

Digital empathy and adolescent social media behavior: Insights from a systematic review for counseling practice in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesian adolescents who spend much of their social lives on social media face fear of missing out, pressure to curate idealized selves, and growing exposure to cyberbullying. Against this backdrop, the ability to recognize what others feel and to respond with care in screen-mediated interaction, digital empathy becomes a competency that school guidance and counseling can no longer treat as optional. This review asks three questions: which guidance and counseling interventions have been used to build digital empathy in Indonesian adolescents, where those interventions concentrate their efforts, and what their patterns imply for school counseling practice. Following PRISMA 2020 procedures, we searched Scopus, SINTA, Garuda, and Google Scholar for Indonesian-context publications from 2020 to 2025; after removing duplicates, screening titles and abstracts, checking full texts against eligibility criteria, and appraising quality, seven studies entered a thematic narrative synthesis. Across the seven studies, promising interventions weave together three strands: ethical digital citizenship, emotional literacy, and interactive media-based learning delivered through digital ecopedagogy, virtual group guidance, animated and comic-based media, and digital counseling services. Digital empathy emerges in a dual role: it works preventively against cyberbullying and developmentally as a foundation for emotional literacy. The review offers a counseling-specific map of this emerging field and argues for embedding digital ethics education in Indonesian counseling services as a route toward transformative digital empathy.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, cybercounseling, digital citizenship, digital empathy, social media.*



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Introduction

Connected digital technologies now reach into nearly every corner of adolescent life, and over the past decade, they have changed how young people form relationships and make sense of the world around them (Mulawarman & Nurfitri, 2017; Nayla, 2024). A social media platform is not a neutral meeting place: its architecture decides who sees whom, rewards particular styles of self-presentation, and filters the emotions users encounter. Because adolescents are among the heaviest users, these design features carry developmental weight. Research has traced swings between solidarity and apathy (Thomas et al., 2018), the construction of idealized self-concepts (Handayani et al., 2020), and a heightened tendency toward fear of missing out (Roberts & David, 2020). The first of these deserves unpacking. Online exposure to another person's hardship can pull users toward collective concern crowds rallying behind a victim of injustice, yet a steady stream of distressing content can also wear down emotional responsiveness until compassion fades into indifference toward others' suffering (Thomas et al., 2018).

Adolescents themselves sense that something is off. In a 2025 Pew Research Center survey, 48% of U.S. teens said social media does more harm than good for people their age, a figure that stood at 32% just three years earlier, pointing to trend pressure and bruising social comparison (Pew Research Center, 2025); scholars of adolescent development raise similar concerns (Hamilton et al., 2024; Sari, 2025). Indonesia adds a sharper edge to this picture: cyberbullying has become one of the most corrosive consequences of adolescent social media use in the country (Larasati, 2024; Radiani & Fadilah, 2024; Setiawan et al., 2020; Tas'adi et al., 2020). Empathy sits at the center of the mechanism. Adolescents low in empathy are more likely to commit online aggression, whereas empathic bystanders can blunt both the frequency and the impact of cyberbullying (Hu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). The core problem is therefore not screen time as such, but intensive use unaccompanied by the empathic competencies that responsible digital interaction demands.

The construct that names this missing competency is digital empathy: the exercise of core empathic capacities recognizing, understanding, and responding compassionately to others' emotions when communication runs through technology (Abou Hashish, 2025; Terry & Cain, 2016). Indonesian scholarship increasingly treats it as a strand of digital literacy central to character formation in the Society 5.0 era (Fitriani et al., 2022). Cultivating empathy online, however, is harder than cultivating it face to face: mediated interaction strips away much of the perceptual information an empathizer normally relies on and reshapes both affective repertoire and background knowledge (Mossner & Walter, 2024). Empathy demonstrably behaves differently in online and in-person settings (Sperandeo et al., 2021), and counselors working online must construct empathic language deliberately rather than trust it to emerge on its own (Paulino et al., 2026). Digital empathy, in short, is a skill to be scaffolded, not assumed.

