



## **A Netnographic Approach to Investigating Problematic Teenagers' Language Use on Social Media**

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Social media has become an essential platform for teenagers these days. Social media grew in popularity as a means of communication, entertainment, information, and even education, beginning with simple social activities. Today, social media is also a factor in the development of adolescent behaviour. As a result, the purpose of this research is to explore into the language use by teenagers in social media. Over the course of three months, a netnographic approach was employed to study the language use of nine teenagers. All of the participants' postings, whether text, images, or videos, were evaluated. Instagram stories posted, shared, and reposted on the participant's account are also recorded in Nvivo for thematic analysis and coding. The outcomes of the survey highlighted five important themes of the teens' language use and behaviour: entertainment, popularity, morality and ethics, relationships, and new contacts. This study is concluded with some implications and a detailed discussion of adolescent social media language use and behaviour. The outcome of this study is hoped to help to identify problems faced by problematic students, where early prevention or solution can be proposed. Several other recommendations were also proposed at the end of this paper.

Keywords: language use, netnographic, social media, behaviour, adolescent

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since hundreds of years ago, there have been several methods of communication used by human; such as sending smoke signals and writing letters. In this decade, social media have become the most extensively utilised form of communication. It consists of platforms that enables users to communicate and participate in online communities,

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while sharing knowledge, concepts, messages, as well as sharing various types of media (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Examples of media that can be shared and exchange are documents, videos, voice or song recordings and many others. Because of the sophistication of technology improvements, social media allows individuals to connect with one another and engage with others without being limited by geography or time since it is done online.

Furthermore, the growth of mobile broadband infrastructure, along with aggressive market competition, has also resulted in an increase in the number of internet users. (Nawi, Zakaria, et al., 2020a). The availability of sophisticated and reasonably priced smartphones has further improved the pace of online involvement (Nawi, Hussin, et al., 2020). This promotes social media use and engagement among youngsters.

A local online survey conducted by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 2020 reveals that the most popular online platform is Facebook, with 91.7% of users, followed by YouTube (80.6% of users), and Instagram (68.1% of users) (Malaysian Communications And Multimedia Commission (MCMC) | Suruhanjaya Komunikasi Dan Multimedia Malaysia (SKMM) - Kajian Pengguna Internet, n.d.). When compared to the previous year, this proportion has surged tremendously. Malaysian social media users are expanding and include a broad age range, particularly among teens.

### **Literature Review**

Social media, when utilized properly, may have a positive impact on teens. Teenagers' favorite social media networks include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, where it can tremendously boost their networking and social links. However, the usage of social media by adolescents in general, and Malaysian teenagers in particular, is becoming more and more alarming due to the result of a lot of bad language uses and behaviors exhibited by the global communities through social media platforms.

Adolescents' use of social media differs from their experience in the real world (Nawi, Hussin, et al., 2020). This exposes children to a wide number of risks and disputes, which can lead to unpleasant or inappropriate language use and disruptive behavior in teenagers. Unpleasant or offensive language, as well as disruptive behaviour, may have a detrimental influence on students' learning and habits, according to Habes et al., (2018). Furthermore, excessive social media use can result in social media addiction (Bányai et al., 2017), present a risk to health (Fardouly et al., 2018), poor academic achievement (Chan et al., 2022) and decrease in life satisfaction (Ismail, 2020). Besides, when teenagers use social media without parental supervision, they are more likely to engage in aggressive language usage. (Tommasel et al., 2018), hate speech (Del Vigna et al., 2017), cyberbullying (Byrne et al., 2018), cyber pornography (Morelli et al., 2016), and sexting (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). These pose risks, particularly to teens, as it will most probably have a detrimental influence on their thinking and manner of life.

