

Social Media as a Medium for Participation in the ‘Kupu-Kupu’ Student Social Movement at UIN Jakarta: Activism without Street Demonstrations

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how “*Mahasiswa Kupu-Kupu*” students whose daily activities are limited to attending lectures and going straight home develop political awareness and social empathy toward student social movements through social media, particularly during the demonstration occurring on 25–28 August 2025. Using a qualitative approach with descriptive phenomenology based on Clark Moustakas’ framework, this research explores the lived experiences of students who did not directly participate in the protest. Participants consisted of students from the State Islamic University, and data were collected through semi-structured online in-depth interviews. The analysis followed the stages of epoche, phenomenological reduction, meaning units, imaginative variation, and synthesis of essence. The findings reveal that butterfly students experience fear and concern toward physical demonstrations, yet they still construct passive empathy and reflective political awareness through their digital interactions on social media. These results indicate that butterfly students are not entirely apathetic; rather, they demonstrate a reflective form of participation that remains relevant within the context of digital democracy.

Keywords: political awareness, digital empathy, butterfly students, social media, social movements

INTRODUCTION

University students are normatively positioned as *agents of change* who play a strategic role in responding to social and political issues. Within democratic practice, student movements are often understood as a form of political participation and social control over state policies (Carolina et al., 2022). However, in the contemporary context, student involvement is not always manifested through direct participation in demonstrations.

The large-scale demonstrations that took place from August 25–28, 2025 revealed a paradox of student participation. Although government policy issues triggered widespread public concern, the level of students’ physical participation was relatively low compared to the total student population, including within the State Islamic University (UIN) environment. This condition illustrates a gap between students’ awareness of the importance of socio-political engagement and their actual involvement in field-based activism. A survey conducted by Bhaskara (2022) showed that although the majority of students considered organizational participation important, only a small proportion were actively involved.

Previous studies have generally focused on students who are directly involved in demonstrations or campus organizations as subjects in examining political awareness and social empathy (Azura et al., 2024; Maghribi et al., 2025). On the other hand, “butterfly students” (*mahasiswa kupu-kupu*), whose daily routines consist primarily of attending classes and returning home, are often perceived as passive and have rarely been examined empirically. In fact, in the digital era, social media has become an important space for the

development of political awareness and empathy. Interactions through digital content, online discussions, and news exposure enable students to develop social concern without direct physical involvement (Efendi, 2018; Brock & Michaels, 2019).

Based on this review, the scientific novelty of this article lies in its focus on butterfly students as the majority group within the student population, as well as its effort to understand political awareness and social empathy formed through digital experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, this study examines how butterfly students interpret the demonstrations of August 25–28, 2025 through social media and construct their roles as *agents of change* in a reflective manner.

The objective of this study is to analyze the formation of political awareness and social empathy among butterfly students toward student movements through social media, as well as to understand the meaning of their non-physical participation within the context of digital democracy.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive phenomenological method based on the ideas of Clark Moustakas (1994). This approach was selected because it is capable of exploring the experiences and meanings constructed by *kupu-kupu* students without using complex statistical analysis, in accordance with the characteristics of phenomenological research that emphasize the exploration of subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research subjects were students of an Islamic State University aged 19–23 years who followed a study–home activity pattern and did not participate directly in demonstrations. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, as this technique allows researchers to choose individuals who are most relevant to the focus of the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted online using Zoom, Google Meet, or WhatsApp. This interview method provides both flexibility and depth in exploring the meanings of participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, namely when no new information emerged from subsequent participants (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological stages, beginning with epoche or bracketing of assumptions, phenomenological reduction, clustering of meanings, imaginative variation, and synthesis of essences as a summary of the core experience (Moustakas, 1994). These stages assisted the researcher in identifying the essence of *kupu-kupu* students' experiences in interpreting the demonstrations of August 25–28, 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed four main themes that describe how *kupu-kupu* students interpreted the August 25–28, 2025 demonstrations through social media. These findings indicate that physical absence from the protests does not necessarily signify indifference; rather, it reflects an alternative form of participation that is more aligned with students' capacities, perceptions of risk, and personal comfort.

Fear and Concern Regarding Demonstrations**Textural**

The phenomenon of *kupu-kupu* students' fear of the large-scale demonstrations of August 25–28, 2025 cannot be separated from the inner experiences they underwent while witnessing the unrest through social media and online news coverage. Texturally, students described fear of potential violence by security forces, tear gas, and the tragedy that befell Affan Kurniawan as concrete evidence that mass protests are not merely spaces for expression but also arenas of risk. This fear was reinforced by campus narratives emphasizing the importance of order and academic ethics, causing demonstrations to be frequently perceived as actions with the potential for disorder and as being contrary to moral values. The participants described inner experiences of fear and concern upon learning that fatalities had occurred during the August 2025 demonstrations. Atika admitted, "I was scared, honestly. After that, I became even more hesitant to participate in protests on the ground." This statement shows that fear was not merely a momentary reaction but an emotional experience that shaped hesitation toward direct involvement.

