



# Facebook vs. Twitter: Social media platform selection for news consumption among undergraduate students

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## ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are used by various age groups. Each social media platform has its own targeted age group, as the user's preference for interface, content and visual varies. Therefore, it is important to identify the preference of age group. Metadiscourse is a term for words that are used in a sentence to indicate the direction and purpose of a text. Each social media platform has different types of metadiscourse, depending on the audience. Hence, the objective of this study is to analyse and identify the social media platforms that students prefer to obtain news and what influences their decision in choosing these platforms. Social media platforms in this study are viewed from the perspective of the media ecology theory by McLuhan (1964). The social media platform chosen by students is mainly influenced by the ecosystem of the media itself. The quantitative part of the study administered a questionnaire to 110 students from the Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL) to identify and analyse the type of social media platforms that they prefer and interviews were then conducted to support the quantitative findings on what influenced their choice of social media platforms. The findings show that Twitter is the preferred social media platform. Various factors influence the students' choice, which are (a) personal bias, (b) less political influence, (c) trustable source, (d) family/relatives not using the same social media platform, (e) ease of identifying fake news and (f) friends' recommendation. It is hoped that future research can further explore the effectiveness of having different types of social media platforms for friends and family and the benefits for the user.

Keywords: **Social media, Facebook, Twitter, news, students, metadiscourse, media ecology**

## INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has evolved through recent years. The rise of mobile phone contributed to the explosion of social media as an inextricable part of daily life. Today, the number of users on social media has increased exponentially. Statista (2021) reported that in October 2021, the number of Facebook users was 2,895 million as compared to Twitter which had 436 million users. Since then, Facebook has maintained its number 1 rank as the social media platform with the highest number of users. This has largely influenced people to shift to obtaining news from digital platforms rather than traditional printed newspapers. Further, Gulzar et al. (2021) highlighted that students rely on social media as it increases their level of creativity in creating content for the platform. With more and more students depending on social media for their daily interactions, it is also natural for them to use social media to obtain news updates as well. However, the platform students prefer as a source of news remains debatable, as the choice of social media platforms may be influenced by many factors.

Sun et al. (2021) mentioned as the popularity of social media rose, it has enabled the dissemination of news through platforms that has large numbers of users. This is because more people feel that social media platforms deliver news faster compared to mass media (Ahmadi et al., 2021). They further added that the younger generation's news consumption has increased over the years through social media as they feel the news is more authentic and in real-time. Essentially, students relying on social media for news consumption hinges heavily on their dependency and loyalty for social media platforms.

Therefore, the present research aims to analyse and identify which social media platforms students prefer to obtain news and what influences their selection.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital era has taken over the world, with most industries needing them to survive and to remain competitive. People everywhere use mobile phones mainly to communicate with each other and it has become an essential platform, especially for students, in completing their assignments and non-assignment related tasks. Apart from laptops or mobile phones to complete their assignments, students also require good and fast Internet connectivity. In addition, students also surf social media in between their breaks and share their daily activities with other netizens. According to Meşe and Aydin (2019), the ever-evolving technologies continue to affect various industries, especially the education industry. Additionally, they elaborated that with the emergence of Web 2.0, students use social media to interact with each other and share fun, interesting and knowledge content with their friends and followers. Their work demonstrated that the main purpose students use social media is to share information with WhatsApp and Instagram being their most preferred social media platforms. Similarly, Anser et al.'s work (2020) found that social media is an integral component of any organisation and an essential part of life, including for students. This shows that social media plays a big role in influencing students as they read and share information online. It is also important to understand and identify which platforms students prefer as their news source, as this will help brands, companies, and organisations to disseminate their messages.