Indonesian research on adolescent mental health has started to close in on this construct from several directions. Julius et al. (2020) position digital literacy as a core counselor competence for developing relevant guidance media, implying that counselors must first understand adolescents' digital ecosystems before they can scaffold empathy within them. Ibrahim (2025) documents how social media use relates to cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and sympathy in Indonesian adolescents; Irmayanti and Chusniyah (2024) call for strengthening empathy and self-control as bulwarks against cyberviolence. Working on general rather than specifically digital empathy, Meuthia et al. (2023) found that heavier use of social networking sites for communication can widen adolescents' access to situations that invite empathic response, a hint that digital environments can also be places where empathy grows. What these strands have not yet produced is a consolidated account of how guidance and counseling (GC) services should develop digital empathy: the relevant literature remains fragmented, and empathy is usually framed as character education rather than as part of structured counseling services.

The present review takes up that task. It maps guidance and counseling interventions that have been used to build digital empathy in Indonesian adolescents, examines where those

interventions direct their efforts, and draws out what the pattern means for school counseling. Three questions structure the review: (RQ1) What types of GC interventions are used to develop digital empathy among Indonesian adolescents? (RQ2) What is the primary focus of these interventions? (RQ3) What are the implications for counseling practice in Indonesia?

Method

We conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) and reported it in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020). The design fits the purpose of the study: the research questions call for mapping and integrating an existing body of evidence rather than producing new primary data.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Four sources were searched, chosen to balance international indexing against national relevance. Scopus and Google Scholar supplied internationally indexed counseling and education research; SINTA (Science and Technology Index) and the Garuda portal covered nationally accredited Indonesian journals, where most accounts of local school counseling practice appear. The search window ran from 2020 to 2025.

For search and selection purposes, we operationalized digital empathy as the enactment of core empathic capacities recognizing, understanding, and responding compassionately to others' emotions in technology-mediated communication (Abou Hashish, 2025; Terry & Cain, 2016). A study, therefore, is counted as relevant if it names the construct directly, or if it examines empathy that is developed, expressed, or trained in digital or online settings, empathy toward others in social media interaction, for instance, or empathy cultivated through digital media-based interventions, even where the exact phrase "digital empathy" never appears. Queries combined concept blocks with the AND operator and joined synonyms within each block with OR; adapted to each database's syntax, the string was:

("digital empathy" OR "cyber empathy" OR "empati digital" OR "online empathy") AND ("counseling" OR "guidance" OR "bimbingan dan konseling" OR "cybercounseling") AND ("adolescent" OR "student" OR "remaja" OR "siswa") AND ("social media" OR "media sosial" OR "cyberbullying")

In SINTA and Garuda, Indonesian terms served as the primary query and English terms were retained to catch bilingual records; to give a sense of scale, title searches in Garuda returned 27 records for "empati digital" and 4 for "empati daring." All queries were restricted to title, abstract, and keyword fields within the 2020–2025 window. We also hand-checked the reference lists of included articles for relevant studies that the database filters had missed.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included, a study had to (1) appear between 2020 and 2025, (2) be written in Indonesian or English, (3) report an empirical study, program, or intervention, (4) address digital empathy or a closely related empathic construct in online contexts, (5) sit within or carry direct implications for guidance and counseling practice with adolescents or school-age students, and (6) be conducted in Indonesia or report findings explicitly transferable to Indonesian school counseling.

We excluded records that (1) lay outside the publication window, (2) treated empathy with no digital or online dimension, (3) described no identifiable intervention, program, or practice relevant to counseling, (4) took the form of opinion pieces, editorials, or other non-peer-reviewed material, (5) duplicated records already retrieved, or (6) sat entirely outside the Indonesian context and offered no transferable implications for Indonesian school counseling.

