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Investigating Teachers' Ethics in the Use of Social Media as a Teaching Media in EFL Classrooms : A Case Study at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara

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Abstract

offers various benefits, such as increased student engagement, flexible communication, and exposure to authentic materials. However, it also raises ethical challenges related to privacy, professionalism, and content responsibility. This study investigates how English teachers at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara reflect ethical awareness in using social media as a teaching tool. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving four English teachers who actively used platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. Thematic analysis revealed four central themes: ethical awareness, content selection, professional interaction, and student engagement. Findings suggest that while most teachers show commitment to ethical practices, such as respecting student privacy and maintaining professional boundaries, inconsistencies occur due to limited institutional guidelines. The study highlights the need for training and policy to support ethical digital pedagogy in EFL settings.

Keywords*: Teacher Ethics, Social Media, EFL Classroom*

Introduction

The advancement of technology has significantly transformed the educational landscape, particularly through the integration of digital platforms and social media into teaching and learning processes. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, the use of social media is no longer a supplementary tool but has become an integral component of pedagogical practice. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have been increasingly utilized by teachers for a variety of purposes, including content delivery, student engagement, classroom communication, and access to authentic materials.

However, the increasing adoption of social media in education also presents ethical challenges, particularly concerning the professional behaviour of teachers. The boundary between personal and professional domains becomes blurred, leading to potential risks such as breaches of student privacy, inappropriate content sharing, and the misuse of digital interactions. Teachers, as role models and educational authorities, are expected to uphold ethical standards both in physical and virtual environments. Ethical teaching practices must therefore be extended to the digital realm, where

educators are required to navigate complex issues related to online behaviour, digital responsibility, and professional integrity.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of digital pedagogy and the benefits of social media in EFL instruction, including improved student motivation, enhanced language exposure, and interactive learning environments. Nevertheless, limited research has examined how teachers perceive and practice ethics when using social media as a teaching medium. Understanding this aspect is critical, as ethical conduct not only affects the quality of instruction but also the trust and safety within the educational community.

This study aims to investigate how EFL teachers reflect ethical principles in their use of social media as a teaching medium. It focuses on identifying the ethical considerations that influence their digital teaching behaviour, the challenges they face, and the strategies they adopt to maintain professional conduct in online environments. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to the growing discourse on digital professionalism in education and highlights the need for institutional guidance in fostering ethical awareness among educators.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at understanding how English teachers at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara reflect ethical principles in their use of social media as teaching tools in the EFL classroom. This design allowed the researcher to capture detailed descriptions of teacher practices, perceptions, and ethical awareness.

The participants of this study were four English teachers selected through purposive sampling, based on their active use of social media in teaching and their willingness to participate. The setting was MAN 1 Kolaka Utara, a public Islamic senior high school in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in exploring the participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across the key research questions. Each interview session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity and depth of responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The data analysis process followed thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach was suitable for identifying recurring patterns in participants' narratives concerning ethical considerations. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher employed member checking by sharing the interpreted data with participants for confirmation. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of their anonymity, and given the right to withdraw at any point.

Results

1. Teachers' Ethical Awareness in Using Social Media

Teachers' ethical awareness is foundational in guiding their social media usage. All four participants acknowledged the importance of digital ethics, including the principles of student privacy, appropriate communication, and professional responsibility. Ms. A showed strong awareness of digital ethics. She emphasized student privacy, stating that she never posted student photos or personal information without

written consent. This was evident during classroom observation, where she consistently reminded students not to tag personal accounts when submitting projects via Instagram. In contrast, Ms. D admitted occasionally sharing student photos without consent, viewing it as a form of class promotion. Her actions, although well-intentioned, revealed a gap between ethical knowledge and practice. She posted group work on Facebook with students' names and photos but without any mention of consent, raising privacy concerns. Ms. R focused on content sensitivity and respectful communication. She filtered student captions before posting and removed content containing inappropriate slang. This behaviour demonstrated her ethical judgment in maintaining academic integrity. Mr. S stressed the importance of being a digital role model. He maintained a formal tone in class WhatsApp groups, used the platform to reinforce vocabulary, and refrained from off-topic chats. His digital behaviour reflected consistency between ethical awareness and practice.

Overall, all teachers showed a degree of ethical awareness, but with varying consistency. Their practices were shaped by personal values, institutional culture, and prior digital experiences.

2. Ethical Practices in Content Selection and Sharing

In selecting and sharing instructional content via social media, the teachers demonstrated ethical considerations concerning accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and student well-being.

