



Social Media Ethics among Polytechnic Students: Assessing Awareness and Responsible Use

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Abstract. The rapid growth of social media has required a high level of digital ethics among higher education students to ensure both personal safety and future employability. This study aims to examine the level of social media awareness and responsible use among students at Politeknik Balik Pulau (PBU) and explores the relationship between these two constructs. Adopting a quantitative research design, data were collected from 221 respondents across various departments and semesters. The structured questionnaire was adapted from the Digital Citizenship instrument. Descriptive analysis revealed that students possess a significant of Digital Awareness ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.78$) and demonstrate commendable levels of Responsible Use ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.73$). Specifically, students showed the highest competence in protecting personal information ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.77$) and maintaining digital security ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.88$). Furthermore, Pearson correlation analysis indicated a strong, positive and significant relationship between awareness and responsible behavior ($r = 0.818$, $p < 0.01$). It suggests that increased ethical knowledge directly translates into professional digital behaviour. These findings imply that the current digital literacy environment at PBU is effective in preparing students for the professional workforce. This study contributes to educational institutions by showing that digital ethics education in polytechnic curricula is important for encouraging responsible use of social media and developing ethical digital citizenship among students. The findings also provide useful insights for educators and policymakers to improve ethical awareness in digital technology environments. A future study could examine the impact of digital ethics education on student behavior in real workplace environments, particularly with regard to professional communication, data privacy and responsible use of digital platforms.

Keywords: social media, ethics, awareness, responsible use, polytechnic student.

1 Introduction

Social media has become a pervasive element of student's daily routines. It has changed a lot since it was introduced. Applications like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and X are now part of the educational environment and are popular used for conversation,

collaborative learning and self-expression [1]. Even though this application provides numerous benefits but it's also raises concern about moral values and ethical online behaviour. The social media ecosystem today is more advanced and complex than before academics and public relations professionals initially adopted it [2]. These tools freely used by numerous students without understood of their long-term effects on their digital footprint. This situation raises serious concerns about student awareness and responsible use of digital technology. Problems arising from this issue, such as improper content distribution, cyberbullying, privacy issues and the spread of false information are still common. [3]. Such unethical behaviours not only affect the students involved, but they also give a bad reputation to the polytechnic and local community [4].

From this perspective, social media ethics is defined as being aware of how students act online, practicing moral values, being respectful and being responsible. Students who have strong ethical values are able to build a positive digital image and engage in respectful and responsible online communication. At the polytechnic level, students are expected to practice using social media responsibly and ethically in preparation for entering the world of work in the future. Despite this, the actual level of ethical awareness and practice among Politeknik Balik Pulau (PBU), Penang students remains a subject of uncertainty. There is a difference between what students know about online etiquette and how they actually behave on social media [5]. Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the awareness and ethical practices of Polytechnic students when using social media platforms. The findings are expected to provide critical insights for educators and institutions to enhance digital literacy programs and strengthen ethical awareness in this rapidly evolving digital era. The research objectives of this study are:

- i. To assess the level of awareness of social media ethics among polytechnic students.
- ii. To examine the level of responsible use of social media among polytechnic students.
- iii. To identify the relationship between awareness and responsible use of social media.

2 Literature Review

The basis for understanding student behavior in this study is based on Ribble's theory [6]. In particular, the focus is on the level of awareness and responsibility among students at Politeknik Balik Pulau when using digital platforms. This study discusses the critical link between social media conduct and future career prospects. By highlighting digital professionalism as a vital asset before they enter the workforce. Previous research findings indicate that although most students are digital natives and highly proficient in using technology, their awareness of social media ethics remains at a moderate level. In line with the study by Mohamed et al. [5]. Many students are skilled in using various social media functions and features. However, they still lack a deeper understanding of regulatory aspects such as copyright laws and privacy rights.

Whereas a study by Mustaffa et al. [7] found that student's awareness is generally limited to basic online etiquette, while their understanding of legal implications and the long-term professional consequences of their online actions remains insufficient. This demonstrates that being technologically competent doesn't necessarily mean that students fully understand the responsibilities and ethical standards that must be observed. Regarding responsible use, previous research indicates a visible gap between what students know and how they actually behave online. Even though students might have basic ethical knowledge, many still engage in risky behaviors such as oversharing personal information, violating other's privacy or participating in cyberbullying [8]. According to Hassan and Razak's study, the anonymity of the internet often makes students feel safe to act unethically and lead to the spread of unverified news or the use of offensive language [9]. This irresponsible behaviour is a major concern. Students often focus on instant engagement, getting 'likes' or 'shares' without considering the negative impact their actions have on themselves or their community.

