

Digital Pressure and Spiritual Coping: Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health in Catholic Schools in East Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of social media into adolescent life has prompted concerns regarding its psychological impact, especially in educational environments lacking digital literacy support. This study investigates how social media use affects the mental health of Catholic secondary students under the Yaswari Foundation in the Archdiocese of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, and examines the role of Catholic spirituality and institutional support as coping mechanisms. The research adopted a descriptive qualitative method using a collective case study design within a constructivist paradigm. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, limited participatory observation, and analysis of digital artifacts, involving 32 students, 4 religion teachers, 3 counselors, and 2 priests. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant patterns: self-expression and identity formation, social comparison and psychological strain, emotional disturbances, spiritual coping mechanisms, and institutional responses. Findings show that excessive social media use correlates with emotional distress, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and disrupted concentration. However, spiritual practices and theological concepts such as Imago Dei significantly enhanced students' resilience and self-esteem. Despite partial school interventions, institutional policy gaps remain. The study concludes that integrating value based digital literacy and structured spiritual formation within Catholic schools is essential for promoting adolescent well-being in the digital era.

Keywords: Social Media, Adolescent Mental Health, Catholic Education, Spiritual Coping, Digital Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how people communicate, interact, and access information. Among the most transformative innovations of this era is social media, which has become an integral part of daily life, particularly among adolescents. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp serve not only as (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska et al., 2022).

However, frequent use of social media has been associated with various negative impacts on adolescent mental health. A 2023 scoping review of 43 studies found consistent associations between social media use and elevated levels of depression, anxiety, poor sleep quality, and low self-esteem (Azem et al., 2023). Another meta-analysis reported a small but statistically significant positive correlation between social media use and depressive symptoms in adolescents ($r = .11, p < .01$) (Ivie et al., 2020). Systematic reviews have shown that over 50% of studies identify a positive association between social media use and anxiety, particularly in the context of problematic or excessive usage (Varela et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, data indicate that teenagers, particularly those aged 13 to 18, exhibit the highest internet penetration rate, with nearly 99% actively connected (APJII, 2024). A national report further noted that overall internet penetration has reached 79.5%, and 87% among Indonesian Gen Z users aged 12–27 (Teresia & Nangoy, 2025). This high level of digital engagement suggests increased vulnerability to the

negative effects of social media, especially in the context of limited digital literacy and insufficient value-based interventions in schools ([Mulalinda, 2024](#)).

Catholic schools pursue an educational mission that extends beyond intellectual competence to include holistic personal development, emotional well-being, and spiritual growth rooted in faith-based character formation (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014). Nevertheless, few empirical studies have examined how Catholic educational institutions in Indonesia address mental health challenges related to social media use, particularly at the secondary level ([Ardhiatama, 2025](#)). This gap highlights the need for research on faith-based strategies to foster psychosocial resilience in a digital environment.

Existing literature emphasizes the importance of protective factors such as spirituality and social support in buffering digital stress and promoting adolescent mental health. Studies have shown that religious practices and spiritual connectedness are associated with reduced anxiety, enhanced life meaning, and improved coping in digital contexts ([Balanza & Tindowen, 2019](#); [del Castillo & Alino, 2020](#)). Indonesian research also suggests that faith-based education may strengthen self-confidence and reduce depressive symptoms among adolescents ([De Leon, 2025](#); [Haliza & Surawan, 2025](#)).

Additional evidence indicates that religiosity and spirituality play a crucial role in strengthening mental health resilience by equipping individuals with effective coping strategies to navigate various digital stressors. These stressors, which are increasingly prevalent in today's technology-driven environment, can adversely impact emotional well-being if not properly managed. Moreover, spiritual meaning-making has been shown to enhance psychological well-being and boost life satisfaction, especially among university students facing academic and social pressures ([Dariusz, 2015](#); [Mosqueiro et al., 2021](#); [Graça & Brandão, 2024](#)).

