



Research article

Influencing Factors of Social Media Reels Engagement of University Students in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Social media reels are now a popular means of communication among university students, which influences their interaction, enjoyment, and communication with each other. This study explores the factors influencing Bangladeshi university students' engagement with social media reels, focusing on psychological motivations, social influences, digital literacy, and cultural contexts. A qualitative research approach was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 24 undergraduate and graduate students from public and private universities in Bangladesh. The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 to identify major patterns and relationships across participants' experiences. Findings showed that emotional satisfaction, stress reduction, and mood management are the key driving factors in the use of reels. Peer validation, social recognition, and following popular trends amplify active participation. Content creation is enhanced by the level of digital literacy and creative competence, whereas culture and gender expectations shape the forms of self-expression and the style of participation. Students try to balance academic work and leisure by managing their time on social media. While reels are entertaining and engaging, they can also distract students and reduce productivity. In some cases, excessive use may lead to social comparison and influence self-perception. Future research should focus on the long-term behavioral effects and ways to promote balanced, ethical and skill-based use of short-form video platforms among university students.

Introduction

The social networking sites (SNS) have rapidly transformed the communication, entertainment, and information-sharing practices among the young generation. Social networking platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are regarded as some of the most widely used in the world; over the years, these sites have been able to continuously innovate with new features that reach their user base and boost interaction with content (Roberts & David, 2025; Berezan et al., 2020).

The emergence of social media reels, which is a short-video feature similar to Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, indicates that this phenomenon can be explained by the emergence of a new app. Reels enable people to create, share and consume a wide range of short and engaging videos. Users can create reels using original audio, filters, and effects, allowing them to express themselves and communicate with others. It is important to identify the factors influencing Facebook Reels usage among university students, as they constitute

one of the most active, trend-sensitive, and socially connected groups of social media users (Wang et al., 2023). Short video content has changed the way people interact by shifting to reels. TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and other social media platforms shifted their priorities towards short video creation that immediately attracts the attention of a mass audience. With the introduction of Facebook Reels in 2021, the primary goal was to enter the rapidly changing attention economy through the promotion of short, visually appealing, and emotional content (Malik et al., 2025). Users engage with content by liking, commenting, sharing posts, saving videos, and increasing watch time (Tenenboim, 2022).

The main purpose of using reels among students in universities can be determined by various psychological reasons, such as entertainment, belonging, seeking knowledge, and self-representation (Menon, 2022). University students are also considered active adopters of new media technologies and important contributors to digital culture (Yujie et al., 2022). They communicate at least with each other through social media, collaborate on

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project assignments, develop their identity, and manage their emotions (Bouko, 2024). Therefore, an ideal environment to discuss the factors of engagement and motivation is Facebook Reels, which is a well-known platform. Additionally, creativity, entertainment, clarity of message, and relevancy are other content attributes that influence engagement (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Short-form videos that are emotionally engaging or visually captivating are more likely to capture attention.

Additionally, the popularity of content may increase by incorporating popular music, difficulties, or jokes to engage users (Manic, 2024). Reliability and perceived authenticity of content creators are important factors of engagement (Walsh et al., 2024). However, the nature of the video content alone cannot determine the communication behavior. People are sensitive to factors such as gender, age, personality, and motivations such as socialization, escapism, and self-expression, which significantly influence user interaction with reels (Jung et al., 2025). For instance, extroverts tend to be more interested due to comments or posts, but introverts choose to play a positive role, just to show support (Khachatryan, 2021). Previous studies indicated that online behaviors, online literacy, and peer pressure drive them to use reels more frequently (Naz et al., 2025). The need to belong to a group and social acceptance of students influence the digital behaviors of learners to a great extent. It has been found that young people tend to follow the examples of their age group in the online sphere to achieve the status of a socially accepted person (Siregar, 2022). In a similar way, the fear of missing out (FoMO) provokes the desire to use popular reels more often to stay socially aware, whereas peer pressure through receiving likes and comments encourages further consumption (Al-Busaidi et al., 2022).

Lastly, the algorithmic design of Facebook also plays a significant role in shaping the audience engagement. Features like autoplay, suggestions, and notifications combine to create habitual use and extended consumption (Zhou, 2024). The algorithm prioritizes overall engagement, which in turn affects the quantity and frequency of posts (Cai et al., 2023). Moreover, the very environment of the universities also offers contextual influences that impact the patterns of involvement. Students use reels during their free time between their classes or when they feel stressed (Ye et al., 2022). On the one hand, the information related to a campus or education can reinforce constructive activity; nevertheless, overreliance can cause procrastination and poor academic results (Leenah Askaree et al., 2025).

Research gap

Previous research has mainly focused on global patterns and quantitative usage of short-form video platforms, with limited attention to Facebook Reels within the Bangladeshi context. There is also a lack of qualitative understanding of how university students' emotional needs, peer influence, and academic pressures shape their engagement. In addition, socio-cultural and gender norms, along with the role of digital literacy, remain underexplored in relation to reels use. This study

addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Bangladeshi university students and examining the interaction among these factors.