Structural

The concerns of *kupu-kupu* students were formed through the interaction between digital experiences and campus culture. Exposure to news about clashes, videos depicting repressive actions by security forces, and online discussions highlighting damage to public facilities contributed to a social construction that mass demonstrations are synonymous with danger. Within the context of UIN, Islamic values and moderation further reinforced cautious attitudes, leading students to maintain distance rather than become directly involved. This fear was shaped by exposure to news and digital narratives concerning unrest, the Affan Kurniawan tragedy, and repressive actions by security forces. *Kupu-kupu* students interpreted demonstrations as risky spaces rather than merely democratic forums. The UIN campus culture, which emphasizes order and moral values, further strengthened the social construction that mass demonstrations are associated with danger.

Essence

This fear and concern became the primary barrier to the physical involvement of *kupu-kupu* students in social movements. They viewed distance as a form of self-protection as well as a moral choice. Thus, the inner experience of fear was not simply a sign of apathy but rather a reflection of the dilemma between the moral urge to oppose injustice and the need to maintain personal safety. Fear and concern became the main obstacles to the physical participation of *kupu-kupu* students. They chose a safe distance as a form of self-protection and a moral decision. Therefore, fear was not merely apathy but a reflection of the dilemma between the moral drive to resist injustice and the need to safeguard personal well-being.

Passive Empathy Through Social Media**Textural**

Although they did not take to the streets, *kupu-kupu* students still experienced empathy through social media. Rafi stated, “I feel sorry for the victims’ families. The state should be able to guarantee the safety of students who simply want to voice their opinions.” This quotation demonstrates social concern emerging from digital emotional connectedness. This empathy manifested in feelings of care, anger, and sadness, even though it was not expressed through physical action.

Structural

Passive empathy was formed through intensive digital interaction. Students read opinions, watched videos of the demonstrations, and participated in online discussions, resulting in social experiences being constructed through digital spaces. Social media served a dual function: as a communication tool and as a medium for emotional learning that strengthened empathy. This is consistent with DeFleur and Rokeach’s Media Dependency Theory, which suggests that students increasingly rely on social media to understand the social world and develop social concern.

Essence

Passive empathy became a new form of participation. *Kupu-kupu* students remained morally and emotionally engaged despite not being physically present at the protest sites. This digital empathy affirms that involvement does not always have to take the form of physical action but can also manifest as emotional connectedness that encourages solidarity and critical awareness. The essence of this experience is that *kupu-kupu* students continue to play a role in social movements, although their participation is reflective and emotional in nature.

Political Awareness from a Safe Distance

Textural

Nabiel stated, “I was really shocked and saddened. Demonstrations should be a space for expressing opinions, not a place where people lose their lives.” This statement indicates that although they remained outside the protest arena, students still recognized demonstrations as democratic spaces. Political awareness emerged through their interpretation of the tragedy, demonstrating that *kupu-kupu* students were not entirely passive.

Structural

The political awareness of *kupu-kupu* students was built through digital social construction. They interpreted political realities based on social media narratives, online news, and public discussions. A safe distance enabled them to absorb information without facing physical risks, allowing political awareness to develop through critical reflection. The constructivist paradigm explains that social reality is formed through individual interpretation; therefore, *kupu-kupu* students developed reflective political awareness from a safe distance.

Essence

Political awareness from a safe distance emphasizes that student involvement does not necessarily have to be manifested through participation in demonstrations. *Kupu-kupu* students remained part of the democratic process through critical interpretation of public issues. The essence of this experience is that maintaining a safe distance is not a sign of apathy but rather a form of reflective participation that remains meaningful within social movements.

Feelings of Guilt and Self-Reflection**Textural**

Rifky highlighted the moral dimension, stating, “I think it is a tragedy that should serve as a reflection. We may protest, but we should not lose our humanity.” Fadli added, “I am increasingly convinced that students’ voices can be expressed through writing and dialogue, not through clashes.” These quotations reveal feelings of guilt as well as self-reflection regarding the decision not to participate in the demonstrations. *Kupu-kupu* students experienced an inner dilemma between concern for social issues and limitations on physical participation.

Structural

Feelings of guilt were formed through comparisons with *kura-kura* students who were active in organizations and participated directly in demonstrations. The religious and moral values promoted on campus, emphasizing social responsibility, further intensified the inner dilemma experienced by *kupu-kupu* students. They felt caught between two poles: adherence to order and the moral drive to resist injustice. This social structure made self-reflection increasingly complex and filled with consideration.