Despite these insights, few studies integrate theology, psychology, and education to thoroughly explore how Catholic spirituality and institutional support function as structured coping strategies for digital pressures. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a contextualized, faith-based analysis of digital resilience among Catholic youth.

Given this context, the present study investigates the psychosocial effects of social media use among students in Catholic schools managed by the Swastisari Foundation (Yaswari) in the Archdiocese of Kupang, and explores how Catholic spirituality and institutional support reinforce their psychological resilience. The study also aims to offer practical insights for the development of value-driven educational strategies that promote students' mental well-being.

This methodological approach is particularly suited to exploring the complex and subjective experiences of students as they navigate the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of the digital world, which are often inadequately addressed by quantitative methods.

The significance of this research extends to educators, Catholic school administrators, educational policymakers, and pastoral communities committed to supporting adolescent mental health in faith-based educational settings. The study's findings are expected to inform the design of educational strategies that foster students' psychological well-being and spiritual resilience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design using a collective case study approach within a constructivist paradigm. It aimed to explore students' subjective experiences of social media use and its influence on mental health in the Catholic educational context. Data were collected through semi structured interviews, limited participatory observation, and analysis of digital artifacts. These methods enabled the exploration of emotional expression, self-perception, and socio-spiritual dynamics.

A reflexive thematic analysis was employed, involving iterative cycles of coding, categorization, and theme development. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking, audit trails, and triangulation of sources and methods were implemented ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#)). This constructivist approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how students interpret their digital experiences through the lenses of faith and school culture, perspectives not easily captured through quantitative methods.

Researchers and Context

The research was conducted by two investigators with expertise in Catholic religious education in East Nusa Tenggara. One is a lecturer in Catholic education, and the other teaches pastoral practice. Their familiarity with the subject, particularly the psychological impact of social media on Catholic youth, allowed for empathetic engagement and contextual sensitivity during data collection.

Participants and Data Sources

The study involved 45 participants: 32 students aged 13 to 18, 4 Catholic religious education teachers, 3 school counselors, and 2 parish priests. All student participants were active social media users. In addition to interviews, 50 digital artifacts such as Instagram posts, WhatsApp status updates, and TikTok videos were analyzed to identify expressions of identity, religious symbolism, and emotional tone.

Researcher Participant Relationship

Researchers had prior mentoring relationships with several participants, fostering trust and openness during interviews. Despite these connections, professional boundaries were maintained, and ethical protocols were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parental consent for minors.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected purposively in collaboration with school leaders, religion teachers, and counselors. Initial meetings identified students actively engaged with social media and willing to discuss its psychological impact. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review board, with particular safeguards in place for adolescent participants. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over four weeks via semi structured interviews, limited participatory observation, and digital artifact analysis. Interviews took place in private settings; observations were conducted outside classroom hours; and digital materials were reviewed with participant consent. The researchers' prior rapport allowed for authentic, reflective narratives supported by a critically reflexive approach.

Interview topics included digital experiences, emotional challenges, spirituality as a coping mechanism, and support from school and social environments. All interviews were audio recorded with consent, and field notes were used to capture nonverbal cues. Transcripts were produced by the lead researcher, reviewed by the co-researcher, and anonymized. All data including field notes and digital content were securely stored in an encrypted system, enabling a comprehensive, multimodal analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with full transcription of 88 pages of interviews, followed by repeated readings to identify initial patterns and reflective insights. Open coding was applied to meaningful data segments, which were grouped into thematic categories. Themes were refined based on internal coherence and analytical depth.

Coding was conducted collaboratively, with researchers independently generating codes and refining themes through discussion. The thematic framework integrated interview transcripts, digital content, and observational data, analyzed through social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Five major themes emerged: social media

as a space for self-expression and identity formation, digital social comparison and self-image pressure, emotional disturbances and mental health symptoms, catholic spirituality as a coping mechanism, and the school-based digital literacy and psychosocial-spiritual support.

