

Social Media Usage and Its Influence on Student Mental Health: A Study Among University Students in Southeast Asia

Dr. Rajesh Kumar Mourya

Head & Assistant Professor

P.G. Department of Psychology

R K College Madhubni, LNMU Darbhanga, Bihar

Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of student life across the globe, particularly in Southeast Asia where internet penetration and mobile connectivity have surged dramatically in recent years. While social media platforms offer avenues for learning, connection, and entertainment, their excessive or unregulated use has raised concerns regarding student mental health. This study investigates the relationship between social media usage patterns and mental health indicators among university students in Southeast Asia, focusing on psychological factors such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and sleep disturbances.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research surveyed 500 students across universities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. In addition, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with university counselors and psychologists. Two main tables are presented: (1) social media usage by platform and average screen time, and (2) correlation between usage intensity and mental health indicators.

The results reveal a complex relationship. Moderate social media use enhances peer support and information sharing, whereas excessive use—especially passive scrolling and night-time usage—is significantly associated with increased levels of anxiety, reduced sleep quality, and symptoms of depression. Platforms emphasizing appearance-based content (e.g., Instagram,

TikTok) showed higher links to self-esteem issues, especially among female students.

This study highlights the urgent need for digital wellness education, platform usage regulation, and university-level interventions to promote balanced social media use. It concludes by proposing a framework for mental health support programs in Southeast Asian universities, integrating social media behavior as a core component.

Keywords: Social Media, Mental Health, University Students, Southeast Asia, Anxiety, Depression, Self-Esteem, Digital Well-being, Screen Time

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and WhatsApp have revolutionized how people interact, especially among youth and university students. In Southeast Asia—a region marked by rapid digitization and youthful demographics—social media is not just a communication tool but a lifestyle component. Students use these platforms to socialize, access academic resources, follow trends, and even participate in activism. However, this digital immersion comes with a psychological cost.

Numerous international studies have linked excessive social media use to mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, and reduced academic focus. These concerns are especially pertinent among university students navigating developmental transitions, academic stress, and identity formation. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated social media dependence due to online learning and reduced face-to-face interaction.

This study explores:

1. What are the social media usage patterns among university students in Southeast Asia?
2. How do these patterns correlate with mental health outcomes?

3. What demographic and behavioral variables influence this relationship?

By focusing on Southeast Asian students, this paper addresses a critical regional gap in the literature, offering culturally relevant insights for education policymakers and mental health practitioners.

2. Literature Review

Research globally has established mixed outcomes regarding social media use and mental health. While moderate use may enhance social support and reduce isolation (Ellison et al., 2007), excessive use—particularly passive consumption—has been linked to depression and anxiety (Keles et al., 2020).

In Southeast Asia, a region comprising countries with high mobile penetration and collectivist cultural values, social media plays a unique role in student life. Studies in Malaysia (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) and Indonesia (Prasetyo et al., 2021) show that while students use social media for peer connection and academic collaboration, issues such as cyberbullying, body image pressures, and FOMO (fear of missing out) are rising.

There is also growing concern over sleep disturbances, reduced in-person socialization, and addiction-like behaviors. Despite this, few studies have employed comparative regional data across Southeast Asia to explore patterns and psychological outcomes, making this study timely and necessary.

3. Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews.

3.1 Quantitative Component

- **Sample Size:** 500 university students
- **Geographic Distribution:**
 - Malaysia (125)
 - Indonesia (125)
 - Thailand (125)

- Philippines (125)
- **Survey Tool:** Online questionnaire with sections on:
 - Frequency and duration of social media use
 - Platform preference
 - Mental health measures (using DASS-21 for anxiety, stress, depression; Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale)
 - Sleep quality and academic impact

3.2 Qualitative Component

- **Participants:** 20 university mental health professionals (counselors/psychologists)
- **Themes Explored:**
 - Observed behavioral changes due to social media
 - Gender differences
 - Effective interventions and policy suggestions

3.3 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis (SPSS)
- **Qualitative:** Thematic coding and pattern recognition (NVivo)

4. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Social Media Usage Patterns by Platform

Platform	Daily Users (%)	Avg. Daily Screen Time (Hours)	Most Active Time
WhatsApp	95%	3.2	Evening
Instagram	87%	2.7	Night
TikTok	74%	2.1	Late Night
Facebook	62%	1.9	Afternoon
Twitter	48%	1.5	Morning