Sousa and Bates (2021) stated that most students use social media for learning purposes. Zamri et al. (2018) agree with Sousa and Bates (2021) by highlighting that the use of social media amongst student has increased drastically over the years, with 95% of students having access to mobile phones. Further, mobile phones as well as Internet connection have become

cheaper and more affordable for most families. Moreover, the trend of using social media to stay in touch with family and friends is on the rise. In addition, Anasri and Khan (2020) elaborated that social media plays a big role in 21st century learning as social media is often used as a collaborative learning method to increase the interactivity of students, lecturers, teachers in sharing ideas and knowledge online. They added further that the increase of student engagement in class online or offline, as a result of the students' interest in using social media as a part of their class activity, helps them enjoy their class and allows them to show their creativity through social media collaborative learning.

On the other hand, Kolhar et al. (2021) disagree as their study showed that students prefer to use social media during their leisure time searching or scrolling for less-stressful content as compared to using social media for academic purposes. The team reported that the habitual behaviours of students using social media for entertainment purposes affect their academic performance drastically as they become more sleep deprived due to surfing social media late into the night and as they become more focused on their social life instead of their studies. Their work demonstrated the negative impact social media has on students due to the effortless flexibility social media affords, as it is just a swipe or click away to switch from academic content to entertainment content, which is more enjoyable for the students. Hence the tendency for students to use social media for entertainment purposes are higher compared to academic purposes. However, language change happens among social media users, as they try to fit within the audience's primary language used (Natsir et al., 2020). In the context of language, Natsir et al. (2020) mentioned that it varies by sentence structure, word choice and slang as each social media platform has different preferences and target audiences. For example, middle-aged to older users prefer Facebook, those in the early twenties and teens prefer Instagram, while video platform users prefer TikTok as the algorithm is different. This study hopes to demonstrate that most students depend on social media to acquire news depending on various aspects, which can be identified through their social interactions and usage frequency of their preferred social media platform.

It should be noted that each social media platform has its own metadiscourse as its audience varies. Instagram and Twitter users generally come from the younger generations of 15 to 30 years old, while older generations, 30 years old and above prefer Facebook. As the audience varies depending on the social media platform, the metadiscourse in these social media platforms also vary. According to Biri (2021), the type of social media platform and its interface and structure are the primary determinants of the metadiscourse from the perspective of users. Similarly, Al-Subhi (2022) elaborated that the use of engagement marks in the context of the chosen social media platform presents the most effective metadiscourse techniques in influencing users. Other than that, the role of metadiscourse on social media is impacted by both visual and language use, which structure the social media's discourse as engaging for the audience. This shows that the type of metadiscourse used on social media influences users in their selection of the platform. It also influences users in selecting certain social media platforms as the source of news.

Ngai and Singh (2020) mentioned in their study that metadiscourse is often used to assert a position on an issue and to build more in-depth gravity towards an argument. In addition, metadiscourse is also used to increase the readability of a text to suit the audience. Additionally, metadiscourse is also used to prevent any objection to the writer's interpretation of the content, that leads a more credible text, as once the users know and understand the metadiscourse used on the social media platform, it will lead them to believe in what they read. In other words, as Ngai and Singh (2020) concluded, metadiscourse renders content on social media platforms to be more "worthy of attention".

Roslan et al. (2021) analysed the metadiscourse chosen for the Aidilfitri television advertisements of specific brands by examining the language and word choices used in these ads. Their findings reveal that each brand displays a different style of metadiscourse which is further influenced by the objective of the advertisement itself. The team further explained that since it was an Aidilfitri television advertisement, most of the contents and word choices was skewed towards the festive celebration. The aforementioned studies show that metadiscourse focuses on the content and in-depth context of the meaning of words used and how other factors such as social media interface play a role in influencing the usage of a social media platform. However, research has yet to be conducted on metadiscourse as a possible contributing factor or influence towards users choosing a specific social media platform as their main medium of news consumption. To this end, the present study analyses the influence of metadiscourse on users and how they can further understand the use of metadiscourse when choosing a social media platform to obtain news.