This study aims to explore the factors influencing social media reel engagement among Bangladeshi university students. Specifically, the research investigates how emotional gratification, peer influence, digital literacy, and socio-cultural dynamics shape students' participation in reels culture.

Research questions

RQ1: What motivates Bangladeshi university students to engage with social media reels?

RQ2: How do peers and social recognition influence students' reels engagement?

RQ3: How do digital skills and creativity affect students' participation in reels?

Literature review

Content and aesthetic appeal of reels

Reels are made in a visually appealing manner where the qualities of short-form video are core factors of user interaction. Content features like the use of favorite music parts, aesthetic sounds, pace, visually appealing editing, and calls to action have been described as important in getting viewers to engage (Fatimah & Nasir, 2025). Audience interaction can be assessed through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and longer watch time. Moreover, emotional storytelling as a part of the reel positively influences engagement immensely, which, in turn, positively influences the increased exposure and retention of the user in the long term (Gross et al., 2023). Based on studies on short-form video use, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, it is suggested that technological affordances, such as recommendation accuracy, serendipity, and user-friendliness, do not have a direct impact on engagement, which entails content consumption and social interaction (Zhang et al., 2023). In other words, the more people think a user-friendly and easy to use, the more they will interact with it and this leads to engagement loops.

In the context of Bangladesh, existing studies suggest that university students demonstrate increasing levels of digital literacy and active engagement with online platforms (Hargittai, 2010; Ng, 2012). Kumar (2019) found that social media usage among students in Bangladeshi universities exceeds four hours on average per day. Prior study suggests a significant increase in the use of short-form video platforms such as reels. With the growing popularity of visually oriented digital media, it remains important to understand how content aesthetics and emotional engagement influence students' interactions with social media reels (Škripcová & Viteková, 2025).

User motivation and psychological factors

Usage of social media channels is essential to understand the behavioral patterns of the university students' psychological and motivational factors that influence them. People watch short-form videos like reels to fulfill

a variety of their desires, such as finding amusement, social engagement, self-expression, escape, and social recognition (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). According to numerical data, people who are highly motivated by validation and seeking attention are more likely to engage in active participation by liking, commenting, or producing material more than those who choose to be passive consumers (Seidman et al., 2025). Furthermore, a comparative study of university students' usage of social media reveals comparable patterns of behavior. Rahman and Mithun (2021) state that contact with classmates and sharing information are primary causes of students using social media.

However, the degree of engagement depends on both technological skills like editing and tagging as well as interior psychological traits like extraversion, openness, and self-esteem. For instance, students who are driven by their social networks may discover it more satisfying to spend their time commenting or sharing rather than creating, whereas students who are digitally savvy typically create more material (Smith & Storrs, 2023). Furthermore, social anxiety, loneliness, and academic pressure typically determine the engagement of social media reels (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Students use reels as a way of venting their emotions or as a reliever from the pressures of the academic work. Zhu et al. (2024) found that Chinese university students who were dependent on short-form video sites were more likely to be depressed and put off doing their work.

Platform affordances and algorithmic influence

The research takes platform affordance theory and algorithmic system perspectives as a foundation to better understand how short-form video reels are presented through social media environments to influence user interactions. While the theory of platform affordance is predominantly concerned with the functionality that digital platforms can offer, it also emphasizes the capacity they have to facilitate or hamper the processing of actions in a technical setting (Guo & Chai, 2024). Some important affordances for reels are easily identifiable short video format, autoplay mode, simple navigation, video editing and features to share content (Kaye et al., 2020). These affordances help to lower obstacles to participation and help foster ongoing interaction to make content consumption and creation easy, quick and accessible. Besides platform affordances, algorithmic systems are important when it comes to structuring user experience. Content suggestions are given using algorithmic techniques that make use of the behavior and preferences of users as well as the interaction history (Schuster & Lazar, 2024). Thus, in the process, the user experiences and usage patterns are influenced through guiding attention and reinforcing usage, resulting in what they see, how long they stay there, and what content they interact with (Zhang & Lin, 2022). The algorithmic process of selecting and prioritizing content for users' feeds means, however, that this is not completely driven by them but is a crucial component of a process that constantly pushes those who

use these platforms to view the most popular and the most interesting content (Hashim & Waden, 2023).

The platform's affordances and algorithmic systems provide a comprehensive perspective for understanding engagement with social media reels. Affordances allow people to easily participate with information by viewing, creating, and sharing, whereas algorithmic mechanisms help to form the structure of information visibility and alter the exposure patterns (Koenig, 2020). The joint actions of these forces can influence users' behavior in terms of attention, emotion, and interaction frequency. This dual perspective emphasizes the fact that engagement goes beyond individual agency to also be a part of platform architecture and data-driven recommendation systems. Such a theory is especially relevant to the study of engagement in the context of university students, because students' interactions with reels are influenced by their individual motivations, as well as the design of digital platforms and the automated systems influencing how content is presented to them. It focuses on understanding that engagement is not merely the result of an external mechanism; rather, it arises from a dynamic process between the technology and the user, where the actions of the human user are always defined in relation to mediation and platform design.