Research Findings

This study's thematic analysis identified five core themes that reflect students' lived experiences with social media and its psychological effects. The data set included 88 pages of interview transcripts, field notes from limited participatory observation, and 50 student-generated digital artifacts (Instagram posts, WhatsApp status updates, and TikTok videos). The five emergent themes are detailed below.

Social Media as a Space for Self-Expression and Identity Formation

Social media platforms provided students with a significant outlet for expressing themselves and shaping their identities. Participants reported using platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp Status, and TikTok to project an idealized self-image and to articulate emotions they found difficult to express in face-to-face interactions.

Table 1. Aspects of Social Media Use and Self-Expression

Aspect	Description	% of Students (n = 32)
Platforms used	Instagram, WhatsApp Status, TikTok	93%
Primary function	Positive self-presentation, concealed emotional sharing	85%, 70%
Shared content	Religious activities, school events, choir/liturgy	60%, 50%
Forms of emotional expression	Quotes, gospel lyrics, dark filters	78%
Emotions expressed	Sadness, disappointment, loneliness	83%
Reaction to low engagement	Frustration, feeling unappreciated	75%

Most students (93%) used social media for self-expression. A majority (85%) utilized it to present themselves positively, while 70% used it to express concealed emotions. Content commonly included religious events (60%) and school or liturgical activities (50%). Emotional expression often took symbolic forms such as quotes, gospel lyrics, or dark visual filters (78%). A substantial proportion (83%) expressed sadness, disappointment, or loneliness. Additionally, 75% reported feeling frustrated or undervalued when engagement (likes, comments) was low. These findings underscore the emotional dependence many students place on digital validation and highlight the need for empathetic digital mentorship.

Digital Social Comparison and Self-Image Pressure

Students frequently engaged in social comparisons on digital platforms, which contributed to feelings of inadequacy, academic stress, and self-blame. These behaviors reflected the internalization of unrealistic standards of appearance, lifestyle, and achievement amplified by algorithm-driven content.

Table 2. Forms of Social Comparison and Psychological Impact

Domain of Comparison	Affected Students	Psychological Impact
Physical appearance & lifestyle	25	Insecurity, reluctance to share personal photos
Academic achievement	18	Anxiety, perfectionism, self-blame
Social validation (likes/comments)	22	Lowered self-esteem

Twenty-five students reported that appearance-based comparisons made them feel insecure and reluctant to post personal images. Eighteen students experienced academic anxiety, perfectionism, and self-criticism as a result of seeing peers' successes online. Twenty-two students said they felt diminished self-worth due to a perceived lack of digital validation. These patterns highlight social media's role in heightening psychological pressure related to identity and self-acceptance.

Emotional Disturbances and Mental Health Symptoms

Participants associated their social media usage with a range of emotional disturbances. Symptoms included disrupted sleep patterns, overthinking, and decreased focus in academic settings

Table 3. Psychological Symptoms Related to Social Media Use

Symptom	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Irregular sleep patterns	19	59%
PHQ-9 score ≥ 10 (mild–moderate depression)	11	34%
Difficulty concentrating in class	14	44%

Over half of the participants (59%) reported irregular sleep. Eleven students (34%) scored ≥ 10 on the PHQ-9, indicating mild to moderate depressive symptoms. Fourteen students (44%) reported difficulty maintaining focus in class. These results affirm that unmoderated social media use has real implications for students' emotional well-being and academic performance.

Catholic Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism

Catholic spirituality emerged as a central coping resource. Students emphasized the significance of religious practices and theological beliefs in maintaining emotional balance and mental resilience.

