

The Factors of Social Media Usage and Mental Health: A Study on Malaysian Adolescents

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Abstract: *Social media is a constantly growing part of adolescents' lives and is becoming more widely used as technological advancement has grown over the years. It has been shown to be driven by positive and negative gratifying experiences. However, a clear understanding regarding the effects social media has on adolescents' mental health, as well as the reasons social media is so widely used is still uncertain. This study explored the social media usage amongst Malaysian adolescents in terms of the factors affecting social media usage and the effects it has on their mental health. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to gather data, by interviewing 10 Malaysian adolescents from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Data analysis was conducted by analysing common themes and coding the data accordingly. The results showed that Malaysian adolescents use social media for both positive and negative purposes. Positive purposes included to seek information, to communicate with others, as well as decrease negative mood and boredom. Negative purposes included to seek online validation, due to the fear of missing out, addiction, and the anticipation of positive effects in the future. This is of concern as these purposes caused some to experience more negative than positive effects on their mental health, such as an increase in negative mood and a decrease in self-esteem.*

Keywords: social media, mental health, social media effects, positive factors, negative factors

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, social media usage has increased tremendously especially amongst individuals of young ages (Dutta et al., 2011, as cited in Isa et al., 2016). Due to this increase in usage, the impact it has on their mental health remains undetermined as to whether its effects lean more towards the beneficial or detrimental side. To illustrate, statistics show that, 88.7% of Malaysian citizens were Internet users as of the year 2020, with a majority of them using it for as long as 5 to 8 hours a day (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, MCMC, 2020). A total of 47 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 17 use the Internet, with the majority of them being adolescents. This represents an increase of nearly 20 percent since the year 2018. (MCMC, 2020). Those who frequently use social media have a higher likelihood of their mental health being influenced by it. This is because individuals' mental health are highly affected by the environments they are often in (Leighton & Dogra, 2009). As adolescence is a vulnerable time that involves many psychological and mental changes, it is important to carefully understand the factors that may affect their mental health (Kircaburun, 2016).

Understanding social media usage amongst Malaysian adolescents is also necessary to study due to the factors that influence their SNS usage which consist of positive purposes, and also less positive purposes. Malaysian youth have been found to use the Internet for entertainment and information purposes, as well as for self-expression, while others use it simply because it is a popular trend or to avoid physical social interaction with their peers (Kapahi et al., 2013). Furthermore, the high rate of Internet use among Malaysian youth resulted in them experiencing unfavourable consequences. This shows that Malaysian youth may use social media for a good purpose initially but end up experiencing adverse effects.

The positive and negative factors cause both positive and negative on their mental health. For example, a positive effect would be that human beings require social interaction in order to thrive, thus social media allows people all over the world to communicate and meet this requirement (Karim et al., 2020). Evidence also suggests that social media can actually help some grow in their self-esteem because it allows them to create an ideal version of themselves to present to others (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). The effects of social media also have an impact on the mental health of individuals with mental illnesses as social media encourages these individuals' ability to socialize and make friends (Indian & Grieve, 2014). However, in terms of the negative effects, Karim et al. (2020) state that individuals who use social media experienced higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms due to the fact that humans are not designed to live off intangible social relationships (Kircaburun, 2016). Another reason is that social media may be used to compare between themselves and their peers, which then leads to low self-esteem or feelings of envy (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Naslund et al., 2020). Moslehpour and Batjargal (2013) also found a positive correlation was found between levels of stress and Internet addiction, as well as feelings of loneliness and Internet addiction amongst Malaysians. Thus, although social media allows many to depict their ideal selves and lives, being constantly exposed to this one-sided façade may cause individuals to feel “less than” due to feelings of envy. These findings show that there are many mixed conclusions, hence there is still a lack of certainty when it comes to the possible detrimental effects social media may inflict onto users' mental health. With that being said, it is important to gain this understanding in order to recognize whether or not social media has damaging effects that society is not well aware about.