Socio-cultural context in Bangladesh

People in Bangladesh use technology in ways that are controlled by their relationships and social norms. Online contact is integrated with relationships, social norms, and institutional expectations in the collectivist society. University students' involvement patterns are directly influenced by peer interaction, mother tongue, spiritual beliefs, and unequal access to technology (Nowrin et al., 2024). Additionally, Ferdous and Huda (2023) noted access to internet plays from different parts of the country plays an important part in determining individuals' online activity. Significantly, social media utilized by Bangladeshi students serves goals beyond just enjoyment (Khanam, 2020). Parajuli (2025) asserts that students utilize social platforms to articulate and establish their identity, as well as to collaborate and engage socially in their academic endeavors. Sivakumar et al. (2023) similarly identified academic collaboration and community development as the primary motivators for students at Dhaka University. Sajid et al. (2024) found out that male and older student groups tend to participate more in self-expressive and political discourse, and female and younger students demonstrate more conservative participation patterns.

Additionally, the nature of content that students will be ready to create or share is often dependent upon cultural and religious norms. Some users do not share materials that do not align with social or moral values, whereas other users are drawn to content in the Bengali language that gives reflection of local humor, morals and youth identity (Chen, 2023). These behaviors are supported by campus peer norms, and it is seen that they are involved in trending challenges and watch peer-edited videos, which is an example of collective identity and social conformity. Collectivist civilizations, such as those

found in Bangladesh, attach more importance to social desirability, such as asking a friend to like or share a clip, in comparison with individualistic societies (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to analyze the factors influencing social media reels usage among university students in Bangladesh. This method was selected, as it would allow a more in-depth look into the experiences, motivations, and perceptions of participants regarding their interest in receiving short-form video content, including Instagram Reels, Facebook Reels, YouTube Shorts, and TikTok.

Participants and sampling

The sample population consisted of undergraduate and graduate learners in private and public universities in Bangladesh. The participants were selected by purposive sampling and included the active participants who primarily used social media reels and offered diversity in the form of gender, academic major, and study year. The snowball sampling was also applied to access some more information-rich participants. The population was

eligible, with ages ranging between 21 and 27 years and using social media reels at least two to three days per week. Figure 1 provides the absorption and exclusion criteria used to identify the eligibility of participants in this research.

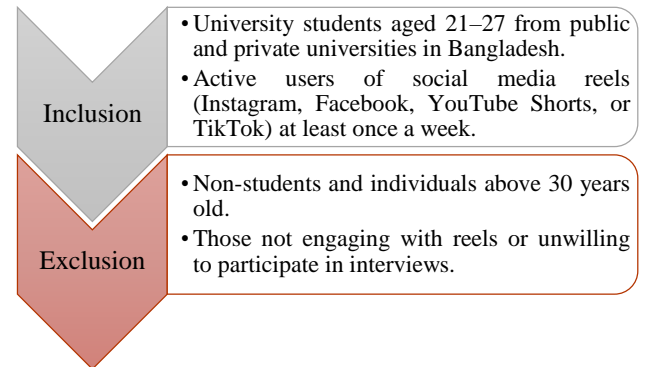


Figure 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the participant selection

Interview procedure

The interview procedure for this study was designed as a structured guide to ensure consistency, rigor, and rich data collection. It consists of five key steps (Hongli, 2024):

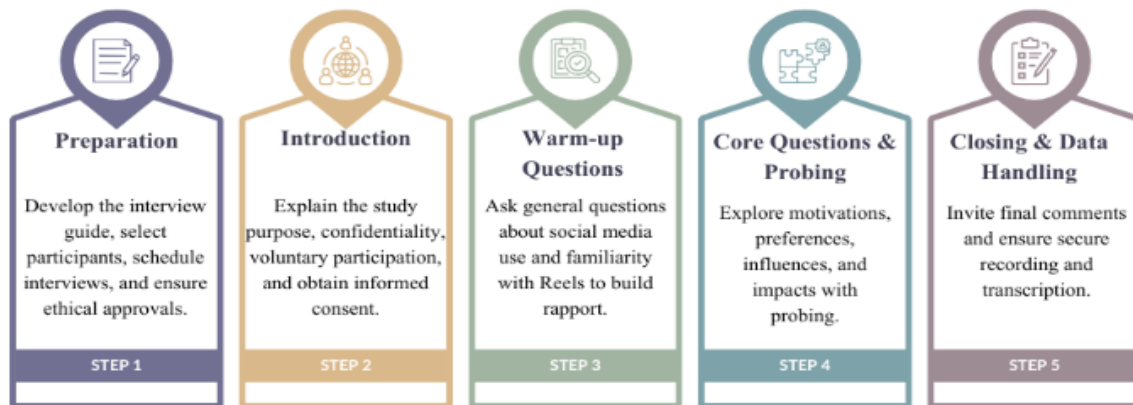


Figure 2: Five-step interview protocol for exploring reels engagement

Data collection

The data for this research were gathered over four weeks by conducting semi-structured interviews using both face-to-face and online forums, such as Zoom and Google Meet, based on participants' availability and convenience at the moment of interviewing participants. A total of 24 participants participated in the study, including 14 males and 10 females aged between 21 and 27 years. Participants were recruited from both public and private universities in Bangladesh, including Khulna University, the University of Dhaka, Jahangirnagar University, Daffodil International University, and BRAC University. The participants represented diverse academic disciplines, including social sciences, business studies, and engineering.