### **Research questions**

Due to the current problem, this study will explore adolescent language use and behavior in social media. Language use and behaviour in social media can be identified through the effects of digital footprints left by users while they are on social media (Nawi, Hussin, et al., 2020). Exploring adolescent language use on social media is an initial step to identify what are the activities and engagements adolescents have while online. Therefore, this study sought to investigate on what are the types of activities and engagements adolescents have while using social media. The outcome could help to identify problems faced by problematic students, where early prevention or solution can be proposed.

### **METHOD**

In this section, the netnographic approach will be discussed and how it is used to analyze adolescent language use from social media. Netnographic is a method adapted from an old traditional technique known as ethnography. Ethnography is essentially an observational study of participants from a particular culture (Sabitha Marican, 2009).

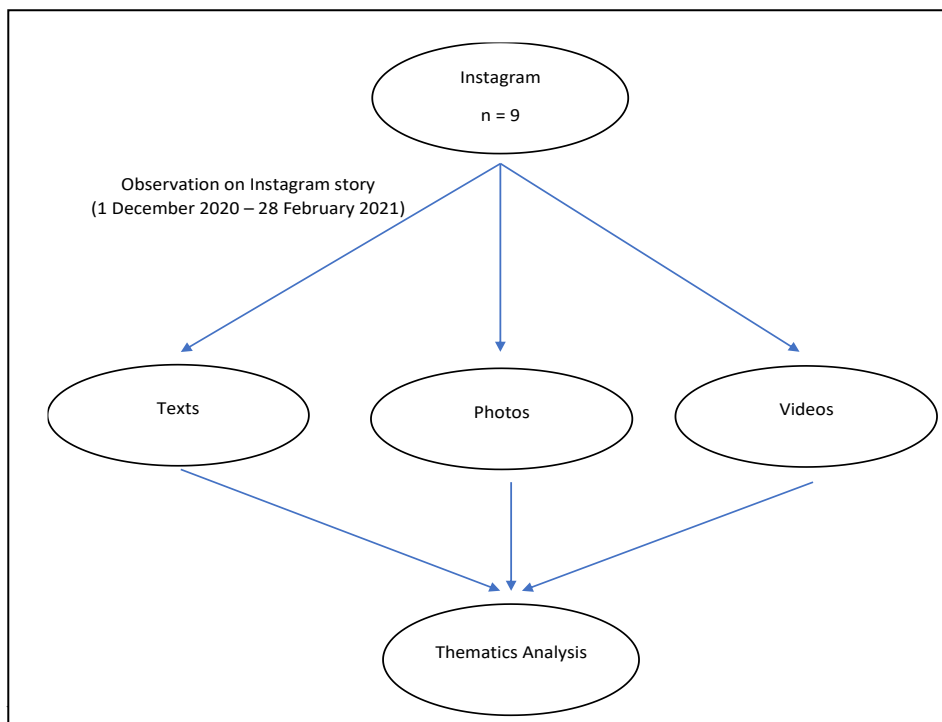
The practice of the ethnographic approach draws from a wide range of information and from various sources that were collected over a period of time from the participant's daily life to make sense of the world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Whereas, netnography is an ethnographic adaptation of the online world to the possibilities of online society and online culture (Brubaker et al., 2020). This study employed a netnographic technique to understand adolescent language and behaviour through their usage of social media.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were nine teenagers who had been involved in disciplinary cases at their high school. Instagram was selected as the social media platform for this study because it is actively used by all participants in greater frequency than any other social media network.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Observations were carried out over a three-month period, beginning in early December 2020 and completed in February 2021. These observations took into account all posts made by participants in the form of text, photos, or videos. Instagram stories that have been posted, shared, and reposted are also recorded in Nvivo and then were thematically analysed and coded. Figure 1 shows the data collection method used in the present study.