Essence

Self-reflection became a pathway through which *kupu-kupu* students reorganized their political identities. Silence did not mean apathy but rather represented a meaningful political experience. Feelings of guilt opened space for students to consider future involvement while affirming that their quiet experiences still held value within the democratic process. The essence of this experience is that self-reflection serves as a bridge connecting fear, empathy, and political awareness, enabling *kupu-kupu* students to continue contributing to social change through different pathways.

Results

This study found that the experiences of *kupu-kupu* students regarding the August 2025 demonstrations were not merely characterized by their absence from the protest sites but also by complex inner dynamics. Fear and concern emerged when they witnessed the tragedy involving fatalities, leading demonstrations to be perceived as risky spaces. Media narratives and campus culture emphasizing order reinforced students’ decisions to maintain

distance as a form of self-protection and a moral stance. Behind this fear, passive empathy developed through social media. Students felt concern for the victims and their families, as well as solidarity with demands for justice. Exposure to digital content in the form of videos, opinions, and online discussions became a medium of emotional learning that strengthened emotional connectedness, allowing involvement to occur in a reflective rather than physical form.

Political awareness was also formed from a safe distance. *Kupu-kupu* students understood demonstrations as democratic spaces and interpreted public issues through digital narratives. A safe distance provided room for them to remain critical without facing direct risks, enabling political engagement to be expressed through reflection and analysis rather than direct action. Finally, feelings of guilt and self-reflection emerged. Students recognized the dilemma between concern for public issues and limitations on physical participation. Comparisons with peers who were active in organizations reinforced this reflection while affirming that voices could be expressed through peaceful means such as writing and dialogue. Self-reflection became the bridge connecting fear, empathy, and political awareness, enabling *kupu-kupu* students to continue contributing to social change through different avenues.

Overall, these findings affirm that *kupu-kupu* students are not an apathetic group. They experience rich inner struggles characterized by fear and concern, maintaining distance while remaining critical, feeling guilt while remaining reflective, and their quiet experiences remain meaningful within democratic processes and contemporary social movements.

Discussion

This study shows that *kupu-kupu* students responded to the August 2025 demonstrations through complex inner dynamics. Fear and concern emerged as a result of fatalities and repressive actions by security forces, leading demonstrations to be perceived as risky spaces. This finding is consistent with Febriansyah and Khamid (2025) as well as Lutfiana and Widiyanto (2018), who emphasize that authorities often prioritize stability and order over the protection of civil rights, in line with Tilly's (2004) framework of contentious politics, which explains the risk of violence as a barrier to participation.

Despite maintaining distance, students continued to develop passive empathy through social media. Exposure to videos, opinions, and online discussions strengthened emotional connectedness with victims and demands for justice. This finding is consistent with Syahputri and Katimin (2024) and Brock and Michaels (2019), who emphasize the role of social media as a form of "empathy training." Additional support from Vraga and Tully (2021) indicates that digital interaction enhances civic empathy and non-physical political participation.

From this empathy emerged political awareness from a safe distance. *Kupu-kupu* students understood demonstrations as democratic spaces and interpreted public issues through digital social constructions. This finding is in line with Anggraeni et al. (2025), who highlight the political awareness of young people, as well as the constructivist paradigm

(Umanailo, 2019), which emphasizes social reality as a product of interpretation. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action further reinforces the idea that young people's political engagement is often expressed through digital networks and personal reflection.

In addition, feelings of guilt and self-reflection emerged, expanding the existing literature. *Kupu-kupu* students recognized the moral dilemma between concern and the limitations of physical participation, differing from the studies of Carolina et al. (2022) and Maghribi et al. (2025), which emphasize actively engaged students. This finding is supported by Thomas and McGarty (2018), who argue that moral conviction and inner reflection can become catalysts for future political engagement.

Overall, this discussion confirms that *kupu-kupu* students are not apathetic. They experience rich inner struggles characterized by fear and concern, maintaining distance while remaining critical, and feeling guilt while remaining reflective. The literature supports most of these findings, particularly regarding the role of social media and the risks of state repression, while the dimension of moral reflection expands the field by offering a new perspective on non-physical political engagement in the context of digital democracy.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a gap that has not been explained in previous research, namely how *kupu-kupu* students, who have long been considered passive and uninvolved in direct activism, actually develop political awareness and social empathy through digital experiences during the demonstrations of August 25–28, 2025. The findings show that although they were not physically present, *kupu-kupu* students still experienced meaningful emotional, reflective, and moral engagement. They constructed the meaning of being *agents of change* through information consumption, digital discussions, and symbolic activism on social media.

The novelty of this study lies in its identification of a form of “reflective activism,” namely non-physical political participation that emerges from digital empathy and moral awareness among passive students, particularly within the context of a religious-based university such as UIN. This finding broadens the understanding that student social movements are manifested not only through street protests but also through the construction of meaning, personal reflection, and digital engagement, dimensions that have rarely been discussed in the existing literature.

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