

PSYCHOLOGICAL TENETS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING PLATFORMS FOR ENHANCED DIGITAL COMPETENCY IN JUNIOR SCHOOLS IN MBITA SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in basic education, developing digital competencies among young learners has become a critical educational priority. Although Social Networking Platforms (SNPs) play a central role in shaping how adolescents interact, learn, and express themselves, their specific influence on digital skill acquisition remains insufficiently articulated. In particular, a problem exists regarding how key psychosocial tenets—such as identity formation, emotional regulation, peer influence, and privacy awareness—interact with SNP usage to either enhance or hinder the digital competency of junior school (JS) learners in rural contexts like Mbita Sub-County, Homa Bay County, Kenya. Guided by Social Cognitive Theory and Connectivism Theory, this study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design with a cross-sectional survey framework. From a target population of 1,080 junior school learners and key educational stakeholders across the sub-county, a sample of 284 respondents was selected using Taro Yamane's formula alongside stratified random sampling for learners and purposive sampling for educators. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Research instruments were subjected to expert review by university supervisors to establish construct and content validity, while internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$). Because the study involved minor learners, strict ethical protocols were maintained, including obtaining institutional clearance, written parental/guardian informed consent, learner assent, and ensuring data anonymity and confidentiality. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and multiple regression), while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that psychosocial tenets—particularly emotional regulation, self-motivation, and positive peer influence—significantly predicted learners' digital problem-solving and information literacy skills ($p < .05$). Qualitative insights reinforced that supportive and socially safe online environments foster digital confidence, whereas risks like cyberbullying and negative social comparison impede skill development. The study concludes that while SNPs serve as vital spaces for digital learning, their potential is constrained by inadequate rural infrastructure and limited pedagogical integration. The study recommends implementing structured online safety frameworks and expanding school-based psychosocial support to foster safe, effective digital engagement.

Key Words: Competency, Psychological, Tenets, Networking Platforms.

Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technology has transformed how young people interact, learn, and develop socio-cognitive skills. Social Networking Platforms (SNPs), including Facebook, Instagram,

TikTok, WhatsApp, and educational forums, have become integral to the daily lives of junior school learners. Beyond communication, these platforms function as digital environments that influence identity formation, social learning, and cognitive development (Chen & Guo, 2023). Consequently, understanding the

psychological tenets embedded within these platforms is essential for promoting learners' digital competency.

Globally, education systems increasingly recognize the dual role of social networking platforms. While concerns remain regarding cyberbullying, excessive use, and exposure to harmful content, evidence also highlights their potential to support learning, collaboration, and digital skill development when used appropriately (Hosen et al., 2021). Similarly, Zainabu, Oyoo, and Onyango (2024) reported widespread smartphone use among students but noted limited evidence on its contribution to psychological well-being and digital literacy. They argued that greater understanding of these relationships could help address challenges such as depression, loneliness, academic pressure, and other psychosocial concerns. Investigating these issues at the junior school level may provide opportunities to strengthen digital literacy while promoting healthy digital engagement.

In Kenya, junior school learners are increasingly using social networking platforms for communication, learning, and self-expression. However, unregulated use may expose learners to risks such as cyberbullying, addiction, anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, and inappropriate online content (Odhiambo et al., 2025). At the same time, the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) identifies digital literacy as one of its seven core competencies, emphasizing the need to equip learners with the skills required for responsible and effective participation in the digital world (KICD, 2019).

Despite the growing use of social networking platforms among young people, research in Kenya has largely focused on access to digital technologies and infrastructure, with limited attention to the psychological factors that influence digital competency. This gap limits the development of comprehensive educational strategies that promote safe, ethical, and meaningful digital participation. Therefore, this study examined the psychological tenets associated with social networking platforms and their influence on digital competency among junior school learners in Mbita Sub-County, Homa Bay County. Specifically, the study sought to identify the main psychological tenets associated with social networking platforms that enhance digital competency among junior school learners.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research approach. This design allowed the concurrent collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions, combining the statistical power of quantitative trends with the contextual depth of qualitative insights (McLeod, 2023).