Each interview lasted approximately 40–45 minutes and was conducted in considerable detail, so they could share their experiences, perceptions, and practices

surrounding the introduction of social media reels. Several themes were explored in the interview guide, such as motivations for watching or creating reels, engagement behaviors, socio-cultural influences, perceptions of platform algorithms, and perceived impacts of watching reels on emotional well-being and digital self-presentation and academic life. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure accuracy and reliability during transcription and analysis. The interviews were conducted in Bengali, translated into English, and transcribed verbatim to support thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully maintained throughout the study. Before participation, all respondents were informed about the objectives of the research, their voluntary participation, and their right to

withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Participants were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic purposes. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all digital interview files and transcripts were securely stored with restricted access to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Data analysis

NVivo 14 software was used to analyze the qualitative data derived from the interviews to make it systematic and identify themes. Data entry was performed through the use of the software, which consisted of full transcripts and demographic details regarding the participants. Significant portions of the text were then marked using descriptive codes. It created nodes that structured major themes, trends, and ideas in a systematic way, enabling one to access the relevant texts and analyze them. Using the six-stage thematic analysis methodology by Braun and Clarke (2006), various coding instances were done to refine the original codes, detect newer themes and sub-themes, and improve the codebook in terms of reliability and depth. Hierarchical node structure was used to show the codes. The parent nodes were broad categories, and the child nodes were specific pieces of data. The representative quotes were used to explain the participants' perception and help analyze the codes. This study used visual representations such as charts, graphs, and thematic diagrams to analyze the coded pieces and identify general trends and connections (see Figure 3). This research design provided a sound and accurate

determination of the factors that affect university students' use of reels.

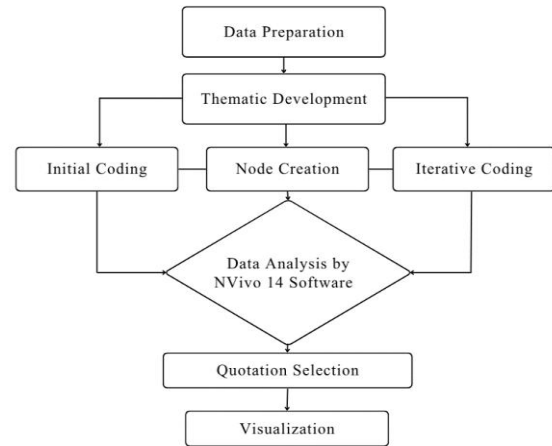


Figure 3: Data analysis process (source: authors own)

Findings

The findings reveal diverse experiences influencing social media reels engagement among Bangladeshi university students aged 21–27. The sample consisted of a total of fourteen males and ten females with both undergraduate and graduate students and different academic backgrounds and usage patterns (Table 1). NVivo 14 thematic analysis revealed four major themes (Figure 4): The mentioned themes and many other sub-themes reflected how personal motivation, emotional needs, social interactions, and digital skills interplay and influence students in engaging in digital media environments, which is multidimensional in nature.

Table 1: Profile of the participants

ID	Age	Gender	Educational qualification	Content preference	Viewer type
P1	25	Female	Graduate	Educational	Light Viewer
P2	26	Male	Graduate	Technology and Gadgets	Moderate Viewer
P3	22	Female	Undergraduate	Entertainment	Heavy Viewer
P4	23	Male	Undergraduate	Motivational Clip	Heavy Viewer
P5	23	Female	Undergraduate	Lifestyle and Personal	Heavy Viewer
P6	25	Male	Graduate	Viral Trends	Light Viewer
P7	24	Female	Graduate	Food and Cooking	Moderate Viewer
P8	21	Female	Undergraduate	Social Issues and Activism	Heavy Viewer
P9	25	Female	Graduate	Educational	Moderate Viewer
P10	22	Male	Undergraduate	Viral Trends	Light Viewer
P11	23	Male	Undergraduate	Entertainment	Heavy Viewer
P12	24	Female	Graduate	Motivational Clip	Moderate Viewer
P13	21	Male	Undergraduate	Lifestyle and Personal	Heavy Viewer
P14	26	Female	Graduate	Food and Cooking	Heavy Viewer
P15	27	Male	Graduate	Viral Trends	Heavy Viewer
P16	24	Male	Undergraduate	Social Issues and Activism	Moderate Viewer
P17	26	Male	Graduate	Educational	Heavy Viewer
P18	25	Male	Graduate	Technology and Gadgets	Heavy Viewer
P19	22	Female	Undergraduate	Viral Trends	Heavy Viewer
P20	24	Male	Graduate	Motivational Clip	Light Viewer
P21	23	Male	Undergraduate	Lifestyle and Personal	Light Viewer
P22	25	Female	Graduate	Educational	Heavy Viewer
P23	24	Male	Graduate	Social Issues and Activism	Heavy Viewer
P24	21	Male	Undergraduate	Entertainment	Moderate Viewer