In the context of polytechnic and TVET education, social media ethics is more than just good manners. It is a vital professional skill that every student must have. Since these students are being equipped for industry readiness their online behavior is seen as a reflection of their workplace professionalism. According to Mohamed et al.'s study, technical skills alone are no longer enough in today's digital era [5]. Employers are now looking for digital citizenship as a sign of a candidate's maturity and emotional intelligence. If a polytechnic student uses social media irresponsibly, it can affect their professional reputation even before they graduate. Thus, practicing ethical behavior online is essential to ensure they are seen as reliable and disciplined candidates when they embark into the industry.

The connection between social media ethics and future employability is very strong because numerous employers now use social media screening to check on candidates before recruiting them. The things student posts online create a digital footprint that acts like a second resume. If a student has a history of posting offensive content or acting unprofessionally, it could result to their job application being rejected. Conversely, students who maintain a positive and ethical digital image are seen as more professional and trustworthy [9]. Therefore, student's behavior on social media today can open or close their future career opportunities.

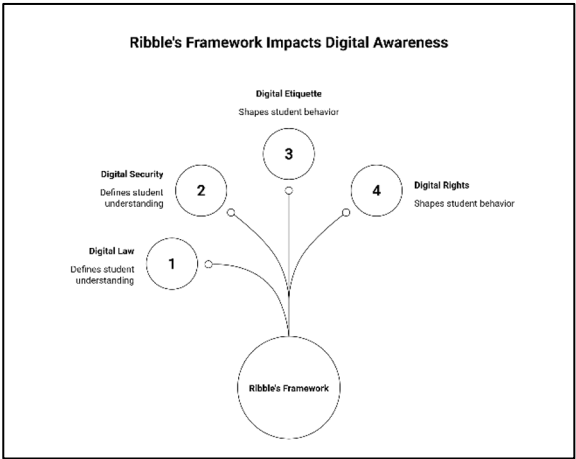
Building upon this understanding, although existing studies have extensively discussed on digital footprints and employability, much of the focus remains on theoretical awareness rather than examining the actual relationship between awareness and real-life practices. In addition, there is still limited empirical evidence within the Malaysian Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) context, where professional conduct is highly emphasized. Hence, this study aims to address this gap by providing empirical insights into ethical awareness and its influence on responsible social media use among students in a Malaysian Polytechnic setting.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Mike Ribble’s (2015) Nine Elements of Digital Citizenship to categorize the research items. The theory serves as the foundation of this study in explaining individual’s behavior in the digital environment. It outlines nine key elements including aspects of knowledge, ethics and responsibility in the use of technology. These elements include Digital Access, Digital Commerce, Digital Communication, Digital Literacy, Digital Etiquette, Digital Law, Digital Rights and Responsibilities, Digital Health and Wellness and Digital Security.

These nine elements provide a foundation for the knowledge aspect of this research, specifically regarding Digital Awareness. Elements like Digital Law and Digital Security help to define what a student should understand. Meanwhile, Digital Etiquette and Rights are more about their actual behavior or Responsible Use. Using Ribble’s framework to categorize the survey items helps to ensure that this study covers all parts of digital maturity among polytechnic students (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Ribble’s Framework Impacts Digital Awareness



4 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using descriptive and correlational approaches to examine social media ethics among polytechnic students. The descriptive approach is used to identify student’s levels of awareness of social media ethics, while the correlational approach investigates the relationship between ethical awareness and responsible social media use. The study population comprises students from PBU. and a simple random sampling technique was used to ensure representative participation from academic departments, with the sample size determined based on Taherdoost’s table at a 99% confidence level [10]. In terms of data analysis, the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) has been used because this scientific software

is easy to use and convenience to the researcher of this study. To ensure reliability, a pilot study involving 30 students was conducted, and only constructs with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.70 were retained, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The questionnaire consists of demographic information, items measuring awareness of social media ethics as the independent variable. However, items measuring responsible social media use as the dependent variable. Each was evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree". The research instrument used in this study is a structured questionnaire adapted from Isman and Canan Gungoren [11] and Mohamed et al. [5], which is also based on Ribble's Nine Elements of Digital Citizenship [6]. The questions were modified to suit the context of social media ethics among Malaysian Polytechnic students.

