



Problematic Social Media Use as a Persistent Concern: Reflections from Two Cohorts of Norwegian Teachers

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media use continues to shape communication, education, and society at large, raising persistent questions about its pedagogical, psychological, and ethical implications. Building on last year's investigation into teachers' reflections on the informational and educational dimensions of social media [1], this follow-up study examines how a new cohort of participants in the Nord University course Informational and Educational Aspects of Social Media engages with these issues. As in the previous study, participants produced reflective blog posts as part of their coursework, and content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, concerns, and potential shifts in perspective. In line with last year's findings—where "Problematic Social Media Use" and concerns about youth mental health dominated reflections—this year's data continues to foreground the same thematic focus. Social media's influence on mental health remains a central point of concern. A comparison of the two cohorts reveals no substantive shift in professional concerns among Norwegian teachers, suggesting a stable pattern of perceived challenges across consecutive years and indicating that the profession's underlying stressors and role demands remain largely unchanged. Taken together, these findings point to a consistent set of pedagogical needs. The stability of teachers' concerns underscores the importance of strengthening course components that address critical digital literacy and AI-augmented content ecosystems. By responding directly to the issues that persist across cohorts, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about how teacher education can more effectively prepare professionals to navigate the complexities of social media use in contemporary educational environments.

Keywords: *Problematic social media use, youth mental health, teachers' perspectives, critical digital literacy*

1. Introduction

Social media has become a defining feature of contemporary communication and education, prompting ongoing debate about its pedagogical value, psychological risks, and ethical consequences [2-4]. For teachers, these debates are not abstract: they intersect with daily professional responsibilities, expectations, and pressures. Educators must navigate students' digital behaviours, respond to concerns about wellbeing, and make informed decisions about how - or whether - to integrate social media into learning activities. As a result, teachers' reflections on social media are shaped not only by theoretical considerations but also by the practical realities of classroom management, safeguarding, and curriculum demands.

Last year's study of participants in the Nord University course *Informational and Educational Aspects of Social Media* (IKT 1022) highlighted how concerns about problematic social media use - particularly its impact on young people's mental health - dominated teachers' reflections [1]. The present study extends this work by examining a new cohort enrolled in the same course and analysing their reflective blog posts through content analysis.

By comparing two consecutive cohorts, the study investigates whether teachers' perspectives on social media are shifting or stabilising over time. The findings indicate a striking continuity: concerns about mental health and problematic engagement remain central, suggesting that the profession's underlying stressors and perceived challenges have not substantially changed. This stability underscores the need for teacher education programmes to strengthen components related to critical digital literacy and AI-augmented content ecosystems, ensuring that training responds to the persistent issues teachers identify in their professional practice. In particular, the growing influence of AI in shaping digital content environments makes this an urgent priority. AI-driven recommendation systems, generative content, and automated amplification processes increasingly mediate what users see, how information is framed, and how social comparisons are intensified [5,6]. Without a clear understanding of how these systems operate, both teachers and students may struggle to recognise manipulated, misleading, or emotionally triggering content.



2. Context

ICT1022 forms part of the continuing education programme *ICT and Learning 1*, which attracts practising educators from primary and secondary schools, as well as instructors and trainers working in both public and private organisations. The programme is designed to strengthen participants' digital competence and pedagogical understanding of technology-rich learning environments, with a particular emphasis on the critical, ethical, and instructional dimensions of digital media.

Within their assignment work, students are required to produce reflective blog posts in which they engage with course literature, current debates, and their own professional experiences. These blog posts serve a dual function: they operate as a pedagogical tool that encourages metacognitive reflection, and they provide a rich source of qualitative data for examining how educators conceptualise the informational and educational aspects of social media. Because participants come from diverse institutional and professional backgrounds, their reflections offer insight into how social media is perceived across different segments of the Norwegian educational landscape.