Netnographic Approach using observation on Instagram Story

## FINDINGS

The section presents the exploratory findings that were discovered after three months of observation of the teenager's language use on social media. The diagram in Figure 2, are projected from the observations of the instagram story posts by all the repondents. The stories posted by the participants are divided according to relevant themes and the by sub themes. From the observation mentioned above, the themes and subthemes identified in this study were all listed in detail in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1  
Themes and sub-themes of adolescent activities in social media

No.	Themes	Sub-themes	Number of post	Total
1.	Entertainment	Relationship	(n=136)	453
		Humour	(n=132)	
		Current News	(n=65)	
		Personal Opinion	(n=54)	
		Current Activities	(n=51)	
		Music	(n=10)	
		Mystical News	(n=4)	
		Beauty	(n=1)	
2.	Popularity	Attention seeking	(n=206)	253
		Celebrity News	(n=37)	
		Online Business	(n=10)	
3.	Moral	Religious advice	(n=48)	82
		General advice	(n=26)	
		Obscene Gestures	(n=5)	
		Abusive Words	(n=2)	
		Obscenities	(n=1)	
4.	Relationship	Stay in Touch	(n=52)	78
		Attracting Attention	(n=26)	
5.	New Contact	Attracting Attention	(n=4)	41
		Building a romantic relationship	(n=37)	

The diagram below (Fig. 2) depicts the relationship between the theme and the sub-theme of this study. These formed themes and sub-themes were analyzed using Nvivo software. Among the themes identified are entertainment, popularity, moral, relationships, and new contacts. The diagram below showed a projection from the observation conducted, to give a brief idea on the process of data collection.

