



The Effects of Social Media on the Mental Health of Malaysian University Students: A Review

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of universities have experienced the increase in social media usage among their students, which has stimulated interest in its effects on mental health. In this review, it would envisage to look and review the existing body of literature related to the relationship between social media usage and mental health particularly among Malaysian university students. The review collates results from a number of studies that examine the impact of social media on mental health, including social media addiction, anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. This paper looks at the positive and negative impacts of social media use and how the impact of using social media can vary depending on individual, cultural, and educational context in Malaysia. Positive outcomes noted are increased social connectivity, emotional support, learning and self-expression while negative consequences include the rise of mental health issues like increased isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem sometimes compounded by overuse and problematic social media behavior. In addition, the review examines the degree social media use has on the mental wellbeing of Malaysian students, and the extent to which cultural and educational factors influence how social media use impacts mental wellbeing. Finally, the review suggests directions for future research, especially the need for longitudinal studies to understand better the long-term effects of social media use on mental health. Also, we provide practical recommendations, including promoting awareness of healthy social media habits, university led initiatives to encourage balanced use, and support to mental health resources for students who may experience social media related challenges.

INTRODUCTION

University students across the Malaysia are now using the social sites including Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, and Twitter in the social commerce of their daily lives (MCMC, 2023). These platforms offer features that allow connectivity, creative outlet, and information sharing; they augment social

relations and academic work (Rahman et al., 2023). However, increased usage of social media has also been associated with different adverse effects on mental health, especially to the youths, the major users (Ahmad et al., 2021).

The stressors that are specific in the Malaysian university students may also make the impact of the

social media usage in students' mental health to be worse. Time management is another issue, which is mainly characterized by the pressure in the schools and the related academics, extra co-curricular activities, internships (Lim et al., 2020; Ali & Chethiyar, 2024). Cultural also contributes another factor affecting the decision making of females, especially in the collectivistic country as Malaysia, where the approval of the family and society is very important (Naveed, Chethiyar, & Arshad, 2024; Zain et al., 2022). As well, others include financial challenges attributed to the high costs of living especially to students living in urban areas, also augments stress and anxiety. Social media as always play a dual role on this front, as while they offer temporary respite for these stressors, they then introduce new ones in form of cyberbullying, FOMO, and social comparison (Kamaruddin & Nor, 2021).

That is why, it could be stated that the role of social media in shaping mental health issues is more or less concerned or reflected. On the positive note it helps obtain social support, decrease subjective perception of loneliness and increase awareness of mental health services (Tan et al., 2022). Youtube and LinkedIn are other platforms that are also important in building skill and networking in careers of one's choice which in turn increases self-efficacy thus decreasing stress related to future planning (Ismail & Hassan, 2021). On the other hand, optimal social media use had positive outcomes including higher student engagement, productivity and better self-regulation while on the extreme side, negative effects include addiction, sleep deprivation, and higher prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms specifically for students with poor self-regulation mechanisms (Ahmad et al., 2021; Chong et al., 2021).

This paper seeks to present a literature review and a critical synthesis of the studied literature regarding the implications for the mental health of Malaysian university students by use of social media with equal attention on the positive and negative consequences. Engaging these effects in regard with cultural and educational setting of Malaysia, the review aims to find out the moderating variables which may influence the relationship between the use of social media and the mental health.

Literature Review

Social Media Usage Ppterns among Malaysian University Students

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other similar platforms are currently a core part of Malaysian university student's existence as the means of communication, work, entertainment, etc. (Azhar et al., 2022; MCMC, 2023). Current social apps including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are the commonly used social media platforms; the student spending nearly 4h33 min per day on these social media platforms (Rahman et al., 2023). This has shown that social media is very essential in the various facets of the students' lives.

As it stands, social media is widely used as an academic tool for group discussions, dissemination of project notes and other learning resources, group projects, and interaction between students and tutors. Further, it offers an opportunity of consolation, whereby friendships are formed, students are able to share their problems and get free counsel at stressful moment. Social media is also an effective and readily available source of information and news, students being able to follow social events, both at the regional and the international level (Lim et al., 2020).