Screening Procedure

Selection proceeded through the PRISMA 2020 stages. Members of the author team screened the records, and eligibility disagreements were settled by discussion until consensus was reached. Database searches in Garuda, Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA produced 240 records; manual citation chaining added 5 more, for 245 in total. Removing 43 duplicates left 202 records for title and abstract screening, at which point 154 were set aside because they did not engage digital empathy, school counseling, or adolescent populations. Of the 48 reports we then sought in full text, 3 proved inaccessible, leaving 45 articles for full-text eligibility assessment against the criteria above. That assessment eliminated 38 articles: 12 non-empirical or opinion pieces, 8 studies conducted outside Indonesia, 7 focused on early childhood or adult populations, 6 without a school counseling intervention, and 5 unavailable in English or Indonesian. Seven empirical studies satisfied every criterion and entered the synthesis; Figure 1 traces the full flow.

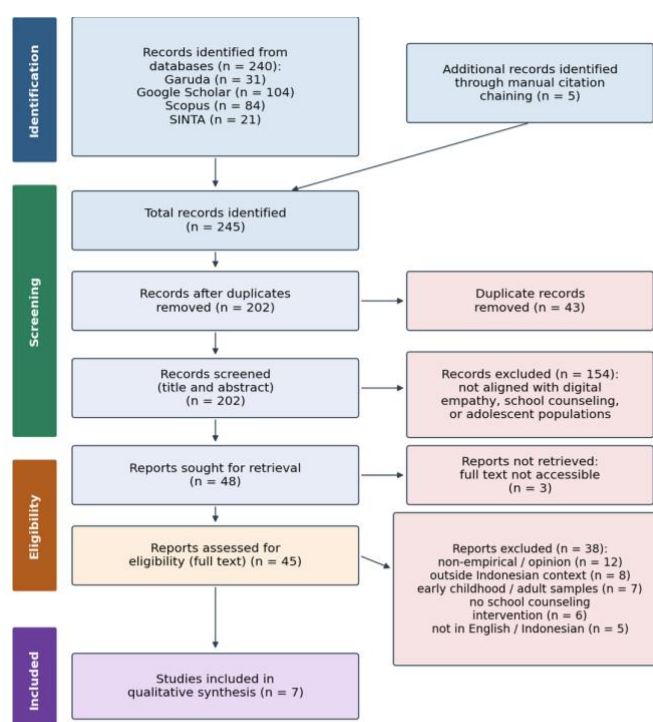


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Data Analysis

We synthesized the seven studies through thematic narrative synthesis, working through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition and naming, and reporting. A charting table recorded each study's author and year, title, intervention type, empathy dimension addressed, and reported outcome. Codes were then clustered into higher-order themes capturing what the interventions target and how they work, and the themes were read against the three research questions. Because the corpus mixes designs, this approach suits it well: it integrates qualitative and quantitative findings around shared conceptual patterns instead of forcing them into statistical pooling.

Quality Appraisal

Given the heterogeneity of designs, we appraised methodological quality and risk of bias narratively rather than with a single standardized scoring instrument. The appraisal weighed the clarity of each study's aims, the appropriateness and rigor of its design (including whether a control or comparison group was present), the adequacy of its sampling and empathy measures, and the fit between reported data and conclusions. In keeping with the review's exploratory aim, appraisal served to contextualize and weight the evidence rather than to exclude studies; its results appear alongside the synthesis in the Findings.

Findings

Seven guidance and counseling interventions aimed at building digital empathy in Indonesian adolescents emerged from the synthesis, and the account below is organized by the review's three questions: intervention types (RQ1), primary focus (RQ2), and implications for Indonesian counseling practice (RQ3). The insights charted for each study in Table 1 follow the same logic. One caveat applies throughout: only part of the corpus names "digital empathy" explicitly, while the remaining studies work with the construct implicitly, developing or training empathy in digital and online contexts; Table 1 flags which is which for every study. Direct links between digital empathy and guidance and counseling remain scarce in this literature, most of the time, digital empathy grows inside the broader frame of character or digital-citizenship education. Table 1 profiles the included studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of the included studies