This is posed to be a problem as the frequency of usage of social media is still high despite negative effects, implying the need to dig deeper into the more significant motivations for it. For instance, Karim et al. (2020) argue that adolescents use social media due to the fear of missing out. However, Fox and Moreland (2015) state that more time spent on social media may in fact cause individuals to feel more fear and anxiety because individuals are exposed to the experiences their friends are having without them. This statement explains that there is a cycle where individuals use social media with the purpose of feeling positive outcomes but end up feeling negative ones instead. Thus, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding whether these factors actually relieve adolescents' mental health as initially thought, or whether they worsen it instead (Franchina et al., 2018). Furthermore, the methodological gap in current literature surrounding this topic, especially in Malaysia highlights the importance of studying this topic. Most studies conducted are quantitative, making it challenging for researchers to thoroughly understand the participants' point of view (Rahman, 2017).

The objectives of this study was to explore the main factors affecting the frequency of social media usage amongst adolescents. It also aimed to identify the positive and negative effects of social media towards Malaysian adolescents' mental health. The significance of this study will be beneficial towards individuals who use social media, especially adolescents. By

understanding the relevant information, users will be able to understand the significance social media holds in their lives, be it positive or negative. It will also help them understand the accurate motives behind their behaviours, which guides them to identify healthy ways to consume social media to protect their mental health. It will also be useful for the support system of adolescents or users who frequently consume social media in general, such as families and friends. Through gaining knowledge of the influence of social media, individuals and their support system can recognize ways to enhance positive well-being when it comes to social media usage. They will then be able to help strengthen or provide the necessary support that individuals may often rely on social media for.

2. Methodology

2.1 Method and design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to achieve the objectives. Qualitative studies involve analysing opinions and behaviours in order to gain a better understanding regarding phenomena that have happened, while phenomenological studies consist of research that looks into individuals' experiences of certain situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In-depth interviews using online platform were used to collect the qualitative data. In-depth interview is suitable as it allows specific, focused questions to be asked which will help contribute subjective answers to the research questions. The questions were asked as it allows the researcher to dig deeper regarding the topic, yet ensure the interview is still structured so as to not derail from the topic (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This technique is suitable for this study because the interview questions will consist of probing questions that will allow for flexibility in participants' answers. Besides, follow-up interview questions were developed based on the participant's responses.

2.2 Sample and location

This study focused on adolescents from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Kuala Lumpur was chosen as it is the capital of Malaysia and is regarded as a highly developing city (Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2020). High development implies technology advancements, hence higher social media usage. Whereas Selangor was also chosen as it has the highest population amongst all Malaysian states and is also one of the most developed states in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021; Habibullah et al., 2018). Thus, it can be said to have high internet as well as social media usage.

This study had a total of 10 participants, which is the maximum suggested amount for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants were chosen via purposive sampling technique, which is when participants are selected based on specific criteria in mind and are available as well as able to explain their thoughts effectively (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria such as the participants must be Malaysian adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17, able to speak English, and uses at least one type of social networking sites (SNS) were used to recruit.

The participants' demographic details are as shown in Table 1.0 below.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Most frequently used social media	Daily average of social media usage (hours)
P1	16	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, Discord	3
P2	14	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube	10
P3	15	Male	Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat	7
P4	13	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, Discord	4
P5	14	Male	Discord only	2
P6	17	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook	8
P7	15	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter	5
P8	12	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, Discord	4
P9	17	Male	Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp	7
P10	13	Female	Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube	8

2.3 Data collection

A total of 15 participants were contacted and provided with information regarding the experiment, whereby 5 did not respond. The remaining 10 were then contacted accordingly after receiving consent and scheduled for an online interview via Google Meets or Zoom between the months of May and June 2021. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes to 40 minutes. Informed consent to participate and undergo voice recordings were obtained using an Informed Consent form. Voice recordings were used as it allows for information to be gathered in a more effective way, especially during data transcription (Jamshed, 2014).