Table 4. Spirituality as a Coping Strategy

Dimension	Description	% of Students
Role of spirituality	Psychological buffer against digital stress	80%
Spiritual practices	Group prayer, recollections, chapel visits	78%, 65%
Reported benefits	Emotional recovery, reduced reliance on social media	75%
Theological concept internalized	Imago Dei (divine-rooted self-worth)	68%
Outcomes	Increased self-esteem, healthier digital behavior	70%

Eighty percent of students perceived spirituality as a psychological safeguard. Common practices included group prayer (78%) and chapel visits (65%). Seventy-five percent reported emotional relief and reduced media dependency. Sixty-eight percent said that the theological concept of Imago Dei helped them root their self-worth in faith rather than digital approval. These insights affirm the role of spirituality in promoting digital resilience.

School-Based Digital Literacy and Psychosocial-Spiritual Support

While some schools had initiated programs to address digital well-being, efforts remained fragmented and lacked institutional integration.

Table 5. School Interventions and Institutional Gaps

Aspect	Implementation	Key Findings
Initial initiatives	Morning reflections, podcasts, basic counseling	79% student participation
Structural limitations	No curriculum integration, absence of SOPs	Affected 100% of schools
Teacher preparedness	Limited knowledge of FoMO, doomscrolling, etc.	70% of teachers lacked training
Teacher recommendations	Value-based digital literacy and spirituality	Supported by 97% of teachers
Institutional policy gaps	No formal policies on digital-spiritual formation	Identified in all schools

Although 79% of students had participated in school-run programs like reflections and counseling, none of the schools had formally embedded these into curricula. All schools lacked institutional guidelines on digital well-being, and 70% of teachers had not been trained in key digital mental health concepts. However, nearly all teachers (97%) expressed support for incorporating spirituality and values into digital literacy education.

These findings highlight the urgent need for systematic policy reform and professional development to ensure that Catholic schools address the intertwined challenges of digital engagement and adolescent mental health.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that social media serves as an important medium for Catholic adolescents to express themselves and construct their identities. These findings align with broader trends in digital culture, in which online platforms increasingly mediate the formation of personal identity and socio-emotional interaction, particularly among younger generations whose social lives are deeply intertwined with network-based communication environments ([Avci et al., 2025](#); [Mirkes, 2024](#)). For instance, Catholic adolescents often engage with daily Bible verse posts on Instagram, accompanied by dark or sepia filters to create a contemplative atmosphere, or share TikTok videos combining personal testimonies with popular Christian songs as a way of affirming their personal faith while fostering a sense of social belonging ([Baraybar et al., 2020](#)).

This behavioral pattern is reflected in the research data, with 93% of participants reporting the use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp Status for self-expression, 85% for constructing a positive self-image, and 70% for conveying emotions that are difficult to express in face-to-face communication. Symbolic forms of expression, such as quotations, Gospel lyrics, and dark visual filters, were employed by 78% of students, and the majority (83%) reported using them to communicate feelings of sadness, disappointment, or loneliness. These findings are consistent with previous observations that digital engagement serves not only aesthetic or entertainment purposes but also facilitates the expression of complex emotions ([Kołodziejska, 2020](#)). Posts featuring religious content and curated visual styles thus perform a dual function: shaping aesthetic presentation while transmitting socio-emotional signals aimed at gaining social recognition.

However, this form of digital expression often coincides with a reliance on online validation, which is closely associated with self-worth ([Verma et al., 2024](#)). Approximately 75% of respondents reported feelings of disappointment and diminished self-regard when their posts received limited engagement. Such findings illustrate a broader psychological pattern in which self-esteem becomes increasingly contingent upon external approval. In this regard, social media emerges as a double-edged domain, enabling identity construction while simultaneously generating latent psychological pressures.

These pressures are exacerbated by a pervasive culture of social comparison within digital environments. This tendency aligns with the concept of algorithmically shaped self-evaluation ([Maciel-Saldierna et al., 2024](#)). Participants acknowledged routinely comparing themselves to peers with respect to physical appearance,

lifestyle, and academic achievements. Notably, 25 students reported feelings of insecurity when sharing personal photographs, while 18 expressed heightened academic anxiety due to exposure to idealized portrayals of success. Such experiences suggest a shift from self-expression toward self-surveillance, wherein algorithmically prioritized content reinforces unattainable standards and intensifies feelings of inadequacy. These observations correspond with findings linking cyber-victimization to elevated psychological distress among adolescents ([Peker et al., 2024](#)).