To execute this, the study utilized a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. A descriptive design systematically measures and describes the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of a target population without manipulation (Trochim, 2020). Complementing this, the cross-sectional approach allowed the researcher to collect data at a single point in time across various cohorts, capturing the current status of the phenomenon under investigation.

The study was conducted in Mbita Sub-County, located in Homa Bay County along the shores of Lake Victoria, Kenya. Mbita Sub-County is characterized by a mix of rural and semi-urban educational settings. While the local economy is anchored primarily on fishing, small-scale farming, and trade, this study focuses specifically on its public junior schools to assess the intersection of local digital resource availability and student digital competency.

According to Jilcha (2020), a target population is the complete set of cases or entities that possess the specific characteristics required to address the research objectives. The study's target population comprised 1,080 prospective respondents across the four educational zones of Mbita Sub-County (Lambwe, Rusinga, Mbita East, and Mbita West). This target population included 800 Grade 9 junior school learners across 69 public junior schools, 276 junior school teachers, and 4 Curriculum Support Officers (CSOs) representing each educational zone. Grade 9 learners were specifically targeted due to their advanced exposure to digital literacy learning under the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) relative to lower grades.

A multi-stage sampling technique was utilized. First, stratified random sampling was used to select representative public junior schools across the four

educational zones of Mbita Sub-County. From a total of 69 public junior schools, 17 schools were sampled proportionally across the zones.

For the participant sample, a census approach was applied to the CSOs due to their small, highly specialized population ($n=4$). To determine the sample size for teachers and students across the selected schools, Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations was applied:

$$n = 1 + N(e^2)N$$

Where:

- N = Total target population (284)
- e = Margin of error (expressed as a decimal, 0.05 for a 95% confidence level)
- n = Calculated sample size

Substituting the values into the formula:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= 1 + 284(0.05^2)284 = 1 + 284(0.0025)284 \\ &= 1 + 0.71284 = 1.71284 \approx 166 \end{aligned}$$

Applying this formula yielded a minimum statistically representative sample size of 166 respondents. However, to maximize statistical power and minimize non-response bias, the researcher opted to include all accessible participants from the target population pools across the 17 sampled schools, resulting in a final participant sample of 160 students, 120 teachers, and 4 CSOs.

Data was collected using self-administered questionnaires for quantitative measures and semi-structured interview schedules alongside Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides for qualitative measures. To ensure that the instruments measured the theoretical constructs they were designed to evaluate, two forms of validity were established before field deployment:

Content and Face Validity: The draft questionnaires and interview guides were subjected to rigorous review by two university supervisors and experts in educational technology. These experts evaluated the clarity, relevance, language, and formatting of the items to ensure they aligned with the research questions and were age-appropriate for Grade 9 learners. Irrelevant or ambiguous items were revised or deleted based on this feedback.

Construct Validity: The instruments were structured around distinct psychological and digital competency frameworks. During a pilot study conducted in 2 public junior schools (which were excluded from the final sample), the internal consistency of the items under each construct was verified to ensure they converged on their respective conceptual dimensions.

To test the reliability of the Likert-scale items in the questionnaires, pilot data was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha (α). A reliability threshold coefficient of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was set as the benchmark for accepting the instruments. The calculated alpha coefficients for all quantitative sub-scales met this threshold, indicating strong internal reliability.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires was cleaned, coded, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency distributions (F), percentages (%), means (M), and standard deviations (SD) were calculated to summarize the trends in demographic variables and Likert-scale responses regarding psychological tenets and digital competency.

Statistical tests, including Pearson Correlation (r) and Multiple Linear Regression analysis, were planned and executed to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Qualitative data gathered from the CSOs' interviews and student focus group discussions were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke: Transcribing raw audio recordings and thoroughly reading the interview transcripts, generating basic, shorthand labels for meaningful text units, grouping related codes into broader, candidate thematic categories, checking the candidate themes against the entire dataset to ensure semantic coherence, Structuring the core conceptual essence of each theme and selecting vivid, illustrative verbatim quotes to contextualize and triangulate the statistical findings within the Results section.