Ms. A filtered content based on age-appropriateness and relevance. She avoided controversial or offensive materials. Similarly, Ms. R rejected content from unreliable or biased sources, prioritizing inclusivity and fairness.

Mr. S emphasized educational value and emotional impact. He only selected materials that supported language learning and avoided anything that could cause discomfort. These actions reflect a dual concern for pedagogical quality and ethical responsibility.

Regarding the sharing of student work, practices varied. Ms. A and Ms. R emphasized the importance of obtaining written parental consent. They believed in creating a safe digital environment where students feel respected and protected.

Conversely, Ms. D occasionally shared student work without consent, hoping to motivate others. This indicates an ethical oversight, despite positive intentions. Mr. S resolved privacy concerns by anonymizing student work or showcasing it as group output, which maintained recognition while protecting individual identities.

These findings reveal that ethical practices in content selection and sharing are diverse. Teachers like Ms. A, Ms. R, and Mr. S applied strict ethical standards, while Ms. D's sapproach indicated a need for stronger ethical guidance in digital practices.

3. Professional Values in Social Media Engagement

Professionalism in digital spaces is critical in maintaining boundaries between personal and academic roles. Teachers' digital personas influence how students perceive authority and respect in online learning.

Ms. A avoided informal language and maintained a polite, instructional tone in her digital communication. She viewed professionalism as an extension of her responsibility as a teacher. Ms. R established clear communication boundaries by avoiding private messaging unless necessary and restricting interactions to school hours. She informed students about this policy at the beginning of the academic year to prevent misinterpretation. Mr. S strictly separated personal and professional accounts.

He used only learning platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram for educational purposes and never shared personal social media with students. His actions emphasized the importance of modelling appropriate digital behaviour.

On the other hand, Ms. D admitted to a more flexible style. She sometimes responded to student messages outside learning hours, aiming to be supportive. However, this informality occasionally led to blurred boundaries. She later reflected on this and began using a separate account for educational purposes. Additionally, all teachers recognized their roles as digital role models. Ms. A shared motivational and learning-related posts only, avoiding personal opinions. Ms. R viewed her posts as examples for students to learn digital respect. Mr. S carefully considered the impact of his content on students and community perception. Even Ms. D showed ethical growth by reflecting on her previous posting habits and adopting more professional practices. These findings suggest that while professional values are upheld in different ways, teachers generally strive to align their online presence with ethical teaching principles.

4. Teachers' Practices in Managing Student Interaction on Social Media

Managing student interaction ethically on digital platforms requires rules, boundaries, and sensitivity to emotional and academic needs. The participants implemented various strategies to regulate and humanize digital learning spaces. Ms. A established closed WhatsApp and Facebook groups for class use, beginning each term with a clear explanation of rules. She monitored group activity to ensure discussions remained respectful and on-topic.

Ms. R communicated clear boundaries at the start of the academic year, especially regarding response times and the scope of communication. This helped her maintain professionalism while remaining approachable. Mr. S acted as a moderator in Telegram groups, setting clear expectations and promptly addressing off-topic or inappropriate posts. He prioritized student safety and focus, creating an inclusive environment where students felt confident to participate.

In contrast, Ms. D had a more relaxed approach in the beginning, which led to some students dominating discussions while others remained silent. Realizing the imbalance, she introduced more structured participation rules to ensure equal opportunities for all.

Teachers also monitored emotional dynamics in student communication. Ms. A encouraged constructive feedback and addressed sarcasm or exclusion. Ms. R paid attention to tone and emojis, using them as teachable moments about digital manners. Mr. S praised students' efforts and used engaging but respectful prompts to keep them active. Ms. D began focusing on equitable interaction and kind language, highlighting her development in managing ethical communication. These findings show that effective digital interaction management requires not only rules but also empathy. Ethical digital leadership helps prevent miscommunication, promotes emotional safety, and ensures student voices are respected.

Across the four themes, this study found that English teachers at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara are generally aware of the ethical responsibilities involved in using social media for teaching. Their practices reflect both shared values and individual interpretations of digital ethics. While some teachers consistently uphold high ethical standards, others continue to grow and adjust their practices through reflection and experience. These findings affirm that ethical teaching through social media is a dynamic, ongoing process shaped by professionalism, awareness, and sensitivity to the needs of learners.

Discussion

This study explored the ethical practices of EFL teachers in using social media as a teaching medium, focusing on four English teachers at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara. The findings, drawn from interviews, observations, and document analysis, revealed how ethics manifests in teachers' awareness, content choices, professionalism, and digital interaction management.