The mental health consequences of this digital strain are further substantiated by the prevalence of emotional disturbances among participants, mirroring patterns identified in prior research ([Tumuhimbise et al., 2025](#)). Key symptoms included disrupted sleep cycles (reported by 59% of respondents), difficulties with concentration (44%), and PHQ-9 scores of 10 or above in 34% of participants, indicating mild to moderate depressive symptoms. These results underscore the detrimental effects of unregulated social media engagement on adolescent mental health and academic performance. In response, targeted interventions should emphasize holistic emotional recovery, consistent with longitudinal findings on the impact of psychosocial stressors on adolescent development ([Adkins et al., 2009](#)).

Amid these challenges, Catholic spirituality emerged as a salient protective factor, offering coping mechanisms analogous to those found in prior studies on religious resilience ([Keisari et al., 2022](#)). Approximately 80% of students indicated that religious practices, such as group prayer, chapel attendance, and school retreats, provided a contemplative space that fostered emotional regulation and meaning-making. Spiritual engagement, in this context, functioned not merely as a source of comfort but also as a psychological resource that helped students navigate digital stressors. Similar protective dynamics were observed in a study of Malaysian parents of chronically ill children, where religious involvement moderated psychological distress ([Chong et al., 2019](#)).

Additionally, theological constructs, particularly the doctrine of Imago Dei, were found to reinforce emotional resilience. This aligns with findings on the mental health benefits of spiritually grounded self-concepts ([Mancini et al., 2023](#)). Sixty-eight percent of participants reported that their sense of self-worth was primarily derived from their perceived identity as reflections of the divine, rather than from social media approval. This internalized belief system enhanced self-esteem and encouraged healthier digital behavior. Thus, spirituality functioned not only as ritual practice but also as a cognitive schema that mediated digital interactions. These results corroborate earlier research identifying religious identity and communal belonging as protective buffers against depression in youth ([Sommerfeld, 2025](#)).

Institutional support within educational settings plays a pivotal role in enabling students to navigate digital challenges effectively. This finding aligns with broader scholarship on the influence of institutional structures on adolescent well-being ([Izquierdo-Iranzo, 2025](#)). Several schools in the study had introduced initiatives such as morning reflections, educational podcasts, and basic counseling services, reaching approximately 79% of students. Despite their promise, these efforts were fragmented and lacked integration into formal pedagogical frameworks. The absence of a coherent institutional structure highlights the urgent need for policy-level interventions that embed psychosocial support within the educational curriculum. Evidence further suggests that comprehensive mental health education can enhance students' awareness of vulnerability, risk, and resilience ([Lewer et al., 2025](#)).

A closer analysis of these institutional gaps indicates that they stem from several interrelated root causes. Funding constraints frequently hinder schools' ability to sustain long-term digital literacy and spiritual formation programs, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas where education budgets are already stretched ([Valencia et al., 2025](#)). Limited financial capacity restricts the procurement of up-to-date digital tools, access to specialized teacher training, and the development of structured student support systems ([Ertmer, 1999](#)). Administrative challenges exacerbate these constraints, as inconsistent coordination among school leadership, parish authorities, and education boards impedes the development of cohesive, cross-sector policies ([Bodily et al., 2018](#)). Such fragmentation not only slows policy formulation but also results in overlapping responsibilities and unclear accountability. Curricular limitations add further complexity; digital literacy and psychosocial support are often positioned as supplementary rather than core elements of the curriculum ([Pomarejos et al., 2025](#)). Consequently, teachers receive minimal guidance on integrating these

components into their daily practice, reducing the overall consistency and impact of school-based interventions. Collectively, these factors form systemic barriers to embedding value-based digital well-being strategies within the fabric of everyday educational practice.

