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Trends in Social Media Use among University Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in social media usage among teens and young adults which may be helpful or harmful. This study aimed to investigate the use of social media and trends among diploma in pharmacy students at UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Kampus Bertam.

Method: A cross-sectional study was conducted whereby data was collected through an online survey and completed questionnaires by 189 respondents (18-22 years old) undertaking diploma in pharmacy in and off campus. Data were analysed using Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet for descriptive statistics and frequency analysis. SPSS version 28.0 was used to analyse the inferential statistics i.e. the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Results: The analysis of the collected data revealed that the majority of the respondents were female and considered themselves moderate users of social media, with an average of four social media accounts. The study also found that social media consumption among pharmacy students at UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang increased during the pandemic compared to the average time spent before. The data showed that a significant percentage of students spend several hours on social media, with the most commonly reported problems being distraction from studying and addiction. These findings raise concerns about the negative effects of social media usage on academic performance and well-being.

Conclusion: Overall, the study provides valuable insight into the habits and exposure of students to social media usage, highlighting the need for further research and awareness of the potential risks associated with excessive social media consumption.

Introduction

Social media can be defined as a group of internet-based applications that allow users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content in a virtual community or network. These platforms typically include features such as user profiles, discussion boards, messaging, and multimedia sharing capabilities. Examples of social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Social media can be used for a wide range

of purposes, including communication, entertainment, news, education, and marketing (Basumatary & Kalita, 2022).

For over two decades, social media has been integrated into our daily lives. The first social media platform, Six Degrees, was launched in 1997 and since then, the number of users has grown exponentially, with 4.62 billion users, or 58.4% of the global population, according to Kepios analysis (Kemp, 2022). Social media has not only become a source of entertainment but also for education and business (Tess, 2013; Hsieh, 2020), It has brought people together regardless of their race, gender or age, and has made communication easier between distant people and facilitated international cooperation among nations.

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, first emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, and quickly spread around the world, leading the World Health Organization to declare a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). In Malaysia, the first recorded case of COVID-19 was on January 25, 2020 (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021), and the government implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020 to slow the spread of the disease (Hashim et al., 2021). This pandemic has had a significant impact on social media usage, as lockdowns and social distancing measures have led to an increase in social media usage for staying connected with friends and family, as well as for entertainment and news. Platforms have reported record numbers of users and engagement, and there has also been an increase in the use of social media for mental health support and sharing COVID-19 related information.

The pandemic has brought about significant changes to daily life, particularly in the field of education. To slow the spread of the virus, many learning institutions have turned to distance learning and online modes of delivery for courses and programs (Ali, 2020). This shift has led to questions about social media consumption and trends among students. Social media is widely used for communication, especially through social networking sites, which have audio and visual abilities that are useful for university-level applications. The trend of social media usage among university students seems to be on the rise, with many students relying on it for communication and interactions. This study aims to investigate social media consumption and trends among students at UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang Kampus Bertam.

Method

A questionnaire-based study was conducted among students at the Universiti Teknologi MARA Bertam branch in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. The questionnaire used in the survey was adapted from a study conducted by (Ali *et al.*, 2019). The questionnaire consisted of three sections.

Section A of the questionnaire contains seven questions to gather information about the respondent's background. The questions in this section are designed to collect data on the student's socio-demographic characteristics and their current internet connection.

Section B focuses on the pattern of social media use amongst the respondents.

Section C evaluates the reason for social media use. Respondents were allowed to select multiple reasons that they feel apply to their daily use of social media. The list consists of 20 randomized question were later on categorized into five categories of answers: Diversion, Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal integrative needs, and Social integrative needs. The reasons are based on a theory called "Uses and Gratifications" Ruggiero (2000), which says that people use media to fulfil specific needs, like socializing, getting information, entertainment, or escape. This theory recognizes the active role of media users and seeks to understand their motivations for using media. It's used in media research to learn why people

use media and what they hope to get out of it, to help improve media products and services. The questions in this section are divided into five categories of answers: Diversion, Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal integrative needs, and Social integrative needs. The survey was distributed through a WhatsApp group and a total of 189 respondents completed it by the end of January 2022.