Al-Rahmi et al. (2020) highlighted that media itself is a language in its own right as it has its own structure and system similar to grammar and the type of structure depends on the social media platform and the users of the platform. Tiani et al. (2021) stated that media ecology is a platform that produces an influence on its environment. In the context of social media, a media ecology is observed when social media platforms influence the behaviour of users, as different types of social media platform have different users with different characteristics. The theoretical concept of media ecology was first proposed by McLuhan in 1964. However, the term “media ecology” was formally introduced by Postman in 1968 (Media Ecology Association, n.d.). In his work on media being the main communication platform that influences human behaviour, Postman mentioned the term media ecology (Media Ecology Association, n.d.). The type of environment created by the media is what enhances and influences human behaviour. He expanded the concept by stating how the environment or platform is used to deliver a message is a complex system which has a significant impact on the way a person would react, think and feel (2013). However, media ecology is also affected by the use of media and the communication technology’s effects are further discussed as the primary cause of social change amongst social media users (Tiani, 2021).

A study by Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) revealed the inter-relation between media ecology and the future ecosystemic society. They further detailed the social consequences that media has towards the media ecology tradition which explains how media accounts influence a user’s way of thinking. They also argued that the Internet is the main medium that shapes the current society, making the Internet the ecosystem used by the present society. The society’s dependency on social media also shows how the ecosystem transforms together with their consistent use of social media. This demonstrates the phenomena where social media has created its own ecosystem, and created an ideal image based on how their respective users act, which further confirms how each user’s characteristics further influence the platform they use. This explains why audiences on different social media platforms vary as the narrative of media ecology for different platforms also varies.

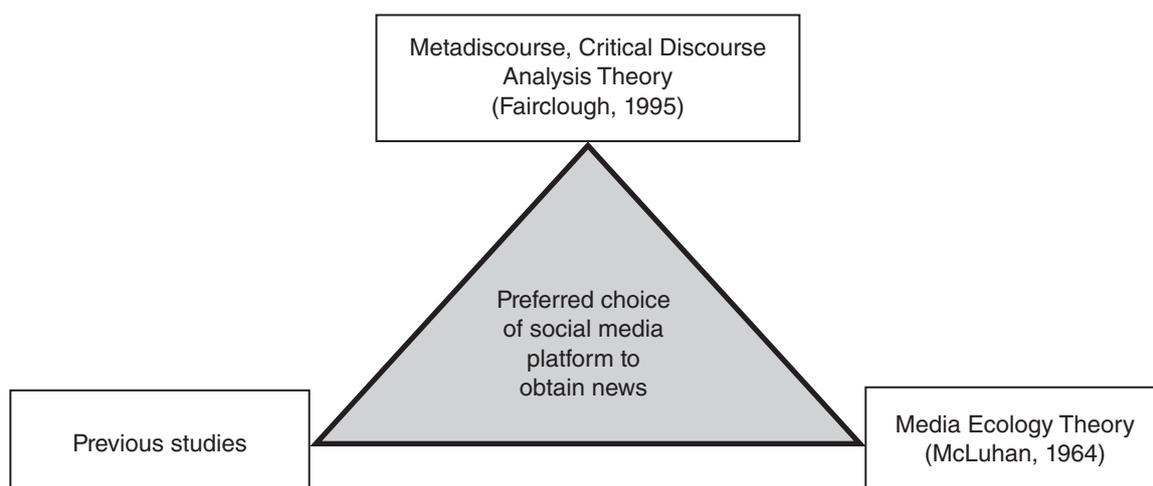
Zhao et al.’s (2016) study demonstrated that social media users opt to use multiple platforms as a communication medium to communicate with various people they want to influence. Their findings show that users intentionally chose the type of content and audience depending on the social media platform they use, and they become competitive in creating content that suits the platform, thus creating the ecosystem. The respondents in Zhao et al.’s study (2016) mentioned that they desire to maintain different boundaries between the different social media platforms that they use, to maintain relevancy with the audiences on the platform and stabilize their own ecosystem for communication.

