.
2) Intrinsically Motivated	Learning is driven by curiosity and personal interest, rather than external factors such as grades or teacher pressure.
3) Independent Learning	Students take charge of their learning by utilising online platforms, such as eBooks, apps, YouTube, or ChatGPT, rather than relying solely on teachers.
4) Reflective Thinking	Students evaluate and modify their learning strategies based on effectiveness and personal growth.
5) Adaptability	Learners find appropriate tools or resources depending on the learning context, including when facing limitations in school.
6) Lifelong Learning Orientation	Students demonstrate a commitment to continuous learning, encompassing academic, personal, and spiritual growth, and often share their knowledge with others.
7) Future-Oriented Learning Engagement	Students use social media to explore career interests and prepare for higher education or future professions.

2) Motivated: Students exhibit curiosity, interest, and a desire to improve their learning, driven by intrinsic motivation rather than external pressures such as being told, forced, or driven solely by grades.

"*For example, at school, I have already learned and understood Chapter Two. However, if the teacher does not proceed with Chapter Three in the next class, I will refer to social media to learn Chapter Three in advance.*" (Student C)

3) Independent: Students engage in learning by utilising various reference materials, including those available online, such as eBooks, websites, applications, and videos, and do not rely solely on teacher-led instruction.

"*Sometimes, when I do not understand the teacher's explanation at school, I try asking ChatGPT or watching TikTok and YouTube to get alternative content and explanations.*" (Student F)

4) Reflective: Students are capable of evaluating their learning progress and know how to implement appropriate strategies to master or enhance their academic achievement.

"*My personal development involves becoming more interested in learning. I think it was two or three years ago that I did not enjoy studying, but when my friends suggested trying online learning, I gave it a try and found that it was easier to understand and more enjoyable. Learning became something I looked forward to.*" (Student D)

"*For me, it is easier to understand lessons through social media compared to what is taught by teachers at school. This is because teachers tend to teach strictly based on what is written in the textbook, resulting in too much input for students to absorb, which can hinder deeper understanding. In contrast, learning content*

on social media is already condensed and simplified, making it easier to grasp." (Student C)

5) Adaptability: Students know how to formulate strategies to seek assistance or locate necessary resources based on the timing and context of their learning needs.

"*In my opinion, as Student A mentioned earlier, sometimes in school we need to ask questions if we do not understand or hear things. Some teachers are willing to respond and repeat their explanations, but others dislike having to repeat themselves, which can make students feel embarrassed about asking. However, on social media, we can ask Google or ChatGPT. So, students do not get scolded or feel ashamed for asking questions.*" (Student C)

"*With social media, we can repeat the learning content as many times as needed until we understand. Nevertheless, in school, we have to ask questions, and sometimes the teacher does not have time to go over the material again.*" (Student A)

6) Lifelong learning: In addition to the self-directed and competitive learner traits outlined earlier, these students also exhibit attitudes aligned with lifelong learning. They demonstrate a positive disposition not only toward acquiring academic knowledge but also toward staying informed about current events, both locally and globally—for example, developments in Malaysian affairs, news, and parliamentary discussions. Some even conduct independent research based on their interests and inclinations.

Moreover, their learning engagement extends beyond personal enrichment; they also share practical knowledge and correct misinformation when necessary. The knowledge they acquire through social media encompasses not only worldly subjects but also religious understanding. Islamic videos, in particular, have been acknowledged by students as beneficial in enhancing their religious knowledge and helping them become better Muslims.

"*In my case, I feel I have become a better person because when I watch TikTok videos, there are many Islamic videos that increase my knowledge about Hadith. I can also understand the Qur'an better through videos, as I find it difficult to comprehend when reading it alone without a translation. On TikTok, there is a video of a religious teacher reciting verses while the translation is displayed on the screen.*" (Student B)

7) Future-Oriented Learning Engagement. Some students have already begun preparing themselves for higher education by effectively leveraging social media as a tool for learning and self-enrichment.

"*For example, during weekends and my free time, I use social media for research for about* 2 *to* 3 *hours.*" (Student C)

"*I also use TikTok and YouTube a lot to learn more about topics related to engineering, because I aspire to become an engineer.*" (Student B)

Traits such as intrinsic motivation, self-reflection, independence, adaptability, life-long learning and goal orientation are essential in shaping individuals who are highly competitive and capable of sustaining success in various aspects of life.

4.2. Theme 2: Relationships with Others

The use of social media as a platform for building and strengthening relationships is undeniably significant. While the modern dependence on mobile devices and gadgets can sometimes obscure the true value of meaningful relationships, social media, when used wisely, has the potential to enhance interpersonal connections. The main subthemes for relationships with others are explained in Table 2:

Table 2. Sub-themes for relationships with others.

Subtheme	Description
1) Strengthening Family Ties	Social media helps maintain and deepen emotional bonds with family members, including through motivational content.
2) Enhancing Peer Relationships	Students become more socially engaged and comfortable with friends through social media interaction.
3) Improving Teacher-Student Rapport	Informal communication on social media with receptive teachers fosters a sense of closeness and comfort.

1) Strengthening Family Ties: As acknowledged by the students interviewed, social media enables them to "strengthen bonds" with family members, both near and far, as well as with parents, friends, and teachers. Forming new connections was also mentioned as an added benefit, as they allow students to learn about cultures and languages from other countries. In some cases, motivational videos helped to "strengthen family ties".

2) Enhancing Peer Relationships: Student B, who previously found it difficult to initiate conversations and communicate with others, now reports that they are "more talkative" after getting to know peers better through social media. Observing others' content on social platforms also helps students become more cautious and selective when choosing friends.

3) Teacher-student relationships were also seen to improve through social media, particularly with educators who are receptive to flexible language use, recognising that today's youth often communicate in a modern, less formal tone.