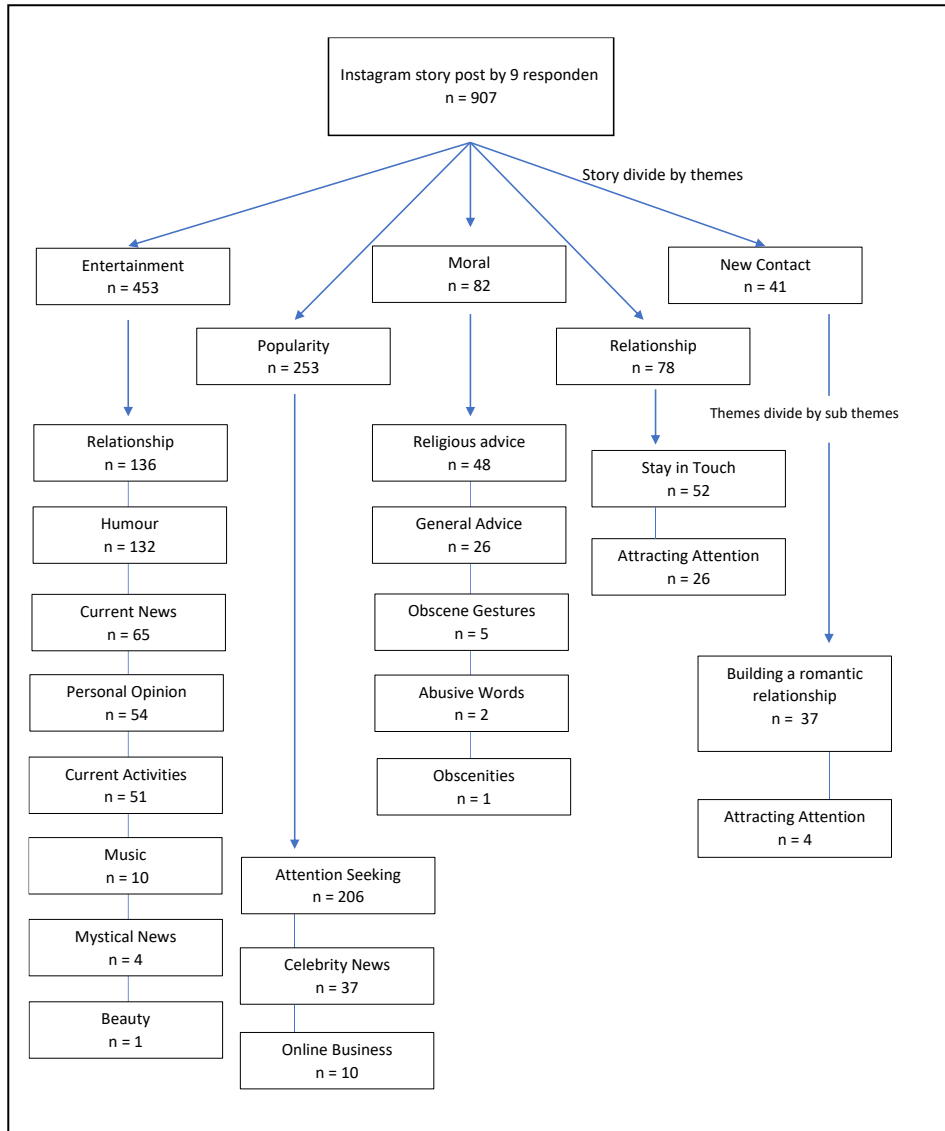


Figure 2  
Diagram projected from observation

### **Entertainment**

In the entertainment theme, there are several sub-themes under it including relationships (n = 136), humour (n = 132), current news (n = 65), personal opinions (54), current activities (n = 51), music (n = 10), mystical news (n = 4) and beauty (n = 1). For the relationship sub-theme, teen 2 shared a conversation of an Instagram user who uploaded her conversation via WhatsApp with her boyfriend. This can happen because the teenager believes the dialogue is romantic. After all, it contains words like "love", "b", and "I love you", which are popular among today's teenage girls.

Meanwhile, teenager 5 re-uploaded a story from another user, showing the lyrics of the song as if they had broken up. It is possible that the teenager is experiencing grief as a result of a fight or has already severed his relationship with his girlfriend. Teenager 5 is a teenage male who, if observed closely, is quite difficult to see a teenage boy who is too affectionate with the sentiments of love.

As for the 'humour' sub-theme, the findings showed that teenager 2 shared a comedy video about "stealing food during his break time, unfortunately a CEO passed by" that was addressed during the fasting month where the man was not fasting and the matter was known when the CEO of the company saw the man's actions and the man tried to cover up his offense with his funny actions that amused the audience. Teenager 1, on the other hand, shared a funny video where the video showed the behavior of a teenage boy who is pranking his sleeping friend by lifting him up and then placed him outside of his room.

Next, teenager 2 displayed the news of the baby's body being scattered as a result of being stabbed by his father who suddenly went mad in the 'current news' sub-theme. Teenager 2 also posted a story of a Srivijaya Air plane that crashed, resulting in the discovery of human flesh. All of the information shared by these teenagers is current news that is going viral and trending on social media.

### **Popularity**

There are three sub-themes under the sub-theme "popularity," namely "attention-seeking" (n = 206), "celebrity news" (n = 37), and "online business" (n = 10). In comparison to the other sub-themes of celebrity news and online business, the findings suggest that the sub-theme "attention-seeking" is the most popular. In the 'attention seeking' sub-theme, Teenager 1 used his Instagram account to display a self-boomerang motion two times. Similarly, teenager 2 creates an Instagram post about "drop your number" in the question box. Typically, teenagers enjoy doing things like this because they believe that they can be complemented by others, whilst viewers who put down their phone numbers do so to gain more contacts and boost their WhatsApp status views.

The 'celebrity news' sub-theme showed an adolescent sharing a tale about a Malaysian star, Janna Nick, who was criticized by K-pop fans, and Emma Maembong, a covid-19 patient. The news had been shared by another individual. Teenagers that post news about celebrities usually do so because they are interested in them. The general public is

also aware that these two celebrities are well-known in the country and that they were involved in some controversy a few years ago.

Meanwhile, the sub-theme 'online business' comprises 10 local businesses that were posted by three teenagers in their social media account stories. The postings are on local products: Demica's external beauty products and SKKM's internal health products, both of which are relatively well-known at present. These items are also popular among Malaysians for their benefits, and often receive a lot of feedbacks. The teenager uploaded the product, implying that the teenager is either an agent or a drop shipper for these two items. It also attempts to draw the attention of the study participants' followers, who are interested in purchasing the products highlighted.

