

Social Media Use among University Students in Malaysia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Social media tools for communication, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, have become important with the development of information and communication technology. In the field of higher education, university students are increasingly using social media to study and live. Consequently, university students and social media use have become a research topic of practical significance. Scholars in Malaysia have investigated this issue, and the results abound. However, few scholars have reviewed the research results of social media use among university students in Malaysia. By using the literature research method, this study reviews the latest research findings on social media use among students, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. This study summarizes the collected literature into three themes: first, the relationship between social media use and academic performance of university students; second, the social media addiction of university students; and third, the relationship between social media use and mental health of university students. Simultaneously, this study presents the ways of thinking and contributions of scholars to address the aforementioned issues. Finally, this study critically examines the research limitations and blind spots, as they need further exploration by scholars and can serve as innovative points of this topic.

Keywords: social media use; university students; Malaysia; academic performance; social media addiction; mental health

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has led to the global popularization of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and other social networking services) as tools for communication. Researchers found that social media has a progressive role in people's daily lives, as social media platforms can be utilized by users for content search, creation, sharing, collaboration, and organization, and they simultaneously provide virtual platforms for individual self-disclosure and self-presentation (Abdul Hamid, Ishak, Ismail, & Mohamad Yazam, 2013).

In the field of higher education, social media has revolutionized the ways of teaching and learning. Social media-based content has been increasingly employed and utilized by learning institutions, especially for technology-based bidirectional communication. Social media use among students from higher education institutions, especially universities, helps them to improve their learning via collaborative activities in virtual learning environments. Social media for educational use seems to have converted the traditional ways of teaching and learning. The underlying new paradigm is that only learning institutions have the privilege to deliver knowledge to students. However, knowledge from a myriad of sources is increasingly available with the emergence of social media. Nowadays, more individuals are offering

knowledge-based content for free or per payment, which is evident on various social media platforms (Mahir, Faridah, & Norzita, 2021).

The coronavirus disease of 2019, also called COVID-19, is extremely contagious and infectious, and it has deeply affected the people and their culture worldwide. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic with major health hazards. WHO proposed drastic measures to help manage the spread of the diseases, with physical distancing as one of the most commonly suggested and adopted strategies to contain the spread. Amid the worsening impact of COVID-19, since early March 2020, Malaysia has imposed restrictions through the nationwide “movement control order,” and it has taken effect from March to June 2020. Public gatherings of all forms, namely, for sporting and social, cultural, or religious reasons, were banned. Furthermore, all business premises and worship places, with the exemption of shops offering essential services, were closed (Leong, Murad, Teoh, & Mohamad, 2020).

Problems exist, and people face them in different phases of their lives. These include social, psychological, physiological, educational, and financial aspects. The COVID-19 pandemic has both explicit and implicit effects on the mental health of the people in a magnitude of ways. Living under quarantine, social distancing, retrenchment or work stoppage, the shutting down of educational institutions, and the general lockdown of cities have intensified the frustration of residents (Khodabakhsh, Ramasamy, Tan, & Chan, 2021). Amid physical distancing and isolation during the pandemic, the rise in social media has become evident; physical and social interactions have been greatly reduced, and the movement was towards the use of digital social media platforms (Dan, 2021). During the pandemic, online classes are being arranged to keep the educational activities going. However, the drastic change has significantly impacted the quality of interaction between students and tutors; it has also affected the teaching methodologies for students and their learning abilities (Bo, 2021).