In a different study, Yeh and Li (2022) looked at the rapid growth of the technology era and how it affected students' awareness towards the communication environment. The study found that the education level of university students influences their awareness of the communication environment on social media. The studies on media ecology and social media by Tiani (2021) and Al-Rahmi (2020) also focused on how a user behaves towards a certain social media platform. In the context of this study, various factors are believed to contribute to how a user chooses a social media platform for news consumption, such as the influence of friends and family using the same social media platform that creates an ecosystem.

## METHODS

This mixed methods study analysed and identified the social media platform(s) that students use to obtain news and what influenced their choice. The collected data were analysed using the metadiscourse approach from Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis. According to Fairclough (1995), metadiscourse is the way a text is created by the writer using a chosen language for the reader of the text. The way each social media platform uses its language varies according to its target age group. Therefore, it is important to identify which social media platform students prefer for their news source and the reason(s) for choosing that particular platform. Facebook and Twitter were the two social media platforms selected for this study, as both platforms have different user demographics.

The study was grounded on the media ecology theory. As mentioned by Gamel et al. (2021), social media platforms rely on digital technologies and computer-mediated communication to get information. The media ecology theory proposed by McLuhan is still relevant as the theory highlights the relationship between subjectivity and social media as the social patterns and interaction formed are linked to the digital culture. This shows how the interface between media, technology and communication influence the human environment. This study analyses the influence of the social media platforms used and its social standing amongst students. The theoretical concept is shown in Figure 1.



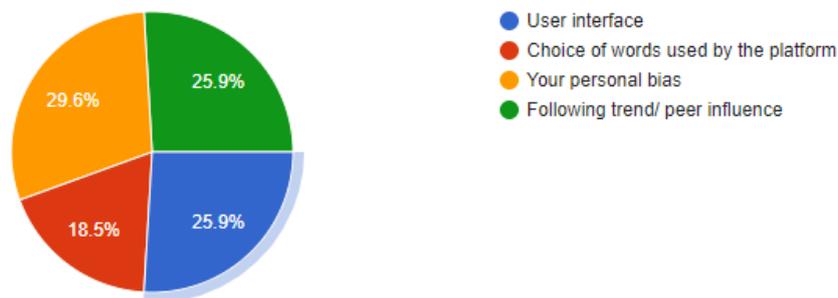
**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework

The study was conducted in October 2021 – January 2022 during an active long semester at Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL), Malaysia. A questionnaire was distributed to a total of 110 IUKL students. The questionnaire comprised of demographic questions and statements regarding the personal preference of social media platforms

to obtain news. About 20 out of 110 students were then called for an online interview to further probe into their decision making in the selection of social media platforms. The interviewees were chosen using purposive sampling as it is a small-scale study in relation to the phenomenon which fits the criteria of social media users who use a platform based on their own choice. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling is used to match the aims and objectives of research which could increase the accuracy of the data collected and its results. The interviews allowed a more in-depth understanding of the subject as well as better clarification of the respondents' views on the metadiscourse used for each social media platform and how the media ecology theory influenced their decision-making. This research mainly focuses on quantitative findings which were then further supported by qualitative data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that 94.5% of the respondents have either Facebook or Twitter accounts, and 81.1% relied on social media to obtain news. Of these, 56.4% followed a news channel so that news updates will appear on their timeline, as opposed to 43.6% who preferred to search for a specific news on their chosen social media channel. Of the total 110 respondents, 55.6% preferred to use Twitter instead of Facebook, since 70.9% of the respondents were aged 21–24, which is the average age of Twitter users. These results demonstrate that the age of the users using social media influences the type of platform they choose to obtain news.