Semi structured interviews were used to as it allows the researcher to dig deeper regarding the topic, yet ensure the interview is still structured so as to not derail from the topic (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The instruments used to collect data consisted of interview questions that were generated to identify participants' demographic background, effects of social media usage on their mental health, and the factors affecting their social media use. Demographic background questions consisted of a total of five questions regarding their age, race, nationality, types of SNS engaged in, and frequency of social media usage. The Positive Mental Health scale (PMH-scale) guided the formulation of questions regarding the effects of social media usage on mental health. After obtaining and rephrasing the relevant information, this section consisted of a total of 10 questions with the objective of determining the effects social media usage has in terms of promoting a positive or negative mental health amongst the participants. The Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) was used to curate questions regarding the factors affecting social media usage amongst Malaysian adolescents. There was a total of five questions with the purpose of giving a better understanding regarding the strongest factors affecting participants' social media usage.

2.4 Data analysis

Data analysis started with the transcription of the interviews in verbatim. The interview transcriptions were organized, ensuring important details were noted down (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcribed data was then coded by identifying similar themes, ideas, and meanings and given meaning with the guidance of past literature. The themes were used to create a framework, which was then reviewed and linked to the current study to help answer the research questions. Participants' quotes were labelled and numbered accordingly to aid in the data analysis and write up. In terms of ethics, this study will use the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2017) Ethics Code as a guidance to derive its ethical considerations.

3. Results

There were four themes identified through the responses from the participants, which were positive factors affecting social media usage, negative factors affecting social media usage, positive effects of social media usage on mental health, and lastly negative effects of social media usage on mental health.

3.1 Positive factors affecting frequent social media usage

The first theme is positive factors affecting frequent social media usage. Participants noted that they use social media to seek information by looking up information online. Social media also was used to stay connected with others. Most participants reported that this is mainly caused by the inability to meet physically due to Covid-19. The participants also reported that they use social media when they feel negatively stressed, are in a negative mood as well as when they are bored. They explained that social media, especially watching videos acts as a form of distraction to escape from the real world too.

“I watch YouTube videos because some of them are funny. And they allow me to get distracted and just like, forget about reality for a while.” (P3, 15)

3.2 Negative factors affecting frequent social media usage

It was highlighted by participants that they utilise social media to seek approval from others, which is frequently motivated by emotions of anxieties. This was sometimes done through posting things that depicts them as doing well or performing good deeds.

“Yeah the number of likes I receive matters to me. When I get many likes, I feel umm, like I’ve gotten approval from these people if you get what I mean. I don’t know, maybe because I get insecure quite easily so I post things to feel better about myself. Mm, especially if the posts are of me doing good things.” (P6, 17)

Social media was also used to overcome their fear of missing out. They mentioned that they checked for updates on a regular basis to see if they had been barred from participating in any fun activities. However, a few noted that this would result in them somewhat regretting their decision to use social media to relieve their feelings of being left out. In terms of instant and delayed gratification, most of the participants acknowledged that social media usage had some negative effects, however receiving instant gratification and delayed gratification would compensate for these negative effects or make them temporarily forget about it.

3.3 Positive effects of social media usage on mental health

The third theme is positive effects of social media usage on mental health. Participants reported that they have feel an increase in their self-confidence when they use social media, especially after gaining positive feedback on one of their posts or being able to resonate with others’ posts. Most participants also noted that due to some of the positive reasons for using social media, they feel an increase in their happiness and excitement. This was said to be due to the ability to consume content they are interested in, to cope with their boredom and communicate with friends. Being able to gain information from social media also caused participants to feel an increase in knowledge, while seeing inspiring posts by others caused an increase in motivation.

“In a way, if you see people who you feel are better than you, it makes you kind of feel motivated to be like the person or to do better as well.” (P1, 16)

3.4 Negative effects of social media usage on mental health

The last theme is negative effects of social media usage on mental health. Most participants noted that social media increases their feelings of sadness and negative stress due to the type of feedback on their posts, negative comments from their friends, or sad content.