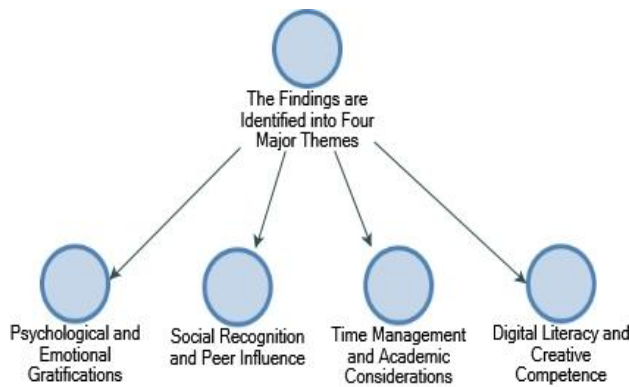


Figure 4: Overview: Four key themes identified from in-depth qualitative interviews

Theme 1: Psychological and emotional gratifications

A significant number of participants indicated that they use social media reels to fulfill emotional and psychological needs. Moreover, several interviewees stated that being a reels viewer helps them forget the pressures of studying and other daily sources of stress, which give them, time to relax and have fun. In addition, reels can be considered tools for mood regulation because comic, trending, and inspirational content has been observed to evoke positive feelings and excitement. Students shared stories in which they felt valid and related when creating or sharing reels, social satisfaction, and self-affirmation. Moreover, the immediacy and brevity of reels enhance those gratifications and allow the students to experience emotional relief in a few seconds.

Stress relief. The majority of interviewees described that the most common way in which reels can be used is as a form of stress relief, which the participants can use to cope with academic stresses and everyday lives. Reels can be used because of their short, entertaining nature to offer students a minor mental rest, forgetting coursework, assignments, and deadlines in a short period of time. In this regard, one respondent observed the following:

“I usually have classes, homework, and academic tasks, and, after a full day of them, watching reels helps me to forget my negative thoughts and refresh myself. It is a kind of short mental shift that brings me relaxation and renews my concentration on the job.” (P16)

Mood regulation. The interest in reels is also fostered by the need to control mood and improve emotional state. Many of the respondents formed positive experiences about how humorous and inspirational content makes them feel as well as how relatable the content makes them feel. In addition, reels bring about immediate, highly short-term satisfaction, which enables students to overcome negative feelings and remain in a positive mood during the day. The control of emotions and feelings proves to be the important motive for the usage of reels, which shows interactions of the digital media behavior and the psychological needs. Some of the respondents said the following:

“Certainly some of the reels make me laugh outright, and that immediately makes me feel happier. I believe that I rely on them unconsciously to feel better.” (P9)

Self-expression and identity. Reels through social media offer a high-profile avenue for students to showcase their personality, creativity, and awareness of social issues, and through this, students are able to establish and negotiate an online identity. In this respect, a second participant began to stress the fact that content creation is not only a form of entertainment but also an opportunity to share individual beliefs, preferences and specific features with peers. As a result, by editing videos, using filters, and including music or captions, students perform an identification activity, which is both individual and social knowledge. In addition, experimenting with self-presentation is also easier in the digital environment; students can experiment and reveal a lot of their personalities that cannot be expressed in offline settings. In addition, twenty-one respondents mentioned that content creation receives instant social feedback, which helps to strengthen self-perception and branding of the self. Students mentioned that reels usage promotes following social trends without abandoning their authenticity, striking a balance between social expectations and self-expression. Indeed, five interviewees in this regard said,

“Making reels gives me a chance to showcase my personality, humor and creativity in a manner my friends would notice online. It gives me a platform to reveal myself, tell about my interests, and communicates with my peers, leading to more interesting and, at the same time, more representative digital interactions in terms of reflection and the image of me.” (P12)

Emotional satisfaction from sharing. Many participants noted that sharing reels brings emotional gratification, social relevance, and bonding. Likes, comments, and shares from their peer group are a means of interaction with each other, and they provide them a greater sense of recognition on social media. Reels have an interactive design that invests users in the creation, consumption and exchange of content, which facilitates amusement and socialization. One participant remarked:

“I feel highly valued and connected to my friends or colleagues when they like, comment, and share my reels. It gives a sort of feeling that I am truly appreciated and a sense of belonging, which encourages me to create and post more reels on my social media.” (P24)

Theme 2: Social recognition and peer influence

Peer influence and social recognition affect students who use reels because it makes them feel they are recognized in society and up-to-date with the trendy world. According to the participants, likes, comments, and views work as a tool that boosts self-esteem and motivates people to create content. Trend imitation by peers, social comparison, and rivalry additionally shape engagement behaviors, and sharing reels builds solidarity and supports the connection of friends. Together, these aspects demonstrate that reels are not only a source of personal entertainment but also a social interaction tool, identity support, and the feeling of belonging to digital communities.