The present study draws on these blog posts to explore how teachers articulate opportunities, challenges, and concerns related to social media use.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

This study examines blog posts produced by students enrolled in the course *Informational and Educational Aspects of Social Media* during the autumn semester of the 2025/26 academic year. In research on digital learning environments, blog posts can function either as data in themselves or as sources that generate additional data through interactions such as comments, hyperlinks, or embedded media. In the present study, the analytical focus is limited to the content of the posts as standalone artefacts. The analysis therefore centres on the topics, sentiment, and key terms expressed in the students' reflections, rather than on extracting further information from comment threads or factual material included within the posts. Accordingly, the blog posts are treated as data, not as providers of data.

Students created their blog posts within a Confluence workspace, a platform commonly used for collaborative knowledge sharing, documentation, and project coordination. Access to the posts was shared with peers through links posted in the course's online classroom (Canvas LMS). The choice of Confluence served two pedagogical purposes: first, to support blogging as a collaborative reflective practice; and second, to familiarise students with professional digital platforms that can be used for communication and knowledge sharing in work-related contexts. A total of 23 students completed the blogging assignment ($N = 23$).

3.2 Analytical Framework and Procedure

The data were examined using qualitative content analysis, a method widely applied to diverse forms of human communication, including both linguistic and non-linguistic texts [7]. Written reflections such as blog posts are particularly well suited to this approach, as they provide structured yet naturally occurring material for identifying patterns of meaning.

To establish the analytical framework, the data were coded and meaning was subsequently developed through interpretive engagement [8, 9]. The analysis followed an inductive logic: no predefined coding scheme was applied. Instead, assumptions and conceptual categories emerged directly from the material, with codes constructed on the basis of meaning attributed to the students' reflections. Understanding participants' perspectives from their own standpoint was central to the process, aligning with principles associated with grounded theory [10].

The organisation and interpretation of the material unfolded in two stages. First, the blog posts were segmented into smaller units of meaning and assigned initial codes. Second, these codes were reviewed and grouped into broader categories that captured recurring themes across the dataset.

The coding process was supported by NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which facilitated systematic organisation, retrieval, and comparison of coded segments.

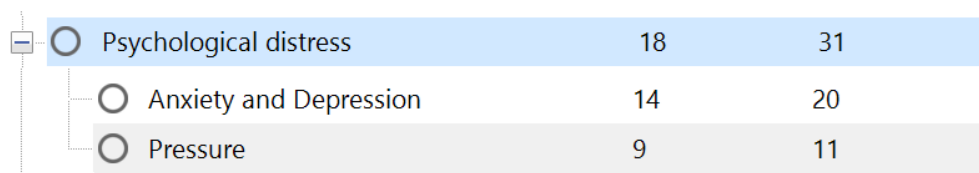
4. Results



Although participants acknowledged several positive aspects of social media use - such as opportunities for social contact, access to information, and creative expression - the prevailing part of their reflections centred on its negative impact on well-being. Through iterative coding and subsequent consolidation, six overarching themes were identified.

Psychological Distress

This was the dominant theme in the dataset and was primarily driven by the code *Anxiety & depression*. It emerged from the consolidation of the codes *Anxiety & depression* and *Pressure*, which consistently clustered around participants' descriptions of emotional strain. Notably, *Anxiety & depression* was both more frequent and more widely distributed across the material than *Pressure*, appearing in 18 files and 31 references compared to 9 files and 11 references for *Pressure*. Together, these codes captured a broad spectrum of affective responses, including heightened anxiety, mood deterioration, and a persistent sense of psychological burden linked to digital environments (see Figure 1 for the NVivo coding structure underlying this theme).