By utilizing the literature research method, the current research will collect and review pertinent findings related to the aforementioned issues and classify them into three themes. The first theme discusses the use of social media and the academic performance of university students and the relationship of these variables. The second theme is about the social media addiction of university students. The third theme pertains to the observable relationship between the use of social media and the mental health of university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Academic performance is defined as an achievement of specific academic targets under the educational setting of students in a certain learning institution (Mahir, Faridah, & Norzita, 2021). Academic performance is also described as an achieved learning outcome, assessment rating, test scoring, and the GPA, which are the indicators used to measure the academic performance of a student. Academic performance may comprise the students’ development in terms of self-adequacy, reasoning skills, subject improvement, and non-psychological progression. Among university students, the use of social media is positively related to self-learning. This scheme can help to improve the students’ self-assessment and their motivation when it comes to learning and academic performance. Mahir et al. (2021) have reported that the use of social media among students negatively influences their academic performance. On the one hand, according to evidence from the literature, the unnecessary heavy use of social media, especially when unmonitored, ultimately distracts students because they tend to deviate from participating in educational activities and divert their attention to non-academic activities.

These counterproductive uses of social media can lower the students' academic potential and success. Students who waste more time on social media will likely have a lower GPA than those who spend less or no time on virtual platforms. On the other hand, social media use by students for academic purposes can positively affect the academic performance of students (Mahir, Faridah, & Norzita, 2021).

A study specifically designed to investigate the effect of multitasking and academic performance among a sizable sample of higher education students has determined that students tended to send text messages and use Facebook while doing their homework or studying. Additionally, this behaviour impeded schoolwork and eventually negatively affected the overall achieved GPA. Another study observed the impact of multitasking with various media technologies on real-time learning. Results showed that multitasking with such technologies inadvertently had a negative impact on learning. The latest study about students of higher learning institutions revealed that participants were preoccupied by media, such as Facebook, and they would send texts in a fraction of minutes after a studying session had commenced (Al-Menayes, 2014).

Another study has suggested that the time spent for social media use is a strong negative predictor of GPA. This observation can be translated into the time spent on social media use having a negative effect on the academic enhancement activities for students, further suggesting that the use of social media compellingly inhibits academic performance. This strong linear relationship implies that the longer a student uses a mobile social media, the lower his or her GPA. This situation can take shape in multiple ways. For instance, as social media are mobile, these virtual platforms are accessible 24-7 worldwide—and this includes the classroom. Numerous studies have reported that the occurrence of classroom use on social media has become more frequent than expected. An impeded academic performance is no surprise because students are not attentive to the class's learning tasks. Students who tend to blame the use of social media for their academic failure are more prone to have a relatively low GPA. This tendency also means that students are aware and observant of the academic consequences of spending much longer time on social media, as reflected by their poor self-reported GPA. In essence, students are not only wasting an excessive amount of time by using social media, but they also blame social media for their underachievement in the academic area (Al-Menayes, 2014).

Talaue et al. (2018) have implied that the use of social media can range from assignment discussion, group discussion and improved interaction amongst lecturers and classmates. Another study indicated that the lack of focus of university students is the negative factor behind the failing academic grades, and the situation is not related to social media (Talaue, AlSaad, AlRushaidan, AlHugail, & AlFahhad, 2018).

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

The definition of social media addiction is drawn from the definition of Internet addiction; partly modified, it can be defined as the excessive overuse of social media that disrupts an individual's sleep pattern, daily routines, work productivity, and social life. This kind of addiction is categorized under a type of Internet addiction that is known as cyber-relationship addiction or "SNS addiction disorder." It consists of a similar set of criteria of Internet addiction, such as personal life negligence, escapism, mental and mind preoccupation, tolerance, mood-modifying experiences, and concealment of addictive behaviour (Jamaluddin, Jeyakumar, & Lee, 2012).

Social media interaction reportedly has a negative effect on the wellbeing of individuals. Different studies have reported the negative impact of heavy use of social media and anxiety, addiction, depression, histrionic personality, and dependency. Focusing on this aspect, the

pervasive use of social media among the youth, especially among university students, should raise crucial attention. In recent years, the impact of social media addiction has become progressively significant. Quite a number of studies have been conducted on this issue because it is a global concern and a health issue. For example, Internet addiction, with social media addiction as its subset, has been recommended as a cause of mental disorder, and this term has even been included in the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder” (Jafarkarimi, Tze, Saadatdoost, & Jee, 2016).