Validation and peer approval. A number of students stressed that the use of reels is highly associated with the need to be seen as a valid person by others. Likes, comments, and views on the post also give them confidence and impose on them their online identity. A student at the undergraduate level commented:

“When my reels get a lot of likes and comments, I believe that people see my effort and creativity. It makes me believe that my friends can enjoy what I share and encourages me to post again.” (P19)

Imitation of popular trends. The impact of peer influence on reels is rather high since students tend to copy the trending sounds, filters, and challenges regarding the intention to follow popular culture. Additionally, the participants reported that by following the trends, they can be socially relevant and visible to others. This implies that it does not involve activity but rather a group digital culture where popularity is closely associated with being a part of a trend that is shared among others. Thus, students justified that trend imitation enabled them to become more visible and made their social connection stronger, which reinforced the sense of belonging to their online communities. One of the respondents wrote that the feeling that he found in reels contributed to his perception of having been appreciated and being valued by his audience:

“It is useful to use popular filters or challenges and make my content noticeable. It's not just about fame; it's about being part of the conversation.” (P1)

Social comparison and competition. Some students talked about why they compared themselves socially when they were looking at the reels of others and more often compared the disparities in terms of views, likes, and creativity to those of their acquaintances. Consequently, this action caused motivation and pressure to create content of a better quality. Moreover, the dynamics allowed cultivating a competitive spirit among peer networks, which created an impression of promptness in terms of posting, as well as the content being produced. The participants recognized that this type of comparison both informed their engagement decision-making together with how they felt about it, thus making them optimize their online selves. Conversely, four graduate students pointed out that watching other people be successful were motivating factors to improve the quality of their content, with one saying:

“I feel competitive about others with reels and it inspires me to uphold my end results and score higher. I use it as a driving force to masses of people and match their novelty, instead of being jealous of them.” (P15)

Group belonging and social bonding. Most of the participants emphasized that sharing and watching reels strengthens both groups and friendships. Sharing content, marking friends, and talking about trends provides a shared online experience as they bond relationships. Reels, therefore, come out to be a group bonding and cultural exchange medium. Some of the participants have

reported that posting Reels helped them stay in touch with their friends even after seeing them in person:

“My friends and I share some funny or trending reels every day, and it has helped us stay connected with each other even when we are not physically present. It is a small but significant way to feel closer.” (P10)

Theme 3: Time management and academic considerations

It is supported by the theme of how time management and academic considerations affect the engagement of students on reels. As a result, participants stated that they managed leisure and study time, planning to watch an item, organizing the viewing via schedules, and carefully selecting the related content. Further, guilt led to self-regulation measures, including restrictions on screen time and conscious choices of content. Cumulatively, these practices indicate purposeful media management, allowing students to watch reels to have fun and relax and, at the same time, be productive to develop a responsible and balanced incorporation of digital leisure in their daily academic lives.

Balancing leisure and study. Interviewees also stressed that their interaction with reels is often governed by the academic requirements since they were aware of the necessity of combining their leisure time with studying tasks. Although reels provide entertainment and relief, the participants said they were aware of limited screen time, trying to focus on academic activities. Moreover, most students reported the means to ensure such balance, including not using reels during the exams or spending certain hours on breaks with digital devices, thus preserving both the productive studying habits and relaxing opportunities. Other respondents told about arranging their use of reels around their study routines:

“I use short breaks to ensure that I watch reels after completing my assignments or during small breaks. This will make me lazy and not guilty about wasting time, and I am able to concentrate more on my learning.” (P9)

Planned engagement. Some of the respondents said that they carefully planned their usage of reels in terms of time and frequency as they understood that they had to find a balance between leisure and academic life. As an illustration, they wanted content to watch when commuting or taking specific study breaks so that they could have fun without losing time on coursework. This kind of planned interaction presents a responsible organizational use of time and indicates how students consider reels an important part of their everyday activity. One participant said:

“When I am eating lunch or going to work, I tend to watch reels. By organizing my time to watch, I do not waste hours scrolling the screen and I will remain useful all day.” (P14)

Guilt and self-regulation. A quarter of the respondents, who were ten out of twenty-four, indicated that they usually felt guilty about their use of reels when it interrupted academic activities or lasted longer than

planned. As a result, they were forced to implement self-controlling measures, such as screen time limits, observation of their habitual use, and content choice, which allowed them to control their media consumption without risking their academic duties.