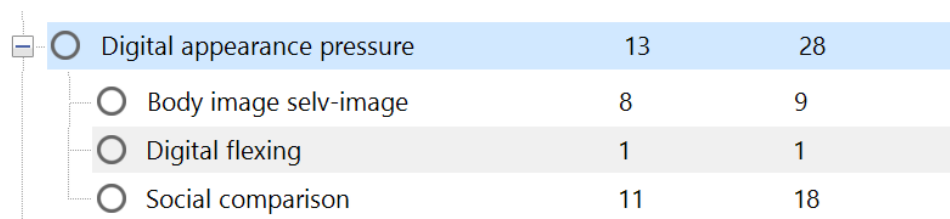


○ Psychological distress	18	31
○ Anxiety and Depression	14	20
○ Pressure	9	11

Fig. 1. NVivo coding structure for Psychological Distress

Digital Appearance Pressure

The second theme, *Digital Appearance Pressure*, was primarily driven by the code *Social comparison*. It was formed by collapsing the codes *Body image/self image*, *Digital flexing*, and *Social comparison*, which shared a common mechanism of self-evaluation shaped by online visibility. Among these, *Social comparison* was the most prominent, appearing in 11 files and 18 references. Participants highlighted how performative displays, together with continual comparisons to peers or influencers, operated as mechanisms that heightened concerns about physical appearance and personal adequacy (Figure 2 presents the NVivo structure for Digital Appearance Pressure).



○ Digital appearance pressure	13	28
○ Body image self-image	8	9
○ Digital flexing	1	1
○ Social comparison	11	18

Fig. 2. NVivo coding structure for Digital Appearance Pressure

Social Harm and Isolation

The third theme, *Social Harm and Isolation*, was primarily driven by the code *Mobbing & exclusion*. It emerged from the codes *Feeling of inadequacy*, *Loneliness*, *Mobbing & exclusion*, *Strangers*, and *Exclusion if NOT*, which collectively pointed to experiences of social disconnection and exclusionary dynamics. Among these, *Mobbing & exclusion* was the most frequently referenced, appearing in 7 files and 14 references. The theme captures both interpersonal harm (e.g., bullying, exclusion, unsolicited contacts) and the broader phenomenon of social isolation amplified by online interactions (Figure 3 illustrates the NVivo coding structure supporting this theme).



<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Social harm and isolation	12	24
<input type="radio"/>	Excl. if NOT	1	1
<input type="radio"/>	Feelings of inadequacy	3	3
<input type="radio"/>	Loneliness	3	4
<input type="radio"/>	Mobbing & Exclusion	7	14
<input type="radio"/>	Strangers	2	2

Fig. 3. NVivo coding structure for Social Harm and Isolation

Curated Digital Realities

The fourth theme, *Curated Digital Realities*, was primarily driven by the code *Perfect images*. It resulted from merging the codes *Carefully selected content*, *Perfect images*, and *Perfect world*, which together described the construction of idealized, unrealistic digital environments. Among these, *Perfect images* was the most frequently referenced, appearing in 9 files and 10 references. Participants emphasized how manipulated self-presentation and highly curated content contributed to distorted perceptions of everyday life, reinforcing unattainable standards and masking the complexities of real experiences (Figure 4 shows the NVivo coding structure for this theme).

<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Curated digital realities	10	19
<input type="radio"/>	Carefully selected content	3	5
<input type="radio"/>	Perfect images	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	Perfect world	3	4

Fig. 4. NVivo coding structure for Curated Digital Realities

Problematic Digital Engagement

The fifth theme, *Problematic Digital Engagement*, was primarily driven by the code *Addiction*. It was derived from the codes *Addiction* and *FOMO* (Fear of Missing Out), which represent different but related mechanisms - compulsive use versus fear-driven engagement. Among these, *Addiction* was the most frequently referenced, appearing in 5 files and 8 references. Together, these codes describe maladaptive behavioural patterns shaped by platform design, reward loops, and constant connectivity, reflecting a behavioural domain in which digital use becomes difficult to regulate (Figure 5 displays the NVivo coding structure for Problematic Digital Engagement).

<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Problematic digital engagement	8	12
<input type="radio"/>	Addiction	5	8
<input type="radio"/>	FOMO	4	4

Fig. 5. NVivo coding structure for Problematic Digital Engagement

Informational Landscape Risks

The sixth theme, *Informational Landscape Risks*, was primarily driven by the code *Exposure to extreme content*. It emerged from the codes *Echo chambers*, *Exposure to extreme content*, and *Fake news*, which converge on vulnerabilities created by the contemporary information environment. Among these, *Exposure to extreme content* was the most frequently referenced, appearing in 3 files and 8 references. Participants described how algorithmic filtering, misinformation, and exposure to harmful content shape understandings of the world and contribute to feelings of confusion, polarization, or threat (Figure 6 presents the NVivo coding structure for Informational Landscape Risks).