"*There are some teachers who do not mind if students communicate with them like friends on social media. This makes students feel closer and more comfortable with the teacher.*" (Student C)

4.3. Theme 3: Communication Skills

Communication skills are among the most significantly impacted abilities resulting from the effective use of social media. Table 3 illustrates the subthemes for communication skills:

1) Increased Verbal Confidence and Expressiveness. Many students acknowledged that their communication competencies have improved due to the opportunities and space provided by social platforms to practice and engage socially. Students gained confidence in speaking and interacting with others, overcoming

initial shyness or introversion.

"*Before I knew anything about social media, I was quiet. I found it difficult to talk or communicate with others, but after getting to know my friends, I have become much more talkative.*" (Student B)

Table 3. Sub-themes for communication skills.

Subtheme	Description
1) Increased Verbal Confidence and Expressiveness	Students gained confidence in speaking and interacting with others, overcoming initial shyness or introversion.
2) Role Modelling and Imitation of Positive Behaviours	Confident individuals on social media inspired students and encouraged them to adopt positive behaviours, such as public speaking and initiating contact.
3) Shift from Online to Face-to-Face Communication Preference	Students transitioned from relying on digital platforms to preferring in-person interactions, reflecting an improvement in their interpersonal communication skills.
4) Development of Social Initiative and Engagement	Social media motivated students to step out of their comfort zones, engage socially, and become more active in their school or peer environments.

2) Role Modelling and Imitation of Positive Behaviours: Confident individuals on social media inspire students and encourage them to adopt positive behaviours, such as public speaking and initiating contact. Some students began by imitating positive behaviours observed on platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube.

"*The impact of social media on me is that when I see someone on social media confidently doing things I would not dare to do—like speaking in front of others or inviting people to something—I take that as inspiration and try to apply it in my life.*" (Student C).

3) Shift from Online to Face-to-Face Communication Preference   Students transitioned from relying on digital platforms to preferring in-person interactions, reflecting an improvement in interpersonal communication.

"*Previously, I preferred communicating through social media, but now I prefer face-to-face interaction.*" (Student A)

4) Development of Social Initiatives and Engagement: Social media motivated students to step out of their comfort zones, engage socially, and become more active in their school or peer environments.

"*When I first entered this school in Form* 1, *I preferred to sit alone and wear a face mask... However, I saw some extroverted students at school and on social media... So I kept trying and eventually became who I am today—an extrovert, maybe even overly extroverted.*" (Student C).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The interviewed adolescents have identified the use of digital devices to access social media as a beneficial medium for knowledge acquisition and self-directed learning. This finding aligns with previous research by Omar, Hassan, & Bolong,

(2021), which suggests that students can enhance their academic performance in the subject through social media, with a positive correlation between social media usage, multitasking on social media platforms, and students' academic self-efficacy. The findings also support the studies by Goodyear and Armour (2021), which suggest that contemporary youth are increasingly utilising social media platforms to access valuable academic content that supports their educational development.

From a socio-developmental perspective, the positive impact of social media on adolescents' interpersonal relationships is equally significant. The study aligns with the findings by Ouvrein et al. (2019) that social media platforms contribute meaningfully to the strengthening of existing social ties while simultaneously broadening users' social networks. It also supports the study by Vaingankar et al. (2022), which suggests that social media networks can facilitate positive psychological development through the cultivation of relationships with peers and global communities, active engagement with media content, and opportunities for personal expression.

The enhancement of communication skills, which emerged as a significant positive finding in this study, is closely linked to the increased opportunities for social interaction facilitated by social media platforms as suggested by Livingstone & Helsper (2007) that social media platforms can enable students to learn how to communicate concisely and creatively. Students develop digital literacy, which is a key 21st-century skill. Adolescents who were initially shy or lacking in self-confidence reported observing and emulating others who displayed openness and self-assurance in their communication. These role models were not necessarily celebrities or public figures but often included peers or even unfamiliar individuals with whom they had no personal connection. Inspired by the communication styles of their peers on social media, some adolescents began practising their interaction skills and eventually succeeded in overcoming their interpersonal limitations.

Producing students who are self-directed and competitive with a positive attitude toward lifelong learning is a key goal in education. This development equips today's students with essential attributes to face future challenges in real life, especially after completing secondary school. Traits such as intrinsic motivation, self-reflection, independence, adaptability, life-long learning and goal orientation are essential in shaping individuals who are highly competitive and capable of sustaining success in various aspects of life, including employment, entrepreneurship, family life, and real-world situations.

Social media also impacted students in building and strengthening relationships with family, peers and teachers. Furthermore, it improves communication skills, particularly in terms of increased verbal confidence and expressiveness, role modelling and imitation of positive behaviours, and the development of social initiative and engagement. These insights underscore the constructive potential of social media in shaping student character and suggest implications for educators,

parents, and policymakers to actively promote positive and educational content in digital spaces.

6. Limitations of Study and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The small sample size of eight participants limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Malaysian secondary school students. The study also did not account for the different types of social media platforms used, which may have varying effects on students' character development. Additionally, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot in time and does not capture the long-term impacts of social media engagement on students' personal growth and development.

While this study provides valuable insights into the positive impact of social media on character development among Malaysian secondary school students, future research could expand the scope in several ways. A larger and more diverse sample across different regions and school types (e.g., urban vs. rural, public vs. private) would allow for broader generalisation of findings. Quantitative or mixed-methods approaches could be employed to validate and measure the extent of the positive effects identified, such as improvements in self-directed learning, interpersonal relationships, and communication skills. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore how sustained social media engagement over time influences students' character development. Ultimately, comparative studies across different age groups or cultural contexts may help determine whether these positive impacts are consistent or vary according to sociocultural factors.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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