5 Result

5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

This present study involved 221 students from Politeknik Balik Pulau (PBU). Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic distribution. The Information Technology and Communication Department (JTMK) comprised the largest group (91.0%), with females making up the majority of respondents (55.7%). TikTok was found to be the most popular social media platform (71.0%), followed by Instagram (20.8%).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=221)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	123	55.7%
	Male	95	43.0%
Deparment	JTMK	201	91.0%
	JRKV	19	8.6%
Semester	Semester 4	79	35.7%
	Semester 2	53	24.0%
	Semester 6	37	16.7%
Main Platform	TikTok	157	71.0%
	Instagram	46	20.8%

5.2 Reliability Analysis

To ensure the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated for both constructs. As shown in Table 2, both scales exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (≥ 0.70), indicating excellent reliability [12].

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Digital Awareness	10	0.973
Responsible Use	10	0.963

5.3 Descriptive Analysis of Social Media Ethics

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the two primary constructs. Responsible Use (M = 4.34, SD = 0.73) and Digital Awareness (M = 4.32, SD = 0.78) both received excellent scores. Digital Security and Digital Intellectual Property (M = 4.43, SD = 0.88) shared the highest mean score in the Awareness construct, while Protecting Personal Information (M = 4.50, SD = 0.77) was the most frequently used behavior in the Responsible Use construct.

Table 3: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Research Constructs

Construct	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (D)	Level
Digital Awareness	4.32	0.78	High
Responsible Use	4.34	0.73	High

5.4 Correlational Analysis

The correlation between digital awareness and responsible use was investigated using a Pearson correlation analysis. A strong, positive, and significant correlation was found in the results ($r = 0.818$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that more responsible social media behavior among students is linked to higher levels of awareness regarding digital ethics.

6 Discussion

The findings show that polytechnic students have a comprehensive understanding of digital citizenship. The elevated of digital awareness (M=4.32) is in line with Ribble’s framework, which highlights the importance of digital security and literacy for current students [6]. In particular, the high scores in Digital Security (M=4.43) indicate that students have a keen awareness of the dangers of using online platforms, including data breaches and illegal access. This is consistent with the findings of Mohamed et al.’s study [5], which found that TVET student’s exposure to extensive digital technology made them more proactive in managing their digital technology use.

Furthermore, the study found that Responsible Use (M=4.34) is highly practiced, particularly in protecting personal information (M=4.50). This indicates a strong Privacy-First mindset. Maintaining a Professional Image has a high mean (M=4.30), which is especially significant because it indicates that students understand the long-term effects of their digital footprint on their future employment opportunities. This

awareness is vital in an era where employers frequently use social media screening as part of the recruitment process. This study's strong correlation ($r = 0.818$) offers crucial proof that awareness directly precedes behavior.

However, it is important to critically reflect on these unusually high mean scores. While the data shows excellent digital ethics, there is a chance that response bias occurred. In many global contexts, researchers often identify a knowledge-action gap [8], where individuals possess high digital literacy but fail to practice it due to peer pressure or the desire for viral engagement. In contrast, polytechnic students in this study seem to consistently apply their ethical knowledge to responsible behavior. This implies that the polytechnic ecosystem's current informal and formal digital literacy guidelines are successfully influencing students' behavior. In addition, a future study could examine the impact of digital ethics education on student behavior in real workplace environments, particularly with regard to professional communication, data privacy, and responsible use of digital platforms.

7 Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the level of social media awareness and responsible use among students at PBU. Based on the empirical data collected from 221 respondents, several significant conclusions can be made. Firstly, the study found that polytechnic students possess a significant level of digital awareness ($M = 4.32$) and demonstrate a proactive of responsible conduct ($M = 4.34$) on social media platforms. The high scores in digital security and the protection of personal information indicate that students are well-informed about the risks of the digital landscape and are proactive in safeguarding their online presence. This maturity is particularly vital given the dominance of TikTok and Instagram in their daily digital interactions.

Secondly, the results revealed an exceptionally strong positive correlation ($r = 0.818$, $p < 0.01$) between awareness and behavior. This is a critical finding as it demonstrates that at PBU, theoretical knowledge of digital ethics is successfully translated into practical and responsible actions. This strong connection suggests that institutional efforts whether formal or informal are effectively shaping student's digital citizenship. Finally, the high importance placed on maintaining a professional digital image reflects the student's awareness of their future career prospects. As employers increasingly utilize digital screening, the ethical conduct demonstrated by PBU students positions them as responsible and employable graduates in the digital economy.

In conclusion, digital ethics at PBU is at a commendable level. However, continuous efforts through structured digital citizenship education and awareness campaigns are essential to ensure these ethical standards evolve alongside emerging technologies, ultimately fostering a safer and more professional digital environment for the academic community.

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