However, there is a number of concerns with the adverse effects of social media overuse. According to the recent studies, continuous involvement with such sites causes addiction, which has negative influences on students' concentration, effectiveness and health. Furthermore, research has established that social media use contributes negatively to mental health where people experience more anxiety, depression and social isolation were used excessively (Chong et al., 2021). These problems underscore the need to enhance the healthy use of the sites among university students in order to harness its enhancement while reducing on the detrimental effects.

Social Media Addiction

Social media dependency is now proving as a major concern among university students affecting various domain of their life's. The relaxing effect makes students postpone academic tasks in order to spend time on the use of social media applications, which results in negative outcome in learning achievements. This behavior has consequences not only in the course of tackling assignments and

concentrating during lectures but also in the deterioration of the quality of a student's learning (Ahmad et al., 2021). Furthermore, over-dependence on social media hinders the interactions of student therefore leaving them stranded between their peers or family members. Instead of getting actual physical interactions, students find themselves glued on computers, constantly interacting with Facebook and-related sites, and getting empty feelings of loneliness at the end of it all. To a large extent, the dependence on social networks is a result of intentionally designed algorithmic features that aim to capture user attention.

Some of the elements, including infinite scrolling which enables users to freely scroll through different contents within a unique site without any interruption and instant notification which creates the irresistible tendency of checking the updates immediately all are installed to control user attention and enables them to spend more time at a particular website (Kaur & Kaur, 2022). These features use psychological principles, including variable incentives and FOMO, to boost addiction potential more beyond what has been seen with social media platforms and make it almost impossible for users to stop using these sites. Chong et al. (2020) affirmed that about half of the university students of Malaysia have symptoms of SMI. This promptly observable process is linked with a number of undesirable outcomes; thus, for instance, lack of sleep and increased stress rates. The use of social media for long periods and more extended periods helps at night affects the sleep which reduces rest. Consequently, such a lack of sleep leads to heightened anxiety and stress levels; it is a pavement to poor mental and general health. Social media addicted students are likely to have high level of anxiety because they feel compelled to portray a certain image or to constantly compare their lives to other's perfect-looking lives. This cycle of addiction, sleep disruption, anxiety creates a negative feedback loop that makes students have poor academic performance and poor mental health hence the need to find ways of dealing with Social media addiction among students.

Anxiety and Depression

One of the studies has identified that the use of technology and students' bullying resulted to anxiety and depression disorders. According to Lim

et al., (2020), about 30% of Malaysian students mentioned they had been cyberbullied, which is also observed to worsen the symptoms of anxiety and depression. The effects of cyber bullying are mostly severe to the students since handling bullying cases online is more severe compared to offline bullying because of its day and night constant harassment resulting to stress, feeling of helplessness and emotional problems which lead to mental health problems in the future (Marimuthu et al., 2023)

Apart from the negative consequences of cyberbullying, there is another problem, the 'fear of missing out' or FOMO is common among students and when added to feelings of cyberbullying increases the level of anxiety and depression. In a study by Kamaruddin et.al (2021) the phenomenon in question known as FOMO is fear of missing out and it manifests itself when a student, for instance when viewing other students' social media accounts, sees friends participating in social events, or other students excelling academically or athletically and the perceiving of the self as being unable to partake in these activities. Feelings of low self-worth and a skewed perception of one's value are likely consequences of this feeling of inferiority that hardwiring fosters due to social comparisons with carefully filtered feeds.

Also, research has shown that the high levels of highly edited and consequently positive content in the social media platforms is linked with increase in depressive symptoms. Ali et al. (2020) and Chong et al. (2021) have found that students who are using social media and exposed to the carefully selected images, lifestyles, and achievements daily get depressed. Such learners commonly experience a phenomenon of comparison with the easily achievable looks and experiences portrayed in the social media or by peers which gradually makes them alienate from real life and hence increases a level of dissatisfaction with actual reality. Such exposure to these images consistently makes women regard reality in an unhealthy way, contributing high risks of developing severe mental disorders in the long run.

Cyberbullying experiences, FOMO, as well as a long time spent on platforms filled with curated posts, give hope while evidence of social media use and negative student mental health outcomes. Solutions for this problem involve the need to conceptualize to counter cyber bullying, encourage

appropriate internet use and help students protect their minds from being affected by social networks.