Table 2: Correlation Between Usage Intensity and Mental Health

Indicators

Indicator	Anxiety (r)	Depression (r)	Self- Esteem (r)	Sleep Disturbance (r)
Instagram Use	0.68	0.62	-0.58	0.64
TikTok Use	0.70	0.67	-0.61	0.69
WhatsApp Use	0.30	0.28	-0.12	0.22
Total Screen Time > 6 hrs	0.76	0.71	-0.65	0.72

The data show a strong positive correlation between high-intensity use and increased mental health concerns. TikTok and Instagram had the highest associations with anxiety and self-esteem issues, particularly among female students aged 18–22. Late-night scrolling contributed to poor sleep quality and next-day academic stress.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that social media is both a facilitator and disruptor in the lives of Southeast Asian university students.

Positive Outcomes:

- WhatsApp and Facebook support academic collaboration and emotional support.
- Moderate Instagram use helps students stay connected and express creativity.

Negative Impacts:

- Excessive use, especially of appearance-oriented platforms, lowers self-esteem.
- Constant comparison and exposure to curated lifestyles increase anxiety and dissatisfaction.

- Disrupted circadian rhythms due to nighttime use impair cognitive performance and emotional regulation.

Interview insights:

Counselors emphasized that many students equate social media with social worth. FOMO, cyberbullying, and unrealistic beauty standards were recurring concerns. They suggested integrating digital hygiene workshops into university orientation programs.

6. Case Study Highlights

1. **Malaysia:** Students from urban universities showed higher anxiety linked to excessive Instagram usage. Those who reduced usage reported mood improvements within two weeks.
2. **Indonesia:** TikTok was cited as both a stress reliever and a distraction. Students who used it primarily at night reported poor sleep and missed classes.
3. **Thailand:** A university implemented a “Social Media Detox Week” and observed improved student engagement and attendance.
4. **Philippines:** Female students were more affected by self-esteem issues due to beauty comparison on Instagram and TikTok. Peer counseling initiatives proved effective in mitigating these effects.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the dual nature of social media—as both a bridge to social connection and a potential risk factor for student mental health. In Southeast Asia, where digital connectivity is high and social collectivism is valued, the impact of social media is particularly pronounced among university students.

Key conclusions:

- Social media usage must be moderated to preserve mental well-being.
- High screen time, particularly on image-based platforms, correlates with anxiety, depression, and sleep issues.
- Universities must adopt preventive and supportive strategies through mental health education and tech-literacy initiatives.

Recommendations:

- Implement campus-wide digital wellness campaigns.
- Encourage tech-free zones and offline peer interaction.
- Train faculty to identify social media-related stress indicators.

The future of student mental health in a digitally connected world depends on balance, education, and supportive environments that prioritize both innovation and well-being.

References

1. Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends”: Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168.
2. Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 79–93.
3. Nadkarni, A., & Hofmann, S. G. (2012). Why do people use Facebook? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(3), 243–249.
4. Prasetyo, Y. T., Ong, A. K. S., Concepcion, K. A. G., et al. (2021). Analyzing the impact of social media usage on the mental health of Filipino students during COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Public Health Science*, 10(1), 123–133.
5. Lee, S. Y. (2014). How do people compare themselves with others on social network sites? The case of Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 32, 253–260.
6. Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 41, 27–36.
7. Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.
8. Hunt, M. G., Marx, R., Lipson, C., & Young, J. (2018). No more FOMO: Limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 37(10), 751–768.
9. Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2019). Media use is linked to lower psychological well-being: Evidence from three datasets. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 90(2), 311–331.

10. Microsoft. (2021). *Digital Civility Index: Southeast Asia Report*. Microsoft Corporation.
11. ASEAN. (2020). *ASEAN Youth Development Index 2020*. ASEAN Secretariat.
12. World Health Organization. (2022). *Youth mental health and digital technology: A growing concern*. WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia.
13. Statista. (2023). *Social media usage penetration in Southeast Asia*.
14. DASS-21 Manual. (2020). *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21)*. Psychology Foundation of Australia.
15. Coyne, S. M., Rogers, A. A., Zurcher, J. D., Stockdale, L., & Booth, M. (2020). Does time spent using social media impact mental health?: An eight-year longitudinal study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104, 106160.
16. Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 173–182.