The recent study provides invaluable information about the relationship between social media addiction and the development of health anxiety among young adults. The selected research period is during the COVID-19 pandemic when numerous individuals worldwide have been concerned with health issues. The situation about the national and global pandemic and related information have been disclosed and disseminated to all population groups, and youths are safely assumed to be among those with the highest potential of having excessive and easy Internet exposure. The combined conditions may lead to the hazardous and irresponsible use of social media when obtaining health-related information. The Internet as a medium is undeniably attractive by nature. Furthermore, health-related information may be attained via social media. Unknowingly, social media platforms have become integral in people’s lives. As knowledge is enhanced, individuals feel reassured about their health. However, this scenario can also depict the adverse impacts on emotional wellness, social health, and psychosomatic wellbeing, as social media users have become overly dependent on health-related information that are available online. This study has implications for people and professionals who create and contribute to the awareness of the negative aspects of heavy and excessive use of the Internet, which may be correlated with health anxiety. Without such introduction, the current situation may lead to an increase in the youth’s general anxiety during the pandemic. Counsellors and health care providers are urged to design unique and beneficial intervention programs aimed at, on the one hand, educating this generation affected by potentially high Internet use and, on the other hand, reducing the probability of health anxiety and other psychosomatic problems that may develop in the time of adversity (Rosuzeita, Nor Izzaidah, Nur Shahira, & Siti Solehah, 2021)

The users of mobile social media in this study, particularly the students, are aware of the adverse effect of prolonged use and misuse of social media on their academic performance, especially when virtual platforms are used during lessons or devoted study time. Incidentally, the students continue to heavily use the tool despite the negative effects. This pattern shows that social media may have addictive attributes that are similar to the ones found in other addictions, such as controlled substances use and smoking. A known nature of technology is that it causes an addict-like behaviour. First, social media is available 24-7, anytime and anywhere. Second, the discreet use of this technology aids users to access social media at unsuitable times, such as during class lessons, without being apprehended (Rosuzeita et al., 2021).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND MENTAL HEALTH OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Social media are obviously one of the available online services for individuals seeking to interact via several various verbal and non-verbal services and applications, and it is a novel concept that is steadily becoming popular. The owned social media form may offer its users important functions that range from communication, building new rapport and relationships, and presenting preservation. Furthermore, social media are platforms for sharing knowledge and information among users. The social media penetration in Malaysia is currently at 53%, which is the sixth highest in the Asia Pacific region. These findings suggest that social media

exposure can eventually lead to depression, a subset of mental illness (Nuramanina, Lukman, Azlini, Normal, & Kamal, 2018).

Mental illness is a major cause of global disability. Approximately 300 million individuals are likely to be impaired from depression. Additionally, the rates of social media use and the rates of depression have risen. Thus, many scholars have attempted to study the corresponding relational effects and the various unpredictable variables. Rajesh and Priya (2020) have listed the adverse mental health situations among university students that are attributable to excessive social media use at which their psychological and physiological wellness are impacted and their emotional wellbeing is harmed.

The use of social media can negatively affect the psychological health of individuals. A study showed that social media tools can exacerbate the problems of mental health (Karim, Oyewande, Abdalla, Ehsanullah, & Khan, 2020). The research subjects in the work of Karim et al. (2020) included members of the public instead of university students in Malaysia; thus, the impact of social media use on students has yet to be determined (Nuramanina, Lukman, Azlini, Normal, & Kamal, 2018).

In an era when pandemic and quarantine exist, the use of social media may escalate to many people, especially the youth, because of the widespread Internet connection. Consequently, Internet overuse and its adverse effects are becoming more of an area of concern among scholars and researchers. Internet accessibility has rapidly accelerated information communication, creating a dependency of people on online sources to acquire information, including the latest multifaceted aspects of their life. Health is an important aspect among them, and they rely excessively on the Internet to evaluate and determine their current health conditions. Furthermore, Internet access is undoubtedly easily available in most countries worldwide. Most young adults view the Internet as an essential learning, work, and social connection tool, to name a few. The Internet, when coupled with social media, has various benefits that range widely from online education, speedy communication, and online shopping, to accessing online information and professionals in the field of health and medical care (Khodabakhsh, Ramasamy, Tan, & Chan, 2021).