Self-Estem and Social Comparison

Social comparison has been emerging more actively, especially among female students since they compare themselves with other people based on the information presented and filtered through social media platforms. This inclination for making social comparisons is triggered by the persistent availability of images and paradigms of lifestyle, beauty and success posted online, which often sets a perceived fixed notion of what makes a man successful, happy and appealing. As Ali et al. (2020) it is mentioned that female students are at higher risk of this experience since they end up assessing the self-worth based on the curated and post-produced life images online. As with any process of self-evaluation which on the surface seems quite innocent, negative impacts on both mental health as well as self-perception are highly likely.

Kamaruddin and Nor (2021) stated that such comparisons lead to lower self-esteem and increase body image issues among the female students. Ideally, youth comparing themselves to beauty standards promoted by influencers and media are kept dissatisfied with themselves and maintaining a distorted self-image. These may make a person develop a sense of ineptitude that might compel him or her to engage in unhealthy changes in perception such as extreme dieting, rigorous exercise or even body sculpting so as to fit the feel of the social media.

In the same vein, Zain et al. (2022) also pointed to other underlying psychological effects of social comparison, namely, the consumption of posts of those influencers who present their perfect and almost flawless lives. Fans of these celebrity idols tend to complain of feelings of low self-worth anytime their real life does not conform to the lives staged ahead of them online. Thus, such feelings cause a very low level of self-esteem because a student is aware that he or she is not living up to the advanced standard set by others. In addition, Zain et al. postulated that such social comparison is highly correlated with increased materialism among students; the subject students develop a materialistic orientation aiming at acquiring menacing material goods and status symbols in an endeavor to try and imitate the lifestyles depicted on social media. This

need to be like those influencers, often comes at the expense of the user, as many will start to shift their focus towards materialistic items, success, and achievements that are detrimental to the user's physical and mental health, as well as the way in which they perceive themselves.

Social Connectivity and Emotional Support

With the help of social media, students have leveraged their capacity to sustain relationships as well as get access to sources of support in the contemporary societies. Applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, etc., have become strategic utensils for students as they help them remain connected with friends, kin and other stakeholders including teachers even with the student physique separated. Tan et al. (2022) noted that the use of social media to develop restoring social relatedness is well articulated since students use the platforms to compensate for the contacts, they lack due to COVID-19 measures such as social distancing and lock-downs. To a large extent these platforms virtual became the main way of communication through which learners were able to share their experiences, offer support, as well as socialize as they would if they were physically present (Equatora & Chethiyar, 2023). The opportunities to use such applications as WhatsApp and Telegram have let students keep the connection with friends, be able to discuss crucial moments, share important information, which decreased feelings of loneliness at a time of social isolation.

Also, social media has also helped students to get some help and information regarding mental health (Qamar, Chethiyar, & Equatora, 2021). Mental health support groups that afford students online access, particularly the ones established on the social media site, Facebook, help students to seek support, listen to peers, and seek direction from those who too are grappling with similar issues. These on-line forums are really helpful in ordeals such as stress, anxiety and other aspects of mental health for providing support to the people which are within these forums. In a recent study by Rahman et al, (2023), the students revealed the access to emotional support where students could share feelings without prejudice, opportunities of learning how to cope with emotions, and resources on how to deal with his or her mental health. These characteristics also locate some entities and platforms as more convenient for students who

might not be ready or willing to go to ask an advisor or a counselor in person. Thus, Covid-19 has demonstrated how social media is a wonderful source of emotional support and can provide an array of information to students during critical periods.