No	Author, Years	Title	Insight
1	(Sari et al., 2025)	Digital Ecopedagogy-Based Counseling to Reduce Cyberbullying in Indonesian Wetland Adolescents	RQ1: A digital ecopedagogy-based counseling model that promotes ethical and responsible digital engagement to reduce cyberbullying. RQ2: The term "digital empathy" does not appear explicitly in the article; the construct is addressed implicitly, because reducing cyberbullying requires students to recognize the harm their online actions cause others, an exercise in perspective-taking and empathic responsibility. RQ3: Students are guided to see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem and responsible for their actions within it, a framing that counselors can use to situate empathy within digital citizenship.
2	(Primasari et al., 2021)	Bimbingan Kelompok Virtual Teknik Photovoice untuk Meningkatkan Empati Siswa Sekolah Menengah Pertama	RQ1: Virtual group guidance using the photovoice technique, in which students capture images of life issues with digital devices and then present and discuss them in groups. RQ2: The focus is on strengthening students' empathy, sensing, and understanding others' emotions through technology-mediated interaction; the term "digital empathy" is not used explicitly, but empathy is trained in an online setting. RQ3: Group discussion of student-produced digital images builds cognitive (perspective-taking) and affective (emotional response) empathy, offering counselors a replicable virtual group format.
3	(Muharammah et al., 2021)	Pengembangan "Perasaan Kita" sebagai Upaya Internalisasi Empati pada Siswa SMP	RQ1: Development of the "Perasaan Kita" animated platform as a digital medium for internalizing empathy among junior high school students. RQ2: The focus is on the internalization of empathy through animated video stories that mirror students'

No	Author, Years	Title	Insight
			everyday experiences; digital empathy is implicit in the delivery of empathy content through digital technology. RQ3: The platform is designed around Davis's empathy aspects, perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress, providing counselors with a theory-based digital medium.
4	(Triana, 2024)	Transformasi Layanan Bimbingan Konseling Berbasis Digital Pasca-Pandemi: Pengaruh terhadap Karakter dan Prestasi Siswa	RQ1: Digital-based counseling services delivered through Zoom and WhatsApp group interaction in the post-pandemic period. RQ2: The focus is on building empathy and emotional management through visual elements (videos, infographics); empathy is measured with the Emotional Intelligence Scale rather than a dedicated digital empathy instrument. RQ3: Technology-mediated group interaction can create a conducive environment for building empathy, supporting the integration of empathy development into cybercounseling services.
5	(Suryati et al., 2024)	Meningkatkan Etika Bersosial Media Melalui Bimbingan Klasikal Teknik Brainstorming Siswa Kelas XI MIPA 3	RQ1: Classical guidance using the brainstorming technique to improve social media ethics among eleventh-grade students. RQ2: The focus is on ethical online behavior; unethical acts, such as anger, hatred, insults, and cyberbullying, are treated as indicators of low empathy in digital interaction, so digital empathy is addressed implicitly through social media ethics. RQ3: Brainstorming engages students in identifying the impacts of unethical behavior and fosters cognitive empathy by taking the victim's perspective on online comments and actions.
6	(Hidayat et al., 2024)	Program Literasi Digital dan Etika Media Sosial bagi Pelajar	RQ1: A digital literacy and social media ethics program for students, delivered as a structured community-service education activity. RQ2: The focus is on ethical social media use, respect, and shared responsibility, positioned as the foundation on which empathic online behavior is built. RQ3: The program helps students apply ethical principles, including responsible content sharing and showing empathy, which counselors can adapt into guidance services.
7	(Firdaus et al., 2025)	Membangun Empati Remaja terhadap Korban Bullying melalui Komik Digital	RQ1: A digital comic ("Rough") on the Webtoon platform, developed using the ADDIE model, to foster adolescents' empathy toward bullying victims. RQ2: The focus is empathy toward bullying victims; the narrative lets students take the victim's perspective, building cognitive and affective empathy through digital storytelling. RQ3: Field-tested with 30 tenth-grade students (mean score 89.64%), indicating a feasible digital medium that counselors can use for empathy building.