“Sometimes I’m excited to post a picture online so that I can get some nice comments, but hours go by and I don’t even get any comments or super little likes. That makes me kind of feel like my post wasn’t as nice as I thought.” (P9, 17)

It was also stated that using social media increases their negative stress due to procrastination. However, most reported that they still use it despite these negative effects. Social media also makes them feel adverse effects as it decreases their self-esteem. This was caused by seeing others upload posts regarding things that they felt they lacked, whether it was tangible items such as toys or good grades, or intangible items such as beauty and social skills. This caused an increase in negative jealousy and fear of missing out which resulted in a self-esteem drop.

Table 2.0 below shows the summary for the themes.

Table 2: Themes and Codes Identified in the Current Study

Theme	Research Objectives	Codes
Positive factors affecting frequent social media usage	To explore the main factors affecting the frequency of social media usage amongst Malaysian adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To seek information via friends and news. – To communicate with others such as with friends and family, especially during the pandemic. – To decrease negative stress or mood by watching videos, playing games and chatting with friends – To reduce boredom also by watching videos, playing games and chatting with friends
Negative factors affecting frequent social media usage		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online validation seeking due to insecurities – Fear of missing out and not wanting to feel left out – Addictive tendencies due to the disregard of negative effects – Constant anticipation of positive effects in the future
Positive effects of social media usage on mental health	To understand the positive effects of social media towards Malaysian adolescents’ mental health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improvements in confidence due to convenience of portraying self as an ideal version – Increase in feelings of happiness or excitement due to watching and viewing positive content – Increases knowledge through seeking information online – Increases motivation through viewing the lives of others

Negative effects of social media usage on mental health	To recognize the negative effects of social media towards Malaysian adolescents' mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increase in feelings of sadness or negative stress due to the lack of positive feedback and validation – Decrease in self-esteem through viewing lives that are better
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4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the factors or reasons affecting social media usage amongst Malaysian adolescents and in turn, understand the effects of their social media usage.

Stay up to date by seeking information online and staying in touch with others is one of the positive reasons on adolescents using the social media. Adolescents utilise social media to assist them in meeting these demands, such as remaining updated about current global events, school-related information, or changes within their social circle, despite the fact that social media is not always a dependable source of information. Children and teenagers have a proclivity to readily believe bogus news, despite the fact that they are unaware whether the source is reliable or not (Dumitru, 2020). Some do so to fit in or because they are unsure of how to differentiate between fake and genuine news.

Aside from that, social media assists teens in making or maintaining ties with online pals, as well as with people they have never met in person. Over the other hand, this implies that teenagers may form friendships with total strangers on the internet, which may be considered harmful by some authorities. This is a source of worry because strangers might act as someone they are not in order to appear more attractive to children, which is a strategy frequently employed by online sexual predators to get access to vulnerable children (Dombrowski et al., 2004). Furthermore, when it comes to the relief of unpleasant sentiments, social media serves as a sort of diversion that allows people to escape from the actual world since it causes them to feel divorced from reality. This might be owing to the large range of information available and the ease with which they can be obtained, as well as the opportunity to gain social support (Ozbay 2007; Purvis et al., 2016).

In terms of negative factors, adolescents use social media due to insecurities by showing that they are doing well in life in hopes of getting social validation. This would also sometimes lead to comparing themselves to others on social media. This could be due to low levels of self-esteem, whereby Hewitt and Goldman (1974) found that these individuals showed a higher yearning for social validation, making them more susceptible to comparing themselves to others online. This then causes them to be more affected when they receive negative comments or criticism as compared to individuals who had a higher self-esteem. The fear of missing out also causes adolescents use social media in order to overcome this feeling by checking for updates from their friends so that they do not miss out. Social media is used to find out what their friends are doing, however would oftentimes come across posts that make them feel left out and upset. Despite this, it does not cause them to reduce social media to relieve their feelings of being left out. This can be explained by Yildiz Durak (2018) who states that adolescents are at risk of addiction towards their electronic devices because of the anxiety they feel without it. In addition, frequent social media usage can be due to the feelings of instant and delayed gratification received, which causes addictive tendencies towards their mobile devices and social media. This could be due to social media's capacity to fulfil multiple needs and wants (Song et al., 2004). The higher the frequency of usage, the more these habitual tendencies are fed, resulting in a more powerful need to do it (Du et al., 2019). The human

mind then becomes trained to associate their social media usage with enjoyable outcomes, causing a constant hope or anticipation for it even if it might not come (LaRose et al., 2003, as cited in Song et al., 2004). Thus, adolescents feel instant gratification that causes them to disregard social media's negative effects, or a longing for delayed gratification, hoping something good will come in the future.