Prior to entering the field, formal research authorization was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), alongside an introduction letter from the university's Graduate Studies Directorate. Written permissions were also

secured from the Homa Bay County Director of Education and the respective school HOIs.

Ethical guidelines were strictly enforced throughout the study i.e. Signed informed consent was obtained from teachers and CSOs. Because the Grade 9 students were minors, parental/guardian consent was obtained, supplemented by written or verbal assent from the students themselves before participation, all respondents were explicitly informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or loss of privileges, participant identities were protected by using alphanumeric codes (e.g., *CSO1*, *FDG4*) in place of real names and all hardcopy research materials were locked in private cabinets, while digital data files were encrypted, password-protected, and stored in secure cloud storage accessible only to the principal investigator.

Results and Discussions

Psychological Tenets and Digital Competency

To examine the primary objective of the study, the research assessed how key psychosocial tenets associated with Social Networking Platforms (SNPs)—including identity formation, emotional regulation, peer influence, motivation, and privacy awareness—influence the acquisition of digital competency among Junior School (JS) learners in Mbita Sub-County.

Respondents rated their level of agreement across a series of structured questionnaire items (Items 18

through 30) using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). In the statistical presentation in Table 3, N = 119 denotes the total number of respondents who fully completed this section of the research instrument. Items 18 to 30 represent the operationalized survey indicators measuring the study's independent variable (Psychosocial Tenets of SNPs) in relation to the dependent variable (Learners' Digital Competency).

The empirical data demonstrated high levels of consensus (with standard deviations generally below 1.0) regarding the role of psychological traits and digital design in fostering digital competency.

Platform Interface & Motivation: A combined 95.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that attractive platform features effectively facilitate learning (Item 18, M=4.30, SD=0.645). Similarly, 91.6% agreed that psychological tenets serve as major motivators for digital learning (Item 24, M=4.18, SD=0.840).

Identity and Emotional Well-being: 92.5% agreed that a proper foundation of identity formation and self-concept enhances digital learning (Item 19, M=4.29, SD=0.752). However, exposure on these platforms introduces significant vulnerabilities. A total of 89.9% agreed that feelings of inadequacy and distress from peer posts are common (Item 20, M=4.18, SD=0.788), and 79.8% confirmed that public exposure of personal identity causes stress (Item 26, M=3.94, SD=0.994).

Table 3

Psychological Tenets and Digital Competency

N	Item Statement on Psychological Tenets and Digital Competency	R	Level of Agreement					M	SD
			SD	D	N	A	SA		
18	Attractive platform features is very effective in facilitating learning	F	1	1	3	70	44	4.3	.645
		%	.8	.8	2.5	58.8	37.0		
19	Proper foundation of identity formation & good self-concept can enhance learning in digital platform	F	2	1	6	61	49	4.29	.752
		%	1.7	.8	5.0	51.3	41.2		
20	Feelings of inadequacy & distress from what others post or say is common among learners in digital platforms	F	2	3	7	67	40	4.18	.788
		%	1.7	2.5	5.9	56.3	33.6		