“Occasionally I can feel guilty when spending too many hours looking at reels. I then consciously narrow the behaviors of scrolling and refocus on studying.” (P18)

Strategic consumption. The idea of selective reel watching as the best method to increase entertainment value and reduce time waste captivated the majority of responders. In particular, the majority of students deliberately avoided straying from relevant or personally beneficial topics. This deliberate and intentional use of reels is reflected in this strategic consumption, which helps students manage their time well and enjoy spending time.

“I only watch things that are trendy or interesting. Enjoy watching and save time by avoiding pointless reels.” (P22)

Theme 4: Digital literacy and creative competence

The results highlight the importance of digital literacy or creative competence to the participants' use of reels. Consequently, individuals who had excellent control over technology became confident in content creation, consumption and sharing. Moreover, using platform features appropriately, such as proper hashtags, trending audio, and editing features, made it more visible, appealing and interactive. As a result, the skills promoted creative expression, peer appreciation, and continuity of student engagement.

Technical skills. According to eight out of twenty-four respondents, the best use of platform features, using suitable and aesthetic filters, and excellent knowledge of video editing are important reasons why individuals made and shared more reels. Technically sound people could make reels that were both creative and visually appealing, as they had great command over technology and they knew how to present it in a more appealing way. Also, the participant's digital skills made it easy and convenient for them to create reels that can attract masses of people.

“I thought I could make more interesting and professional reels after I learned how to use filters, music layers, and editing effects. It helped me enjoy the process and learn more about it.” (P3)

Confidence in content creation. The willingness of students to create and share reels was highly correlated with the confidence that they felt in navigating the service and creating engaging material. This confidence created involvement and active participation; took risks openly; and posted regularly. On the other hand, unfamiliarity usually limited participation to passive consumption apart from participation in content creation. An interviewee mentioned:

“On occasions when I see my reels are beneficial and entertaining, I am proud to share them. The belief

helps me continue producing and testing new concepts and not concern myself over failures so much.” (P13)

Creative expression. Social media reels allow students to be unique and creative. In particular, the interviewees said that the experience of trying visuals, music, and storytelling helped them express their individual style without losing contact with peers. Moreover, creative realization was strongly linked with emotional satisfaction and social acknowledgment and, consequently, encouraged repetitive involvement.

“I like to challenge myself with new transitions and ideas in my reels because in this way, I feel like I am expressing my personality. Infusibility among friends who like my creativity makes the effort worth doing it.” (P5)

Platform navigation and engagement tools. Students said that the platform knowledge of features, including hashtags, trending audio and algorithmic suggestions, increased platform visibility and user interaction. With the ability to maneuver these tools, the participants could reach broader audiences as well as have more opportunities to interact with peers. A graduate student stated that understanding the features of reels is essential for creating engaging content.

“Knowing how to use trending sounds, hashtags, and filters properly makes my reels more appealing and discoverable. It feels satisfying when my content gets reactions and encourages others to engage with me.” (P20)

Discussion

This study demonstrates that university students mostly use reels to maintain their emotional balance and for entertainment. Additionally, reel use can be measured by some factors, such as psychological gratification, peer group pressure, digital skills and other sociocultural factors. Participants mentioned that the reels are a fast-acting and immediate source of relief from stress during learning time, which relaxes and distracts them from the work pressure at that time.

However, there was not only a positive aspect of usage, as some students reported they were sometimes distracted and guilty when they became too involved or it got in the way of their studies. This reflects a duality in the consumption of short-form videos, as they can bring emotional satisfaction as well as some appreciation of the adverse effects of continued use. Other socially related factors, such as psychological satisfaction, peer influence, digital skills, and the general sociocultural context, also affect reels engagement. Students report that enjoying the reels leads to repeat usage of these reels and having peers present and expectations also influence their frequency of use and how. Among the many findings, many participants connected their engagement with social approval, which includes frequent liking, commenting and sharing of their posts, which elicited feelings of acceptance, confidence and belonging among their peers (Siresha and Kodali, 2024).

The study illustrates the importance of social feedback mechanisms for influencing the ways online

behaviors and online identities are formed among youth (Rusin & Szandala, 2024). Meanwhile, pupils actively participate in the latest trends and popular fashions to maintain their current and visible presence in their social networks. But the competition is not an even match; here there can be pressure to stay active and on social media, as participants pointed out. This results in a conflictual range between showing one's individual personality and group-based digital behavior. This refers to digitally suggestive forms of engagement that manifest the personal agency and the socially influenced expectations that occur in online contexts (De Melo et al., 2021). Thus the students experience tension between wanting to be unique and wanting to fit in. This shows that talking to people online can be both beneficial and detrimental for social life. Being an active participant, a student must learn digital literacy and must be creative at the same time. Most participants who answered the interview measured that if they knew more about video editing, choosing ideal layouts, using the correct hashtags, and mixing, they could create more appealing reels. These traits will make people feel stronger and more determined (Huu, 2023). Nonetheless, algorithmic elements play a significant role for user interaction and decision-making, as features like autoplay, trending filters, and recommendation platforms drive users to become more involved (Choi et al., 2023). Zhang and Lin (2022) contend that algorithms amplify the engagement of users and that they limit the user to choosing content by themselves, but they also make people stay engaged over a long time. This evidence suggests that effective use of technology can enhance creativity; however, its design may also limit users' autonomy in content selection (Mihelač & Klarić, 2025).