**Figure 2.** Respondents' reasons for choosing a specific social media platforms as their news source

Based on Figure 2, personal bias at 29.6% is the main reason that respondents chose a specific social media platform to obtain news, followed by user interface and trend/peer influence (each at 25.9%) as the second reason. Apart from this, 18.5% strongly agreed that the language used on the platform was simpler to understand. Regarding personal bias, 38.3% held a neutral opinion regarding their chosen platform having lesser biased political opinions; however, 29.1% agreed and 23.6% strongly agreed that their preferred social media platform has lesser biased opinions.

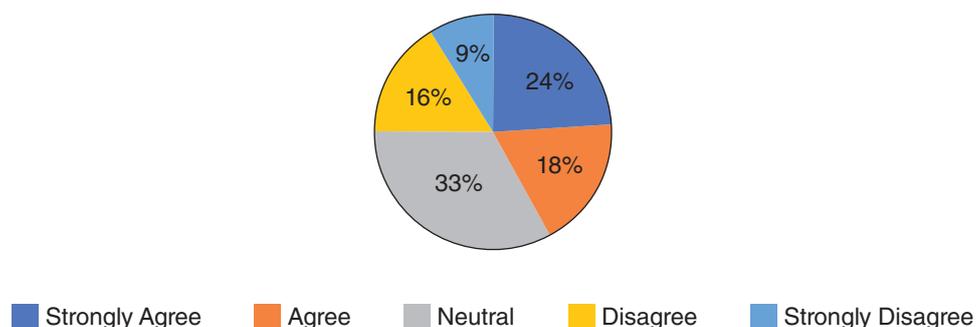
Additionally, a majority of the respondents (32.7%) held a neutral opinion that the social media platform they used was a trustable source while 27.3% agreed and 29.1% strongly agreed. Malik et al. (2019) mentioned that Twitter helps students improve their learning styles through various ways. One way is by improving their vocabulary skills including through reading of news. News on Twitter is more compact with a character limit for each tweet. Therefore, word choices are very critical in Twitter. In supporting Malik et al. (2019), Sudiran (2020) elaborated that Twitter helps in improving one's English competence, where the media plays a big role in providing news in English. This suggests that the language

used on a particular social media platform leads students to believe that the platform is a reliable source and does not have too much political influence. This also contributes to students choosing Twitter over Facebook as their preferred social media platform.

Further, Sudiran's (2020) study showed that the character limit on Twitter forces students to think critically of their choice of words for their postings. This trend could be influenced by students who are not keen to read the whole news article from news media sites. They would rather read important points which are delivered through the news site's Twitter account, which simplifies the news due to character limit. Hence, this demonstrates that the metadiscourse used on Twitter is directed to its own users who prefer simpler and less wordy discourses to obtain news updates. Respondents 1, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 18 and 20 also agreed that the reason they chose Twitter was because its metadiscourse was more suitable for their age group, as the younger generations prefer lesser words and succinct texts, which Twitter provides, compared to Facebook posts which are lengthier and contain a lot of advertising pop-ups. This finding concurs with Sudiran (2020) and Malik et al. (2019) who found that Twitter was used by many educational experts to increase engagement for their online classes as their students prefer to use Twitter, which offers a metadiscourse that meets the students' preference.

This finding is also in line with the media ecology theory, where Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) mentioned that when an ecosystem in an environment modifies its users' thoughts, behavior and decision making, the ecosystem imposes a big influence on the environment. In the context of this study, the ecosystem refers to friends/peers who influence users in selecting certain social media platforms to obtain news. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2016) in corroborating with Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015), added that the ecosystem significantly influences users, especially under media ecology, as users want to have a sense of belonging in a social media platform, and hence they are greatly influenced when more friends/peers use it.

**The platform I use is not used by my relatives**



**Figure 3.** Responses regarding choosing a social media platform not used by relatives

Another factor that contributed to students using a particular social media platform as a news source was their relatives not using the same platform. From the total responses, 23.6% strongly agreed and 18.2% agreed that when their relatives use a specific social media platform, they tend to choose another platform, so that they are not exposed to the same content, as each social media has its own metadiscourse.