Two patterns stand out. The interventions cluster around three overlapping foci: ethical digital citizenship (Hidayat et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2025; Suryati et al., 2024), emotional literacy and intelligence (Muharammah et al., 2021; Triana, 2024), and interactive, media-based learning (Firdaus et al., 2025; Primasari et al., 2021; Triana, 2024). They also tend to work on cognitive and

affective empathy at once: the same program that trains perspective-taking and the reading of others' emotions usually also cultivates emotional responsiveness to others' experiences.

The intervention types range widely: digital ecopedagogy (N. P. Sari et al., 2025), virtual group guidance built on photovoice (Primasari et al., 2021), a purpose-built animated platform (Muharammah et al., 2021), digital counseling run through Zoom and WhatsApp (Triana, 2024), classical guidance using brainstorming (Suryati et al., 2024), a digital-literacy and social-media-ethics program (Hidayat et al., 2024), and Webtoon-based digital storytelling (Firdaus et al., 2025). Reported outcomes converge on gains in students' empathy, emotional regulation, and awareness of what online behavior does to others, but designs and measures vary greatly, and control or comparison groups are mostly absent. Triana (2024) used a standardized instrument (the Emotional Intelligence Scale); Firdaus et al. (2025) reported a pre-post media-effectiveness evaluation with tenth-grade students.

Methodological quality across the corpus is uneven. Pre-experimental and descriptive designs dominate, and several studies rest on one-group pre-post or single-sample evaluations with no control or comparison condition (e.g., Firdaus et al., 2025; Suryati et al., 2024; Triana, 2024). Two studies also began life outside a formal counseling setting: Hidayat et al. (2024) is a community-service (*pengabdian*) program on digital literacy and social media ethics, and Firdaus et al. (2025) is an instructional-media (ADDIE) development study from a visual-communication journal. Both stayed in the review because they deliver structured, replicable empathy-building activities that counselors can transfer directly into guidance and counseling practice, meeting inclusion criteria 3 and 5, though their non-counseling origin is a boundary condition to keep in mind. Read together, the reported gains are preliminary and hypothesis-generating, not robust estimates of effectiveness.

Discussion

What the corpus suggests, taken as a whole, is that digital empathy in Indonesian adolescents grows best where guidance and counseling interventions braid together ethical digital citizenship, emotional literacy, and interactive media-based engagement. This section reads that pattern against the three research questions and the wider literature, under two caveats already noted: part of the corpus treats digital empathy only implicitly, and the underlying designs are largely pre-experimental or descriptive, which keeps every claim here preliminary and hypothesis-generating.

Empathy as Moral Agency in Digital Spaces

On RQ2, the reviewed studies converge on a single idea: online, empathy and moral agency cannot be pried apart. Sari et al. (2025) who, as noted above, work with digital empathy implicitly rather than by name, cast empathic engagement as both understanding others' emotions and owning one's responsibilities within a digital ecosystem; Hidayat et al. (2024) make ethical literacy in social media, grounded in digital responsibility, the base on which empathy is built. The same moral thread runs through work that positions digital empathy as a route to moral elevation and prosocial behavior in students (Ayu, 2025), through evidence that empathy moderates the link between moral disengagement and cyberbullying perpetration (Zhou et al., 2023), and through findings that empathic bystanders supported by internet moral judgment are more likely to step in for victims (Hu et al., 2023). For counseling practice, the lesson is to stop teaching empathy as an abstract virtue and start treating it as a situated ethical competency exercised in concrete online interactions.