<input type="radio"/> Informational landscape risks	4	10
<input type="radio"/> Echo chambers	1	1
<input type="radio"/> Exposure to extreme content	3	8
<input type="radio"/> Fake news	1	1

Fig. 6. NVivo coding structure for Informational Landscape Risks

5. Discussion

Taken together, the six themes identified in the analysis point toward a multilayered model of digital vulnerability that captures the complex ways in which social media environments affect young people. This model encompasses several interrelated dimensions: emotional vulnerability, identity vulnerability, social vulnerability, behavioural vulnerability, and informational vulnerability. Such a perspective aligns with broader scholarship emphasising that adolescents' online experiences are shaped not only by individual choices but also by the relational and structural dynamics of networked platforms [3,11].

Emotional vulnerability refers to experiences of psychological distress, including anxiety, insecurity, and diminished well-being - patterns that mirror evidence showing that digital environments can intensify emotional reactivity and fluctuations in mental health [12]. Identity vulnerability emerges through pressures related to appearance and the influence of highly curated and idealised representations of life, which may distort users' perceptions of themselves and others [13]. Social vulnerability involves risks associated with exclusion, negative interactions, and exposure to harmful or potentially dangerous individuals, echoing meta-analytic findings that online peer dynamics can amplify social tensions and hostile interactions [14]. Behavioural vulnerability is reflected in patterns of compulsive engagement, such as excessive use and fear of missing out (FOMO), which can reinforce dependency on digital platforms [15]. Finally, informational vulnerability highlights exposure to misinformation, algorithmically amplified content, and potentially extreme or harmful material resonating with analyses of how algorithmic curation shapes users' informational environments and can narrow or distort what young people encounter online [16].

Importantly, these layers do not operate independently. Rather, they interact dynamically, often reinforcing and intensifying one another. For instance, exposure to curated realities may heighten appearance pressure, which in turn contributes to emotional distress. Similarly, experiences of social exclusion can lead to increased and potentially problematic engagement with social media, while informational risks - such as misinformation or sensationalised content - may further exacerbate emotional strain.

Overall, these findings support a holistic understanding of digital well-being. Such an understanding moves beyond a narrow focus on individual behaviour to recognise the broader influence of social dynamics and platform design. This perspective aligns with the teachers' reflections, which implicitly acknowledge that students' online experiences are shaped not only by personal choices but also by structural and relational dimensions of digital environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined teachers' reflections on the informational and educational dimensions of social media within the context of ICT1022, revealing how educators interpret digital platforms as complex environments that shape students' emotional, social, behavioural, and informational experiences. Across the six themes, teachers consistently framed social media not merely as a set of tools but as a socio-technical ecosystem that produces both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Their reflections highlight how psychological distress, appearance-based pressures, social exclusion, curated realities, problematic engagement, and informational risks intersect to influence students' well-being.

The findings demonstrate that teachers are acutely aware of the structural forces embedded in platform design and recognise their implications. Importantly, teachers do not view these challenges as peripheral to education. Instead, they position them as central to contemporary digital competence and as areas requiring explicit pedagogical attention.

Within the ICT1022 framework, these insights underscore the need for digital literacy education that extends beyond technical skills to include emotional resilience and critical media analysis. Teachers' reflections show that they are ready to engage with these broader dimensions, but they also signal the



need for continued professional development that equips educators to navigate and teach within increasingly complex digital environments.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of research emphasising that digital well-being, critical information literacy, and social media pedagogy must be integrated into teacher education. As digital platforms continue to shape the conditions of learning and social life, teachers' capacity to understand, interpret, and mediate these environments will remain essential.

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