### ***Moral***

The theme of morals encompasses several sub-themes, including religious advice and general advice. However, the findings also demonstrate that the teens actively create posts that feature obscene gestures, abusive remarks, and obscene words. Within the 'religious advice' sub-theme, the average Instagram user, as well as the majority of survey participants, posted and share such advice frequently. Each of them uploaded a post about a particular 'prayer' to be performed at the start of the religious month, which has its distinct element that encourages Muslims to participate in actions that will increase their reward.

For example, teenager 4 shared about 10 Islamic verses or surahs from the Quran that can prevent some things such as surah Al-Fatihah which prevents the wrath of Allah, surah Al-Waqiah which prevents disbelief, and other Surahs that can be used as a guide to followers who view the story through the teenager's social media posts.

Furthermore, teenager 2 offers some general advice on how the Prophet Muhammad dealt with his sadness by performing ablution, thinking well of Allah Almighty, worshipping and remembering Him, and prioritizing prayers. This is emphasized further by the posting of Al-Quran verses in which Allah SWT promises an infinite reward to those who persevere and show patience. Teen 2 then discussed the Sunnah of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Fasting on Mondays and Thursdays earns Allah's favour in this life and the next. Furthermore, Sunnah practices such as fasting may teach people to obey and acquire good and noble qualities.

In addition, the findings also revealed that teenagers also made unethical posts. This can be identified through the next sub-themes which are 'pornographic gestures' (n = 5), the use of abusive words (n = 2), and also obscene words (n = 1). For example, a pornographic gesture in which a teen 2 uploads a video of himself while showing a middle finger gesturing the word 'fuck.' Furthermore, teenager 2 posted the story in which he used abusive words like 'shit' in his video, as if he was cursing himself.

### ***Relationships***

The theme of 'Relationship' refers to how study participants maintain contact with their followers by simply being online. Staying in touch and attracting attention are the two sub-themes of this theme. Through the sub-theme of staying in touch, study participant 8



would be utilizing the Instagram features such as 'reposting' stories when a friend tags them and putting up stories with 'asking me a question' session. During the 3-month observation period, the theme "stay in touch" appeared 52 times in the stories of the study participant. Participants in the study will keep in touch using the available Instagram feature, exchanging personal information, wishes for important dates, recalling memories, and so on. One study participant asked for her followers' phone numbers because the study participants had recently just switched to a new phone number, and afterward the follower wished the study participants a happy birthday.

Under the theme of maintaining 'relationships,' teenagers in this case are willing to go to extra lengths to increase the number of followers or likes on behalf of their friends to be seen on par with study participants who have a large number of followers. For example, study participant 5 assisted a friend in adding contacts or obtaining likes from her Instagram followers. To pique the interest of his followers, study participants also shared pictures or videos that had been uploaded by their friends in the story belonging to study participants with intriguing comments such as 'antiknya b' which means 'you are so beautiful baby' and 'hmm lawo.' that translated into 'hmm pretty'. The phrases appear 26 times in the stories of the participants in the study for the theme of maintaining "relationships.

#### ***New Contacts***

The 'new contact' theme meant that study participants used social media to connect with a partner, adding a like mark to a newly uploaded status and adding contacts. Building a romantic relationship and attracting attention are the two sub-themes. There is a sub-theme that appears the most, 37 times, for the sub-theme 'building a romantic relationship.' Through stories uploaded while tagging the partner's Instagram, study participant 2 maintained a close relationship with the partner. In addition, the study participants said some comforting words to their partners that were considered romantic, such as 'goodnight b,' 'ilove you,' and also 'sayang,' which means 'my dear' and many more expressions. Participants in the study also uploaded photos of their partners in their social media stories to showcase their love for them. Participants in the study frequently made jokes with their partners by acting out scenes from dramas such as treating their brother as their child and writing sentences like 'papa derah gok balik anak jerik ey hahahahah', which means 'daddy, are you not back yet, kid is crying hahahahah'.