Academic Collaboration and Resources

Increased has been the use of social media especially in the education sector since it has so many merits when it comes to the process of learning. The use of social media is highly recommended since many gains relates to student includes; Moreover, based on the work of Ismail and Hassan (2021), social media facilitates sharing of academic content, group project, and online learning resources that might improve the students' learning. Students are then able to connect with other students, teachers and professionals from other regions, thus widening their social learning networks and their views of several topics. Self-learning and planning: Social media websites like You tube, LinkedIn have shown enormous success in the development of skill & other career related plans. YouTube is a source of educational channels, lessons, tutorials and webinars offering students, lessons in the subject of their choice, as well the flexibility of studying at their own pace in addition to learning more than is taught in a classroom setting. LinkedIn on the other hand is a professional social tool in which student can form connections with employers, advertise their accomplishments and achieve objectives related to student career. According to Rahman et al. (2023), such platforms are relevant for students as they can offer them exposure to professional content, advises, and other resources in order to help students enhance certain skills and define further career prospects. This trend has not been restricted to some regions, but it is in conformity with global trends. According to Lim et al. (2020), students across the globe are adopting social media platforms in their learning processes, including in ways capturing curriculum content, social interaction and learning in social media communities. This continuation is due to the realization of the benefits of adopting social media in facilitating normal learning in academic learning environment. Consequently, social media is a necessity in the modern education systems since it provides lots of win-win opportunities for students 'academic and career advancement.

Advocacy and Mental Health Awareness

Since students can freely post their views, sentiments, and opinions on different social networks, it has been easier for students to advocate for awareness campaigns on mental health to be conducted with the penalties goal off overcoming the stigma encountered in this area of health (Muniandy et al., 2022). Through presentation of individuals' personal needs and problems, social media promotes formation of social acceptance and support. This openness is important to diminish the stigma around mental illnesses in society to motivate people to get the assistance they need. The Malaysian mental health campaign has enabled students to freely express or discuss their mental health within the society depriving the issues of the taboos that are associated with them. In such ways, students are not only made to give an account of their personal difficulties but also taught about good mental health practices; and they themselves are encouraged to be responsible for other students in the community (Ismail & Hassan, 2021).

Further on, social media websites are appropriate forums for community involvement and participation to support students for collective effort towards mental health issues. What is more, they relieve the student from loneliness and help them feel that there are others who want to hear about their experience (Chethiyar & Sukanderam, 2022). This feeling of togetherness could definitely change the people's attitudes towards mental health conversations because they won't be facing the problem alone. Like gatherings, online protests, forums, and basic demands for help also contribute to making demands for improved mental health services and policies in learning institutions louder. Social media also hence enables individual students as well as group formation that can cause change on the society on how mental health is perceived and handled (Qamar, Chethiyar, & Equatora, 2022).

Culture and Educational Contexts in Malaysia

Culture and education systems in the Malaysian context are the critical moderator that determine the impact of social media technology on university students. Notably, Malaysia has collectivist societal culture that puts much value on community and family and this results to the way students use social media platforms (Muniandy, et al., 2021). This collectivist orientation but creates

the ties that bind, as students maintain continuity with family friends, and other associates using social media, Zain et al., 2022). But as one can see, this emphasis on group identity as well as social unity will also include certain pressure towards conformity that results in social comparison behaviors which, in their turn, might affect students' psychological well-being. For instance, students are at risk of developing increases stress or anxiety arising from inadequacy in their online identities in comparison to the role models and friends' appearances (Hussain, Chethiyar, & Ibrahim, 2022).

In addition, the urban to rural differences in Malaysia play an important role in evaluating the impact of social media on the mental health of students. Urban students are more privileged to access fixed infrastructures such as internet, ICT devices and advanced units for social media hence use social media more frequently and diversely. But of course, it also socializes and makes urban students more comparative and vulnerable to copy pasted content often coming from different parts of the world that may lead to negative notions of self or mirage expectations leading to subsequent problems such as depression, anxiety, or inadequacy (Azhar et al., 2022). On the other hand, rural student, who cannot access internet and social networking sites as much as urban students, might encounter other forms of difficulties. Though such students may not be as susceptible to the demands of such global comparisons as others, lack of access to online resources can lead to their perceiving themselves as being left out of some broader social or learning groups or communities. This digital exclusion can also affect their chance to seek for mental health & peer support or other services, which can reduplicate the feeling of rejection may influence their mental health in a way which is not similar to that of their urban counterparts.

In this way, cultural and geographic aspects of Malaysia foreground the ways in which social media affects mental health of university students. The entire systematic influence of social media is not homogeneous but depends on the cultural characteristics of students, their geographical location, and access to resources to develop appropriate programmatic and interventionistic measures.