Both the negative and positive factors affecting social media usage causes both positive and negative effects as well. The positive effects include an increase in positive feelings due to the factors "to stay up to date", "to alleviate negative feelings", "online validation seeking", and "instant gratification". The factors of "online validation seeking" and "instant gratification" are mostly associated with improvements in adolescents' confidence by using social media due to positive feedback and feelings of belongingness. For some, the act in itself of being able to choose and curate their own posts causes a boost in confidence regardless of the feedback, but the positive feedback act as an enhancer of confidence. However, for others, some would deliberately post photos on social media to get positive feedback, such as what was stated regarding the factor of online validation seeking. The factors "to stay up to date" and "to alleviate negative feelings" are linked to an increase of happiness and excitement mainly due to being able to relieve boredom or stress, and an increase in productivity levels due to the ability to gain information or motivation. It is believed that this will help in the adolescent's personal growth as well. As reported in the past study (Khoo & Zhooriyati, 2021), personal growth helps the adolescents to understand about self; thus, guide them to accomplish their life goals as setting life goals enhance their life expectation which lead the adolescents to be more confidence and optimistic in themselves.

The negative effects included increase in sadness, negative stress and decrease in self-esteem. This is mainly due to procrastination and a lack of positive comments which cause some users to feel self-doubt. It is worth highlighting that some adolescents use social media for the purpose of receiving validation, but it is not always received, which results in them feeling negatively. One of the biggest factors that causes these negative feelings were seeing others have nicer things or live nicer lives, as well as fear of missing out such as seeing their friends spending time without them. This can be explained by Tandoc et al. (2015) who state that social media has the ability to bring about feelings of jealousy and envy amongst individuals who often view their peers post positive, fun things about their respective lives which may cause them to deem others' lives as better than their own.

4.1 Implication

The implications of the current study are towards theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, this study adds information to existing theories. Drawing upon the Uses and Gratifications theory by Katz et al. (1973), the focus was mainly on positive factors such as to share information, stay connected, or escape stressful situations. It also focuses on the ways in which individuals actively choose how to use social media as well as states that they are aware of their social media usage and its outcomes. The present study shows that there are negative factors driving social media usage, regardless of whether it brings about positive or negative outcomes and that adolescents are not fully actively choosing how to use social media. This shows that social media has a much more powerful control over its users than the theory assumes. With regards to real world applications, the results of this study provides first-hand explanations by Malaysian adolescents regarding their social media usage and underlines why they choose to use it so frequently regardless of its different effects. Whether they use it for positive or negative purposes will help adolescents and families recognize these factors and identify ways to help, such as via parental guidance. As an effort to overcome this, parents who

are connected with their children on social networking sites (SNS) act as a protective barrier which can reduce these negative experiences and effects (Mesch, 2016). The results can also be applied in the real-world via teaching children social media literacy to identify the negative outcomes, or teaching parents risk factors and how to understand their children's social media usage. By drawing on previous literature, educators or parents are able to understand certain connections and factors that may make adolescents more susceptible to the negative effects of social media. For example, through Kilduff (2014) in terms of competitiveness and motivation, Kim et al. (2017) in terms of self-esteem levels and social comparison, and Drummond (1991) in terms of the age of adolescence and their need to be socially accepted.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the current study's results together with existing literature regarding the topic helped answer the research questions posed. It shows that Malaysian adolescents use social media to for positive and negative purposes, with some using it for more negative than positive purposes which may be harmful to their mental health without their realization or concern. This is important to understand in order to protect their mental health and well-being.

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