First, **teachers' ethical awareness** significantly shaped how they navigated social media in educational contexts. Teachers like Ms. A and Mr. S demonstrated high levels of awareness by safeguarding student privacy, setting digital boundaries, and serving as role models in online behaviour. Their practices resonate with the ethical principles outlined by the Ontario College of Teachers and align with Warnick et al. (2016), who emphasize that ethical conduct online is not accidental but must be developed through institutional support and reflective practice. Meanwhile, Ms. D's inconsistent application, such as posting student photos without consent, shows that while awareness exists, ethical application may still depend on individual values and institutional clarity. This supports the view of Howard and Roblyer (2018), who argue that ethical maturity is fostered through exposure to real digital dilemmas and guided decision-making.

Second, **ethical decision-making in content selection and sharing** was evident in how teachers curated digital materials. Teachers like Ms. R and Mr. S deliberately avoided biased, culturally inappropriate, or unverified content, opting instead for inclusive and educationally relevant materials. This practice aligns with guidelines from Common Sense Education and findings from Frontiers in Psychology (2022), which emphasize the ethical responsibility of teachers as content gatekeepers. The ability to balance instructional goals with digital sensitivity reflects a deeper understanding of teachers' dual role as educators and ethical media curators. Kimmons (2015) warns of the risks of uncritical sharing, reinforcing the importance of careful evaluation before distributing materials on public platforms.

Third, **professionalism in digital engagement** emerged as a core component of ethical teaching. Teachers maintained professional boundaries by restricting private communication and limiting social interactions to academic platforms and hours. Ms. A and Ms. R exemplified this by avoiding casual language or off-topic discussions in class group chats. These behaviours align with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, where teachers model appropriate conduct to influence students' online behaviour. In contrast, Ms. D's more relaxed approach, though well-meaning, blurred boundaries and occasionally led to overfamiliarity. This highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between warmth and authority. Supporting this, Carpenter and Harvey (2020) found that students perceive teachers with professional online personas as more trustworthy and credible.

The fourth theme concerned **managing student interaction on social media**. Teachers like Ms. A and Mr. S implemented clear rules and protocols in digital classrooms—such as limiting discussions to learning content, moderating tone, and encouraging respectful peer interaction. These actions created a safe, structured digital space and are supported by Henderson et al. (2021), who argue that consistency and trust are key to effective digital learning. Moreover, sensitivity to students' emotional well-being—such as correcting errors privately and praising publicly—was shown to boost confidence, especially among more reserved learners. Ms. R's careful monitoring of emojis and tone in group chats illustrates this emotional vigilance.

However, not all interactions were equally structured. Ms. D's more open-ended digital policy sometimes led to confusion among students about when and how to communicate. This finding echoes the conclusions of Falloon (2020), who stressed that without ethical scaffolding, online learning environments risk becoming emotionally unsafe or disorganized.

Beyond individual practices, the study revealed the significance of **institutional support and ongoing professional development**. All participants acknowledged the need for clearer school policies and more structured training in digital ethics. This reflects Samosir et al. (2025), who argue that while pre-service teachers are digitally confident, they often lack ethical awareness. Ferrero et al. (2021) further emphasize that ethical competence grows within communities of practice through mentoring, storytelling, and continuous reflection. Without these supports, inconsistencies—such as seen in Ms. D's practices—are more likely to persist.

In sum, this study affirms that ethical use of social media in EFL teaching is a multifaceted responsibility. It involves informed decision-making, cultural sensitivity, professional conduct, and empathetic management of online interactions. Teachers at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara generally demonstrated an awareness of ethical principles, though the depth and consistency of application varied. The study suggests that ethics is not simply about avoiding harm, but about promoting respect, fairness, and inclusivity in every digital interaction. Ethical literacy must therefore be cultivated not only through awareness, but through guided practice, institutional policies, and reflective teaching cultures.

Conclusion

This study explored the ethical practices of English teachers in using social media as a teaching tool at MAN 1 Kolaka Utara. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving four teachers, the research revealed four major dimensions of ethical behavior: awareness, content curation, professionalism, and interaction management. While most participants showed an understanding of key principles like privacy and respectful communication, inconsistencies appeared in areas such as obtaining consent and setting boundaries. Teachers generally selected appropriate content and used social media professionally, but some practices—like sharing student work without approval or responding to messages outside academic hours—reflected a lack of institutional policy and formal training on digital ethics.

Overall, the study suggests that while ethical awareness among teachers is present, its consistent implementation remains a challenge. Upholding ethics in social media use requires more than personal commitment; it also depends on clear guidelines, reflective practice, and ongoing support from educational institutions. When applied thoughtfully, ethical principles can help transform social media into a powerful, inclusive, and safe learning platform in EFL classrooms.

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