Health anxiety is a multidimensional concept covering mild forms to health-related fear, which is clinically significant and blended with disease convection. This disorder can be gauged on a quantitative scale ranging from temporary and mild to chronic and serious diagnosis, and it is never qualitative. The main risk factors of the development and maintenance of health anxiety are latent dysfunctional health-related beliefs, which are derived from prior illness and medical factors. A precipitating critical incident can serve as a trigger point; it can be in the form of bodily and physical change or dysfunctional/maladaptive assumptions or beliefs about health that are internally or externally activated or stimulated, leading to the individual's misinterpreted health-related beliefs. These beliefs are further supported by cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and affective factors that are considered to be the major maintaining factors of health anxiety. These factors are believed to be the main reason for the constant anxiety, concern, and worry of an individual, whether he or she has or can develop a critical illness or a health-related issue. Simply put, debilitating beliefs increase the risk of an individual to develop disastrous awareness when he or she is exposed and his or her attention is focused on health concerns or situations. The use of the Internet has been more emphasized during COVID-19 because people rely on the Internet to search and attain information about the pandemic. Young people are attracted to online health resources because of the obvious benefits of using the Internet. Nevertheless, researchers and scholars predict the Internet's hazardous impacts on young adults as one that can provoke anxiety due to the online health-related content and information. They have implied that health-anxious individuals are highly gravitated towards excessive and heavy use of the Internet, which augments the possibility of excessive visitation to doctors and anguish, as evidenced by the common responses regarding

the effect of the Internet's excessive use among people with health anxiety. Similarly, the affected individuals were prone to justifying the factors that would suggest possible obsession to the use of the Internet for healthcare-related issues, confirming the assumption that the excessive and heavy use of the Internet can pose a challenge in their daily lives. Individuals with health concerns usually proceed by seeking information that may provide a sense of security against health-related threats and reassurance to satisfy their health-related uncertainties and anxiety. These behavioural strategies may reduce the anxiety for a minimal period as a sustaining health anxiety factor. However, exacerbated feedback may arise, in which the return of health anxiety and the perceived reassurance will eventually worsen the initial anxiety, causing a negative cognition should bodily sensations recur or if uncertainties surface with respect to medical test results. This postulate claims that even people with moderate anxiety have the tendency to more frequently seek health-related information online than those without anxiety, but the information deficit may cause health-related worries, and seeking information may also exaggerate the anxious feelings, especially among individuals with cognitive distortion (Khodabakhsh, Ramasamy, Tan, & Chan, 2021).

Although the number of research in Malaysia regarding the aforementioned topics is scarce, numerous studies on social media use involving university students and their mental health have been conducted worldwide (Nuramanina, Lukman, Azlini, Normal, & Kamal, 2018). The studies from abroad have discovered the adverse relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms. The work of scholars based in the United States has shown that individuals who had spent more time on social media within 24 hours and those who visited social media sites at higher frequencies for a week (seven days straight) had significantly more depressive symptoms compared with those who spent much lesser time on social media. Additional variables, such as self-esteem, anxiety, and sleep quality, were considered, and multiple social media platforms were investigated. Their study results were similar to the general social media usage studies in which the higher use of social media was significantly associated with higher depressive symptoms (Nuramanina, Lukman, Azlini, Normal, & Kamal, 2018).

By contrast, no significant relationship was found between social media use and depressive symptoms in the other studies. Independent studies about Facebook usage and Instagram usage and their respective relationship with depressive symptoms have been separately conducted, but no significant relationship was found (Nurul, 2019).