Wok et al. (2016) mentioned that social media helps build a family's bond by helping family members to stay connected through social media. However, not everyone wants to connect with their family members on social media, which is reflected by the high number of

responses for selecting a social media platform that is not the same as their family members'. This proves that the respondents do not use social media to communicate with family members, which could be attributed to the former having had negative experiences in using the same social media platform as their family members or relatives. This study is parallel to the study by Procentese et al. (2019) who studied the impact a family has towards open communication through social media including parent's perception.

Procentese et al. (2019) found that communicating through social media platforms can enhance a family's relationship in a modernised lifestyle setting. However, the study also discovered that the perception that parents have of their child using social media can also negatively impact the child's attitude. Therefore, Procentese et al. (2019) suggested that parents should take a positive approach in embracing their child's use of social media by looking at the advantages. With the positive perception parents have towards their child using social media, the child will also be more comfortable in using the platform to communicate with their family members, thus avoiding the situation where a child decides not to use the same social media platform just to avoid their family members.

The work of both Wok et al. (2016) and Procentese et al. (2019) present examples of positive experiences of using social media to communicate with family members. Therefore, students can be more open to using the same social media platform to connect and communicate with their family to enhance the bond between them.

However, Hussain et al. (2020) disagree as their study showed that people opt to use social media to escape from family problems, and the best way to do so is by using a different social media platform than the one used by the family. The authors (2020) also suggested that users turn to social media as an escape platform to release their stress and bad feelings that they have towards their family, but not to the extent that they would be replaced by social media altogether. The authors explained that social media platforms are mostly used as an avenue by users to vent their feelings without hurting the feelings of their family members as they still appreciate and want to maintain their relationship with their family members and relatives. This shows that social media has both cons and pros which leads one to select a specific platform over another for obtaining news or to communicate with others.

Additionally, based on the interviews held, Respondents 2, 3, 7, 8, 14, 16 and 19 mentioned that their relatives used Facebook as it is more suitable for their older age, and that its metadiscourse was much longer and more convenient to navigate as they do not need to open an additional page to read news in comparison to traditional news media. This proves again that the metadiscourse of a social media platform influences the user's decision to select a particular platform. Similarly, the media ecology presented on a social media platform further influences the decision of a user to choose that specific platform.

Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) stressed that being a part of an ecosystem is one of the most important parts of communicating through a social media platform. Therefore, when a user is aware of a relative on a particular social media platform, it limits their freedom of speech or expression as compared to speaking with a friend. Hence, the findings illustrate that media ecology presence plays a strong role in influencing students in selecting platforms to obtain news, and not to communicate. This may be due to the fact that students can freely share with each other news that they have read and can continue to discuss the news on the social media platform without the need to worry about their family members' or relatives' possible negative reactions and perceptions towards them.

Yeh and Li's (2022) work showed the effects of media ecology and how it can significantly influence a user in the selection of social media platform(s) to communicate with others. Hence in the context of this study, students chose a social media platform that their relatives are not using as their news source.

The platform that I use makes it easy to identify fake news

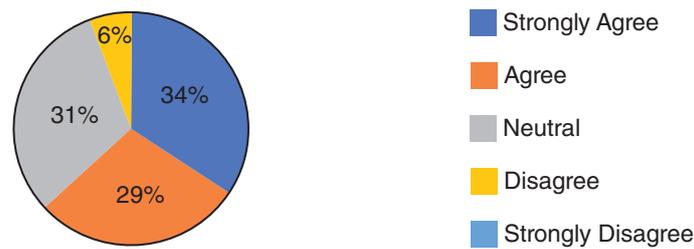


Figure 4. Responses for choosing a social media platform based on its ease of identifying fake news

The results show that 34.5% of respondents strongly agreed that the social media platform they chose to obtain news was the easiest to identify fake news. This is probably a strong factor which encouraged them to continue sourcing news from the chosen social media and recommend their friends to do the same. The latter is proven, as 30.9% of respondents agreed that they were using a particular social media platform to obtain news, based on their friends' recommendations. Friends/Peers have a bigger influence in recommendation when it comes to students. The responses also reflect a neutral agreement for social media platform recommendations by family (33.3%) and lecturer/higher education institute (25.9%). This clearly implies that friends have a stronger influence in recommending social media platforms as a news source to students.