Gender and socio-cultural differences also play a crucial role in these behaviors. Women were smarter and only discussed things related to their morals with men. On the other hand, they were less connected to society and could speak their minds more freely. (Luitel, 2024). This disruption illustrates the profound influence of gender-specific morality and cultural narratives on interpersonal relationships. Moreover, participants exhibited a moderate degree of engagement, focusing on attaining equilibrium between leisure and systemic productivity through deliberate screen time regulation and judiciously selected content (Shin and Gweon, 2020; Van Gog et al., 2020). These actions show that nowadays most teenagers are willing to find out the pros and cons of the internet and learn how to use it properly. Moreover, they try to find out what the internet offers them and what it does not. The research enhances understanding of online relationships among Bangladeshi university students by illustrating the interplay of relationships, emotional needs, and technological opportunities within a cultural framework. These behaviors show that more young adults want to know what the internet can do for them and how to use it well.

Policy implications

This study offers significant policy implications that Bangladeshi university students can leverage to enhance

their daily use of social media in a healthier way. Moreover, universities, digital spaces, and government bodies in Bangladesh can create a way for the student to use it in a proper manner. With the emergence of digital technology and to keep balance with the fast-paced world, short-form video platforms like reels are becoming increasingly popular as people want to gain more information within a short time. This calls for scientific action at the educational, social, and digital governance levels to bring more balance. Combined policies can foster moral awareness that works and lead to useful and long-term involvement.

Integrating digital literacy into higher education: In order to support the Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041 of producing more technologically sound individuals who will promote development, purpose and analytical thinking will aid in the development of critical and effective sense, enhancement of higher-level thinking ability, self-regulation and control, and command over technology.

Promoting mental health and digital well-being: One important theme that will come out of this study is how gender affects how people use technology. Female students are often seen as shy when they use technology or talk to other people online. They may need a place where they can surf the web without being bothered by other people because of their gender. Schools and policymakers can make this kind of setting so that everyone feels welcome and not threatened. Making it easier for people to abuse others online and taking immediate action against crime and bad behavior can create an environment like this for everyone, but especially for women.

Ensuring gender-inclusive online spaces: The next valuable observation that can be adjusted according to the results of this research is the impact of gender norms on engagement in the digital environment. Since female students are more conservative, there should be an increased number of gender-sensitive online policies that would enable equal and safe participation. Educational institutions and governments need to promote a culture of openness in online participation, set up ways for people to report digital harassment, and ensure that social media is a place where everyone is respected and valued equally.

National strategy for mindful digital engagement: Finally, the ICT Division of government needs to construct a national framework for making the best use of digital media. This policy shall incorporate digital citizenship, in a responsible way of innovation, and media ethics as a subset of the digital Bangladesh vision. Bangladesh can have a generation of technologically sound, emotionally stable, and socially active people using social media to acquire knowledge, express thought creatively, and attach themselves to civic life through demonstrating healthy internet behavior.

Strengths and limitations

The research provides useful data on the association between emotional satisfaction, peer approval, digital literacy, and time management with the use of reels by the Bangladeshi university students. One of the strongest points is that it discusses how reels work as a space of self-expression, a stress-reducing activity, and a means of social inclusion into a collectivist society. Theoretically, the study is highly valuable because it incorporates insights through the perspectives of uses and gratifications, peer influence and digital competence and hence adds to the knowledge on the subject of youth participation in short-form video culture. The study also highlights the cultural and gendered nuances shaping digital participation in Bangladesh, enriching the international academic community with context-based insights. Nevertheless, focusing solely on university students limits the ability to generalize the findings to the entire population. Over time, the rapidly changing digital spaces and algorithms can alter engagement dynamics, but the adverse effects—such as distraction, overuse, or dependency on digital platforms—were not thoroughly examined; these effects should be studied within a much broader context.

Conclusion

This paper has examined issues related to the interaction of Bangladeshi university students with social media reels, showing that emotional satisfaction, peer acceptance, digital literacy, and time management all influence the nature of student interaction. Reels are not only a source of entertainment and stress relief but also a platform of self-expression, identity formation and social integration in the context of collective culture. The results show that it is a negotiated practice (harmony of enjoyment, recognition, and self-regulation) rather than a spontaneous activity. In addition to that, the research

emphasizes the impact of gender conventions and cultural presuppositions in virtual actions as they replicate the tendencies of society in general within the framework of online social interactions. On the whole, the study is relevant to knowledge about youth digital engagement in developing societies, with references to the necessity of balanced, mindful, and inclusive digital practices. Future research ought to also look into future behavioral effects, cross-platform use, and approaches to encouraging healthy and meaningful social media activity in young adults.

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Data availability

The datasets supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Credit author statement

Riham Hasan: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Md. Rayhan Kabir:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Md. Shariful Islam:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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