Pedagogical and Technological Mediation of Empathy

Pedagogically, Triana (2024) and Suryati et al. (2024) show what digitally mediated and classroom-based formats can do for empathy and emotional regulation, especially after the pandemic. When Zoom- and WhatsApp-based counseling was paired with visual and interactive tools, group empathy and emotional intelligence rose (Triana, 2024); brainstorming in classical

guidance helped students see unethical online behavior for what it is and grasp its emotional cost, feeding cognitive empathy (Suryati et al., 2024). The photovoice, “*Perasaan Kita*,” and digital-comic interventions work the same seam from a different angle, using student-produced images, animated narratives, and Webtoon storytelling to draw out cognitive and affective empathy alike (Firdaus et al., 2025; Muharammah et al., 2021; Primasari et al., 2021). All of this squares with evidence that empathy behaves differently online than in person (Sperandeo et al., 2021) and must be scaffolded deliberately, through structure and dialogue, when interaction is mediated (Mossner & Walter, 2024; Paulino et al., 2026).

Digital Empathy as a Preventive and Developmental Construct

For RQ1 and RQ3, the synthesis shows the interventions giving digital empathy a double job. As prevention, it curbs antisocial online behavior, cyberbullying above all by nurturing ethical awareness and perspective-taking, a role that matches Ibrahim’s (2025) image of cyber empathy as a “digital shield” and echoes calls to strengthen empathy and self-control against cyberviolence (Irmayanti & Chusniyah, 2024; Meuthia et al., 2023). As development, it builds emotional literacy, self-regulation, and the capacity for compassionate engagement, empathy treated as a competency that grows with experience, not a fixed trait.

Implications for Counseling Practice in Indonesia

In practice, the message for counselors is to move past delivering empathy as a moral lecture and to scaffold it instead experientially, participatorily, and inside the technologies adolescents already inhabit. Concretely: fold digital ethics education into classical and group guidance; put student-generated digital media to work in making others’ perspectives vivid; and build empathy work into existing cybercounseling services instead of treating it as a stand-alone topic. Counselors then become facilitators of empathic digital transformation, a role in step with the wider push toward digital literacy and innovation in Indonesian guidance and counseling and with the development of accessible cybercounseling models (Brooks et al., 2023).

Momentum is clearly building. Very recent Indonesian work has begun to formalize digital empathy within guidance and counseling, including a systematic review of digital empathy in online communication published in a guidance-and-counseling journal (Ibrahim, 2025) and a digital empathy training program for peer counselors in a madrasah setting (Ayu, 2025). Both appeared after the database search for this review had closed, and both signal that the counseling-specific evidence base this study calls for is starting to take shape.

Limitations

Several limitations bound these findings. Seven studies from four databases are a small corpus, and relevant work indexed elsewhere or sitting in grey literature may have escaped the net. Empathy was measured heterogeneously and mostly without standardized instruments, which limits comparability, and the short time frames of most studies leave the durability of effects an open question. The synthesis itself is narrative, so it characterizes patterns rather than estimating effect sizes. Finally, the review was not registered in a protocol registry such as PROSPERO, and no formal inter-rater reliability statistic (e.g., Cohen’s κ) was computed for screening; future iterations of this work can remedy both.

Conclusion

This review set out to map guidance and counseling interventions for developing digital empathy among Indonesian adolescents, to locate their primary focus, and to draw implications for practice. Across the seven included studies, digital empathy appears to grow best where interventions bring ethical digital citizenship, emotional literacy, and interactive media-based

engagement together, and it works on two fronts at once, preventing cyberbullying while building emotional literacy and self-regulation. The review's contribution is a counseling-specific synthesis of a field previously dominated by character-education framings, and its practical orientation is concrete: integrate digital ethics education into guidance services and scaffold empathy through experiential, technologically embedded learning. The small corpus, the heterogeneous and largely non-standardized empathy measures, and the narrative design mark the limits of what can be claimed. Future research should widen the database coverage, develop and validate context-sensitive instruments for measuring digital empathy, and put these interventions to experimental or longitudinal tests. That agenda would move Indonesian counseling practice from promising models toward evidence-based, transformative digital empathy services.

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