N	Item Statement on Psychological Tenets and Digital Competency	R	Level of Agreement				M	SD
			SD	D	N	A	SA	
21	Psychological tenets help students develop critical thinking skills & ability to sieve trustworthy online information	F %	2 1.7	5 4.2	14 11.8	60 50.4	38 31.9	4.07 .871
22	Unguided psychological tenets normally contribute to the virality of inappropriate content	F %	4 3.4	2 1.7	16 13.4	57 47.9	40 33.6	4.07 .918
23	The addictive nature of digital platforms is useful for enhancing digital competency	F %	10 8.4	11 9.2	27 22.7	42 35.3	29 24.4	3.58 1.197
24	Psychological tenets are avenues for motivating digital learning	F %	3 2.5	4 3.4	3 2.5	68 57.1	41 34.5	4.18 .840
25	Psychological tenets give learners the ability to resist negative peer pressure from digital platforms	F %	13 10.9	8 6.7	11 9.2	52 43.7	35 29.4	3.74 1.259
26	Students' personal identity are publicly exposed in online platforms making them feel pressure & stress	F %	6 5.0	4 3.4	14 11.8	62 52.1	33 27.7	3.94 .994
27	Psychological tenets enable understanding & adequate management of peer pressure from online audience	F %	2 1.7	6 5.0	16 13.4	62 52.1	33 27.7	3.99 .878
28	Psychological tenets enable understanding & coping up with cyber bullying cases	F %	4 3.4	2 1.7	12 10.1	59 49.6	42 35.3	4.12 .904
29	Psychological tenets promotes creativity in structured educative ways	F %	2 1.7	4 3.4	7 5.9	70 58.8	36 30.3	4.13 .798
30	JSS students are capable of effectively using digital tools to solve problems	F %	5 4.2	9 7.6	14 11.8	57 47.9	34 28.6	3.89 1.040

Note: F = Frequency; % = Percentage; SD = Standard Deviation.

Cognitive Skills & Coping Mechanisms: High agreement was found for items asserting that psychological resilience aids digital safety. Specifically, 82.3% agreed that psychological tenets foster critical thinking to sieve online information (Item 21, M=4.07, SD=0.871), 79.8% agreed they enable management of peer pressure (Item 27, M=3.99, SD=0.878), and 84.9% agreed they help students cope with cyberbullying (Item 28, M=4.12, SD=0.904).

Platform Risks & Behavioral Divergences: While 81.5% agreed that unguided traits contribute to viral inappropriate content (Item 22, M=4.07, SD=0.918),

views were highly fractured regarding digital addiction. Only 59.7% of respondents agreed that the addictive nature of these platforms is useful for competency building, yielding a high variance in responses (Item 23, M=3.58, SD=1.197).

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (CSO) yielded three primary themes aligning with the quantitative results:

Theme 1: Visual Engagement and User-Centered Design

Students emphasized that appealing interfaces are vital to sustaining their interest:

"We find attractive platform features very helpful in digital learning because they make lessons fun and easy to understand. Attractive digital platforms make learning exciting and help me improve my digital skills while studying." (FDG8)

Theme 2: Identity Presentation and Peer Dynamics

Qualitative responses illustrated a dual approach to identity, split between authenticity and social curation to fit peer expectations:

"We often present ourselves differently online than we do in real life by changing our behavior to appear 'cool' or socially accepted... online identities are often carefully constructed." (FDG4) "Some people do not like faking their lives and therefore choose to remain the same person both online and in real life... their online behavior closely reflects their real-life character." (FDG3) "When peers share achievements or receive praise online, we often engage in self-comparison, which can lower our self-esteem and confidence." (FDG15)

Theme 3: Coping Strategies and Active Collaboration

When navigating negative feedback or cyberbullying, learners rely heavily on protective social circles (teachers, parents) and selective digital boundaries:

"Once something is online, many people can see it... Being careful online helps me stay safe and respectful." (FDG1) "Online platforms help us learn new things by allowing us to share school projects with classmates... This collaborative interaction also strengthens digital skills." (FDG6)

The findings highlight that digital competency among Junior School (JS) learners is deeply intertwined with psychological design, identity formation, and peer-induced pressures.

The high consensus on Item 18 ($M=4.30$) and Item 24 ($M=4.18$) proves that technology adoption in JSS environments is not purely a logistical issue, but a

psychological one. Intuitively designed, visually stimulating interfaces are pedagogical enablers. These findings align with Chen et al. (2020), who argue that interactive features directly determine student engagement levels. Because younger adolescents are emotionally responsive to aesthetics, interface design serves as an initial cognitive gatekeeper. Furthermore, incorporating motivational elements (such as goal-setting and positive feedback) supports persistence in digital spaces, echoing assertions by Schunk and Di Benedetto (2023) and Bond and Bedenlier (2024) that digital presence is heavily sustained by emotional and psychological support structures.