LIMITATION AND SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION

The literature review conducted in this study has been limited to tertiary education students. Academic performance, addiction to social media, and mental health among Malaysian university students are the main concerns highlighted in this review because this situation does not only occur in Malaysia but also happens around the world. Therefore, the findings from other countries are considered for better understanding. Nevertheless, this study is more focused on the issue among Malaysian university students only because this problem is becoming more critical and needs to be given greater awareness among the academics and the public. This problem not only occurs among students but also in all groups, such as children and the elderly. Moreover, focusing on social media as opposed to the other media types seems more beneficial because it is a mechanism that can easily influence users and negatively affect the users when misused. The social media platforms that have been selected in the current work have also been restricted to the latest social media platforms or tools commonly utilized by individuals. A gap clearly exists, and addressing this limitation is a pivotal point for innovation and further exploration by scholars with similar pursuits. Researchers and scholars can benefit more academically from developing tools that can be used to capture the social media

complexity and user patterns. Simultaneously, the context of social media use should be considered when the effect on academic performance is examined. Thus, future studies must account for the context of social media use, not only on the amount of time spent using the social media. Hence, the consequence of social media use on the other possible and plausible factors, which may include the goal of students, the fulfilment of university regulations, and the behaviour and attitude of students, must be examined and explored.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social media are becoming more popular and gaining widespread attention, especially among university students; they have become an integral part of people's lives as a novel means to spend free time and, separately, as an information channel for educational and entertainment purposes, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, the effects of social media on their users, particularly the way they can cause addiction, and their impact on the academic success and mental health of students should be urgently examined. Students may utilize social media for numerous reasons, including interest sharing, relationship engagement with friends and families, and as a stress outlet. However, this unguarded utilization may become an addiction—one that only a few individuals manage to escape. Utilizing social networks constructively will allow students and the youth to benefit from information development, which can be utilized towards improving their academic success. Moreover, other correlated variables may influence the tangible link between social media and academic achievement. Therefore, further research is vital to firmly expose the basic framework between the two factors (Rosuzeita, Nor Izzaidah, Nur Shahira, & Siti Solehah, 2021)

The dual impact of social media is evidenced by student achievement, and scholars should be responsible when approaching the subject of social media use among university students. The downside of excessive social addiction should not be ignored. The reviewed literature offers particular recommendations. For instance, higher learning institutions, especially universities, should pay more attention to augmenting the beneficial and meaningful aspects, and one of the methods is to promote social media as a communication, entertainment, and learning tool. Voluntary attendance restriction on social media should also be encouraged, with users going online on selected days; among students, it should be restricted per session. Most importantly, self-realization must be encouraged among students. Given the potential harm caused by the excessive use of social media, students should act responsibly during the learning process in view of achieving their desired academic results (Talaue, AlSaad, AlRushaidan, AlHugail, & AlFahhad, 2018).

In conclusion, this review has been conducted to discover the latest research findings on social media use among Malaysia university students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the review, the relationship between social media use and academic performance of university students in Malaysia, the occurrence or tendency of social media addiction among them, and the concerns regarding the Malaysian students' mental health can be identified, discussed, and analysed in a scholarly manner. Educated as they may be, university students are urged to use the best of social media facilities to ensure a virtual environment that is free of negative elements, especially while they are in isolation due to the pandemic. On the one hand, social media can bring numerous benefits, such as allowing people to share knowledge with the public. On the other hand, the adverse effect of social media should be seriously scrutinized by authorities, namely, the Royal Malaysian Police, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, the Companies Commission of Malaysia, the Securities Commission, Bank Negara Malaysia, and the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs. These authorities have the power to act against irresponsible social media users. Continuous good cooperation should be ensured to address the aforementioned issues,

especially to avoid being affected by a virus that can harm individuals, communities, and countries (Faridah, Norliza, Muhamad Afzamiman, & Mohd Hizwan, 2020). In addition, educational providers and parents should encourage the perception of lowering the social media use among Malaysian university students with respect to what they usually expect. Education providers and parents may also introduce barriers, such as penalties of use and time-limited access, to the students.

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