A study by Décieux et al. (2019) highlighted that the use of social media among friends was a necessary tool in building the relationship between them as it enables complimentary interactions apart from the normal offline face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, the study further demonstrated that people prefer to use social media as it is more time-effective and efficient when communicating with their friends. This shows that a friend's opinion plays a big role in the selection of one's social media platform as the person would want to be in the same circle as their friends to communicate better with each other.

Décieux et al.'s (2019) study also found that social media helps to increase friendship-driven interactions between a person and his/her friends, and to do so, he/she must use the same social media platform that would allow them to communicate with each other, so that they are exposed to the same metadiscourse from the same social media platform. Hence it will influence both parties in a similar way, as opposed to if they were to use different social media platforms with different metadiscourses. Therefore, it is important for the younger generation to use the same social media platform for better communication. This results in peers/friends using the same social media, and being exposed to the same content and metadiscourse.

Another factor that influences media ecology as mentioned by Yeh and Li (2022) is the presentation of content on the platform. The findings reveal that the chosen social media platform by university students was due to its built-in feature in identifying fake news and its indication of fake news in the postings. This refers to how the ecosystem of a platform feeds news to users and how users are cognisant enough to research further or check with their friends who use the same social media platform if the news is true or fake. Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) agree with Hakanen (2009) and further elaborated the importance of understanding the difference in ecosystems of various social media platforms. Thus, the present findings indicate that students in this study are aware and are able to identify which social media platforms can help detect fake news better.

This is further supported by Mohamad Yusuf et al. (2022) who highlighted the effects of fake news on social media and how it significantly affects news credibility from the perspective of users. The study showed that the main factors that contribute to the credibility of news on Facebook are technology acceptance, quality of news source and interactive media. Hence, the present findings are in line with the findings of Mohamad Yusuf et al. (2022) that students are aware of which social media platform can detect fake news better compared to others, which in turn influences the student's dependency on social media to obtain news.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study demonstrates that university students from IUKL prefer using Twitter as their main social media platform as the majority of Twitter users range from 20 – 24 years old. There are several reasons why students prefer to use Twitter as their main social media platform to obtain news: their own personal bias, simpler interface, easier to understand content, lesser political influence, and ease of identifying fake news as opposed to other social media platforms. The last factor is important as there is a prevalence of fake news circulating in the Internet as anyone can publish content and make it viral. Another factor that influences students in selecting a particular social media platform is their family/relatives not using the same platform. They consider social media as their own personal space that they can freely use in the absence of their family. Finally, peer influence in using the same social media platform so that they are exposed to the same content.

This study provides a glimpse into understanding the metadiscourse present in the social media platforms selected by students as their news source. Social media platforms are most beneficial when a person can use it for both academic and non-academic purposes. It can also help a person to communicate with both family and friends without having to have a separate social media platform for specific social circles. Additionally, this study reviewed metadiscourse under the critical discourse analysis theory and media ecology theory as both theories have a big influence on each other, where it is essential to understand and analyse language, communication and type of platform concurrently.

As this research was only limited to IUKL students, future research can be expanded on a wider scale to include more undergraduate universities around Malaysia to examine the effectiveness of having separate social media platforms from friends and peers and the impact it has on an individual, to measure if having separate social media platforms for friends and family can help enhance the relationship between the person and friend/family and to better understand how media ecology can further influence a user in choosing social media platforms as their main medium of communication.

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