A strong self-concept was strongly supported ($M=4.29$) as a prerequisite for digital exploration. When learners possess a healthy, stable self-awareness, they navigate digital tasks with greater agency. This corroborates the work of Schneider and Preckel (2017), who demonstrated that self-concept is a fundamental driver of academic engagement and resilience in virtual learning spaces. However, peer feedback and social-media curation introduce friction. The qualitative division between students presenting a curated "cool" persona (FDG4) and those choosing authentic representation (FDG3) indicates that social pressure actively shapes online actions. As a result, digital engagement in JS settings risks becoming superficial and performance-driven rather than educational.

The reality of digital exposure is reflected in high agreement rates for Item 20 ($M=4.18$, low self-esteem from peers) and Item 26 ($M=3.94$, identity exposure stress). This strongly mirrors Valkenburg and Peter (2011), who observed that early adolescents are highly vulnerable to peer evaluation, social comparison, and emotional distress on online networks. This study also highlights the complex nature of "addictive" platform loops (Item 23). While some operational fluency can result from high-frequency platform engagement—consistent with Kuss and Griffiths (2024), who note that

high exposure can build basic technical navigation skills—this behavior brings significant long-term psychological risks. This dilemma is best summarized by CSO3, who warned that educators cannot celebrate "addictive fluency" without addressing the behavioral dependencies it creates.

To survive these environments, students require critical thinking and emotional regulation (Item 21, $M=4.07$; Item 28, $M=4.12$). Metzger and Flanagin (2013) assert that cognitive self-regulation directly improves a learner's ability to evaluate online credibility and resist misinformation. Similarly, the capacity to withstand and

process cyberbullying depends heavily on internal psychological assets. As noted by Hinduja and Patchin (2023) and Kowalski et al. (2024), while external reporting tools are helpful, psychological resilience, emotional self-control, and adaptive problem-solving serve as a learner's primary defenses against cyberbullying-induced distress.

Table 4 presents the result of a Pearson - Correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between psychological tenets (independent variable) and JSS students' capability to effectively use digital tools to solve problems (dependent variable).

Table 4
Psychological Tenets and Digital Competency

Independent Variable	Inferential Statistical Test	Correlation with dependent variable (JSS students are capable of effectively using digital tools to solve problems)
Psychological tenets	Pearson Correlation	.396
	Set Sig. (2-tailed) (α)	.05
	Observed P value	.000

When examining the significant relationship between psychological tenets and effective use of digital tools to solve problems by JS learners, Pearson's correlation was used to determine the degree of the relationship. The range of the correlation was interpreted from -1 to +1. Where a negative value was an indication of a negative correlation but a positive value was an indication of a positive correlation. The coefficient being < 0.3 indicates weak correlation, $> 0.3 < 0.5$ shows moderate correlation and > 0.5 indicates strong correlation. From table 4, there was a statistically significant positive and moderate relationship between psychological tenets ($r = .396$; $p = .000$) and digital competency of JS learners.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, Psychological tenets including identity formation, emotional regulation, resilience, motivation, and perception of online interactions play a significant role in shaping digital competency among JS learners. Further findings on the relationship indicate that psychological tenets a statistically significant positive and moderate

relationship ($r = .396$; $p = .000$) to digital competency of JS learners.

Recommendations of the Study

The study recommended that schools should adopt use of embedded systematic use of digital technologies to pedagogy to increase the scope of psychological support and online safety initiatives by construction of psychologically sustainable and closely supervised remote learning environments which allow for the continued development of students' identity and enable them to practice emotional control and learn to be resilient and motivated. There should be clear procedures and monitoring systems to lower psychological threats like cyber bullying, general anxiety, and negative social comparison which impede learner engagement and skill acquisition.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The author used generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) to assist with language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The AI tool was not used to generate scientific content, interpret data, or draw conclusions. All content has been reviewed and verified by the author, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Single author: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Declaration of conflict of interest

There is no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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