For the second sub-theme, 'attracting attention' refers to the desire of study participants to let their followers know about their lives with their partners that have been shared, such as referring to the relationship of study participants 3 with their partners where study participants have shared Instagram content in the story to add more likes and to have publicity. The sub-theme 'attracting attention' appeared four times in the story belonging to study participant 6. Among the stories uploaded were the conversations of study participant 6 and their partner. Meanwhile, the participants of study 1 also uploaded a story thanking their followers for helping him to reach 10 thousand followers.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to the findings, the most popular theme among Instagram users is 'entertainment.' This is where they use social media to communicate their happiness and enjoyment with friends, family, and partners. However, if this group of kids is not given adequate attention, they are likely to be affected. Previous research has found that adolescents who spend too much time on social media for entertainment have poor sleep quality (Brubaker et al., 2020), emotional disturbances (Hasan et al., 2018), negative behaviors (Buctot et al., 2020), and reduced performance on tasks or work (Brubaker et al., 2020; Cao & Yu, 2019). If not dealt with properly, this problem will arise among this group of teenagers.

The same can be said about teenagers' social media ethics. The findings revealed that some study participants made rude gestures such as obscene gestures, abusive remarks, and obscene words, while participating in live streaming sessions. Many studies have found that adolescents frequently use inappropriate words such as abusive words, sexting, and pornography (Farré et al., 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Given that Malaysia is a country that values courtesy and good manners, making obscene gestures and using abusive language in the text is frowned upon and goes against the values instilled in them since childhood.

Furthermore, the teen girl's gesture does not appear to respect her honour and dignity, and she posts the action on Instagram in general, where her account's followers from all walks of life can see it. If the video is watched by children, indirectly they are bound to follow and be influenced to perform the same action (Alruwaily et al., 2020; Alshamrani et al., 2020; Zuraidah, 2014). This influence is feared to have adverse effects and normalization on young people, especially children who use social media.

Interestingly, the study also found that the same adolescents also shared religious advice on social media. 'Religious advice', such as general reminders, sunnah of fastings and prioritising prayers, was the most shared sub-theme in their accounts. This is due to the friends or followers in their social media circle still practicing religious teachings and sharing religious messages. According to studies by (Nawi, Zakaria, et al., 2020b; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020), socio-religious movements in the digital space are on the rise as a result of the active muslim users online'. This group of teenagers still adheres to the basic teachings of Islam, as indicated by the 'religion' indicator.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study of teens' language use and behaviour on social media has recently been recognised as an essential topic, and while various survey-type studies have been conducted to assess adolescent personality through social media, a different technique is needed. Through this study, researchers have been able to study some of the fundamental themes of individuals online behaviour through their language use. These themes are formed based on their online behaviour and activities. The outcome of this study is hoped to help to identify problems faced by problematic students, where early prevention or solution can be proposed.

Because these teenagers are at risk, reducing or limiting their time spent on gadgets will help them avoid becoming overly reliant on social media. If the use of social media is not controlled in advanced, a number of risks and issues will occur. Researchers have yet to discover an effective way for limiting the use of social media among addicted youngsters. However, involving and educating parents is one of the solutions that can be proposed to address this issue. Parents should also use smartphone usage management apps such as digital wellbeing (Android OS) and screen time to manage their children's social media usage (iOS). This restriction not only restricts adolescent access to social media and all smartphone apps, but it also assists them in dealing with a variety of emerging issues.

Furthermore, it is urged that the government, particularly the Ministry of Education, implement and establish values and ethics guidelines for using social media and smartphones among school children. This is due to the fact that the digital world has become an inseparable part of contemporary life. Since no online activity or action can be totally deleted, any errors or misconduct in the digital arena might compel individuals to live with the consequences for the rest of their lives. Worse, if the activity in question is illegal and could result in legal consequences.

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