A significant limitation in addressing digital well-being was identified in the pedagogical preparedness of educators ([Calvin & Wibowo, 2024](#)). Approximately 70% of teachers reported limited familiarity with critical digital phenomena such as Fear of Missing Out, doomscrolling, and algorithmic influence. This knowledge gap undermines the effectiveness of school-based interventions. Nevertheless, prospects for advancement remain promising, as 97% of educators expressed support for the integration of value-oriented digital literacy and Catholic spirituality into the formal curriculum.

The absence of institutional policies on digital spiritual formation constitutes an additional structural shortcoming ([Kołodziejska et al., 2024](#)). None of the schools involved in this study had developed standardized guidelines or operational procedures related to spiritual development in digital contexts. This disconnect between students' personal spiritual practices and the lack of institutional support mechanisms underscores the urgent need for systemic educational reform. The potential benefits of such reform are reinforced by research demonstrating the emotional benefits of structured spiritual interventions ([Daştan & Kulakaç, 2024](#)).

In summary, this study affirms that social media represents an ambivalent space for Catholic adolescents, simultaneously enabling identity exploration while exposing users to significant psychological risks. This complexity is consistent with broader research on adolescent coping ([Compas et al., 2001](#)). Within this digital landscape, spirituality has proven to be a vital source of resilience, and schools emerge as pivotal institutions for fostering emotional and moral integrity. The findings therefore advocate for the systematic integration of values-based digital literacy, sustained professional development for educators, and the establishment of institutional policies that support digital spiritual formation.

Nevertheless, certain methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Given the qualitative nature of this study and the close rapport between the researcher and several participants, the possibility of social desirability bias cannot be entirely excluded. Participants may have provided responses that aligned with perceived expectations or emphasized socially acceptable aspects of their spiritual and digital practices. Although multiple strategies such as anonymizing responses, clarifying the absence of evaluative judgment, and employing open-ended questioning were used to mitigate these effects, these measures cannot completely eliminate the influence of relational dynamics on self-reported experiences.

Future research could build on these findings by employing more targeted mixed method designs. Specifically, quantitative studies examining correlations between particular spiritual practices such as daily prayer, sacramental participation, or creation of religiously themed content and measurable mental health outcomes would complement the current qualitative insights. Additionally, longitudinal investigations could determine whether the protective role of spirituality against digital stressors is sustained over time and across diverse sociocultural contexts. Such approaches would provide a more robust evidentiary foundation for designing interventions that integrate spiritual formation with digital well-being education.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research exploring the intersection of digital engagement and adolescent mental health, with a specific focus on Catholic educational settings in Indonesia. The results highlight the complex interplay between emotional vulnerability, online behavior, and spiritual resources. While social media serves as a platform for connection and self-expression, it also amplifies psychological stress through mechanisms such as comparison, validation-seeking, and digital fatigue.

Catholic spirituality anchored in concepts like Imago Dei emerged as a potent source of emotional regulation and identity resilience. Students who internalized faith-based values were better able to contextualize their worth beyond social media metrics. However, the study also revealed substantial institutional gaps. Although

teachers demonstrated willingness to support value-based digital literacy, schools lacked formal policies, training frameworks, and curricular integration to address these emerging needs.

Implications

Based on these findings, several implications can be drawn:

Catholic educational institutions should adopt comprehensive digital literacy policies that integrate spiritual formation and mental health support.

Ongoing professional development is essential to equip educators with the tools to address digital stressors, including topics like FoMO, doomscrolling, and the psychological effects of algorithmic content.

Digital citizenship and spiritual resilience should be embedded across subjects, not isolated within religious education classes.

Counseling services, retreats, and peer support groups should be designed with student input to ensure relevance and accessibility.

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