Mediating Factors

Gender Differences According to the survey, more female students perceive themselves to be more vulnerable to the adverse mental health impacts of social media within a comparison and cyberbullying domain (Ali et al., 2020). **Personality Traits:** Psychologically appealing students are prone to addiction than IPA students, while extroverted students use social media to support face-to-face communication (Chong et al., 2021). **Self-Regulation Skills:** The outcomes reveal that students with good temperamental control, in particular time management capabilities, are more prepared to deal with technological interference, which includes social networks (Abdul et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dual Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

The data generated under the literature presents a two-part perception of social media with regard to mental health. On the plus side it enables connectivity and collaborations in academic sessions but at the same time fuels addiction, anxiety and depression. Such ramifications conform with global results that consider social media to play multiple parts in developing mental wellness consequences (Kaur & Kaur, 2022). In this regard, Malaysian university students, in particular, endure heightened pressure because of culture power and expectation (Ali et al., 2020).

Negative Effect and Cultural Context

The role of filtered content, Fear of Missing Out, and cyberbullying is ubiquitous, so it takes a toll on some students. In the Malaysian context where collectivism values, social relations, and family orientation are highly frequent, such types of tendencies as social comparison and validation seeking may be especially intensified (Zain et al., 2022). Furthermore, the weak Prepare and Implementation of digital literacy in Malaysia worsens these challenges about social media to the student where they end becoming a victim of the negative impacts reported by Rahman, et al., 2023.

Positive Contributions of Social Media

Potential advantages also include the following, namely social media is good for community and advocacy. Social media like the Twitter and Instagram have helped Malaysian

students to educate people on mental health increasing the support from Malaysian students (Tan et al., 2022). Accessibility to educational contents through various social media platforms, intention, and purposes of using social media in other projects in learning institutions underlines personal and organizational development among students (Rahman et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

Digital Literacy Programs: Universities should implement workshops on managing screen time and identifying harmful online behaviors. **Enhanced Counseling Services:** Institutions must ensure that counseling services are accessible and equipped to address social media-related mental health issues (Lim et al., 2020). **Policy Interventions:** Government policies should focus on mitigating cyberbullying and promoting safe online spaces. Educational campaigns can encourage responsible social media use (Ismail & Hassan, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Subsequent research about the association between social media usage and mental health of university students in Malaysia should concentrate on identifying the longitudinal outcome of social media usage. Although a plethora of current studies describes short-term impacts and their understanding of anxieties, dejections, and self-images, further long-term research is necessary to assess the function of persistent social-networking-site engagement on self-esteem. As longitudinal studies, these designs could give a much clearer picture of how negative and destructive uses of social media in early years can result in poor mental health, in patient number or organizations, or indeed, how positive, supportive uses of social media could help to build and sustain good mental health in the longer term.

However, future research should try to analyze the impact of different social media platforms because such platforms may have diverse impact on the subjects' mental health. For example, applications like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide completely different visual interface, content types, presence, and psychological effects. More detailed, researchers should investigate platform specific aspects: how passive browsing as opposed to active and active participation, what

kind of content students are exposed to (selected post opposed to a simple search of relevant hashtag), or how platform's structures helps or hampers students to develop or exacerbate mental health conditions.

One direction for the future research will be to focus on studying the effects of the digital divide and rural-urban differences on the use of social networks and mental well-being in Malaysia. Internet facilities, social networks, and engaging in internet activities remain unproportional, and students in rural regions have limited networks, less access to technologies, and fewer chances of participating in programs to make them literate. These disparities could result in varied mental health status, for instance; exclusion, loneliness or being socially unsupported for rural students. Analyzing how these inequalities impact on the usage of social media and the consequences for mental health, researchers can shed light on the issues of implementing efforts of reducing the digital gap and providing equal assistance in learning for students of all color.

Also, the impact of the new media technologies like AI for social media behavior ought to be brought into further discussion. Machine learning is becoming more and more the norm for content curation, guiding user interactions by suggesting items to view based on patterns detected in user engaging and content consumption. There is greater exposure to the formation of echo chambers, which combined with anxiety and depression present a more significant threat than the old media. Such questions as how these technologies shape students' interactions with social media and how these algorithms can either worsen or improve mental health conditions, should be explored in the future research (Azhar et al., 2022). Filling these gaps, future research will enable the understanding of the continuous dynamic between SMD, technology, and mental well-being.

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