Results

Sociodemographic

Table 1 shows the socio-demographics of the respondents who participated in the survey. There were a total of 189 respondents, with 150 (79.4%) identifying as female and 39 (20.6%) identifying as male. The table also shows the distribution of ages among the respondents, with the majority being 20 years old (36.5%, or 69 individuals) followed by those who are 21 years old (30.7%, or 58 individuals). There were 25.4% (48 individuals) who were 19 years old, and only a small number of respondents who were 18 or 22 years old (3.7%, or 7 individuals each). Out of a total of 189 respondents, 102 (54.0%) reported residing at home and 87 (46.0%) reported residing on campus. The reason for the above distribution is that many students are on campus while others who are not on campus are undergoing clinical training.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Socio-demographic characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Female	150 (79.4)
Male	39 (20.6)
Age	
18	7 (3.7)
19	48 (25.4)
20	69 (36.5)
21	58 (30.7)
22	7 (3.7)
Semester	
Semester 1	56 (29.6)
Semester 3	65 (34.4)
Semester 5	68 (36.0)
Current residence	
Home	102 (54.0)
Campus	87 (46.0)

Pattern of Social Media Use

The data in the table provides information on the social media patterns of a sample of 189 students. The device that was most commonly owned by Diploma in Pharmacy students is a smartphone, which was owned by 187 individuals. Following this, laptops were found to be owned by 90 individuals. On the other hand, the devices that were least commonly owned were tablets and PCs, with only 29 and 10 individuals respectively owning them.

Subsequent analysis on the pattern of use involved dividing the data into several categories, which included the category of user, the total number of social media accounts per student, frequency of time used to check social media, time spent on social media, increase in time spent on social media, and the length of time the students have been using social media.

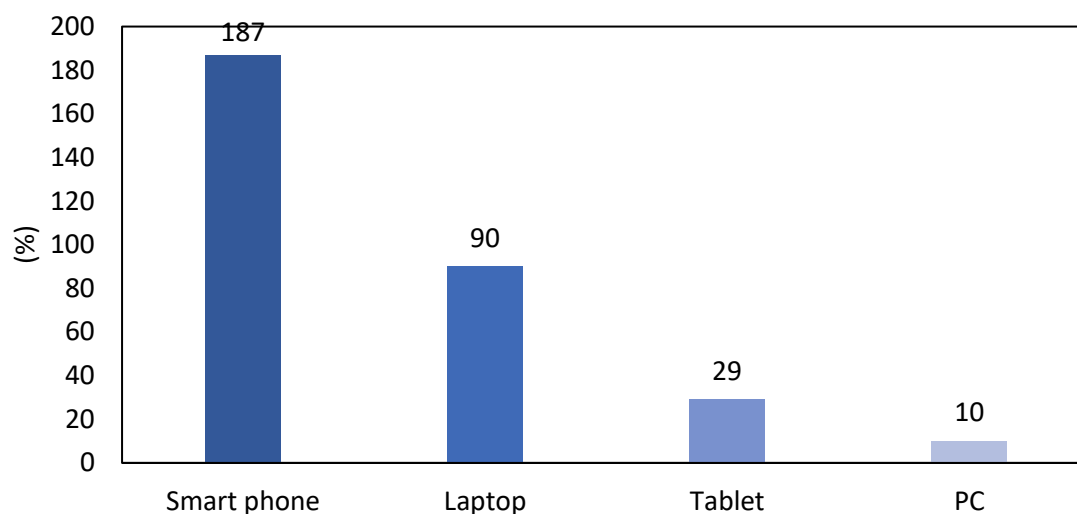


Figure 1: Device owned and used by Diploma in Pharmacy students for social media consumption

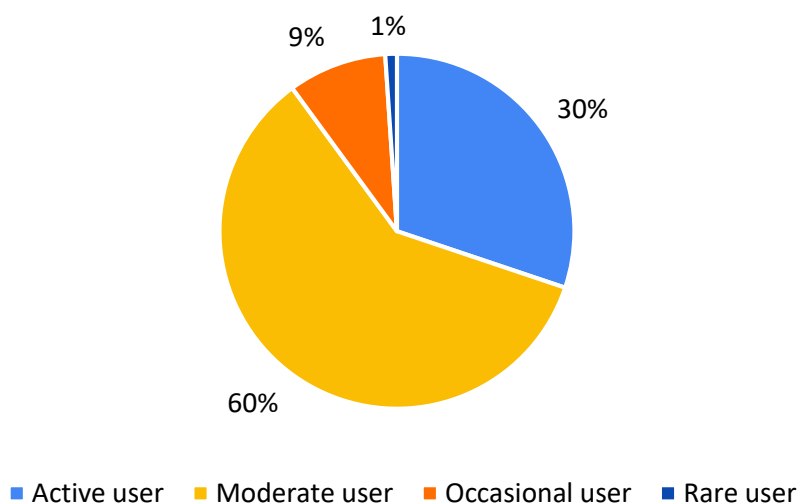


Figure 2: Category of social media users among Diploma in Pharmacy students

The category of user is divided into four categories: Active user (30.16%), Moderate user (59.79%), Occasional user (9%), and Rare user (1.06%). The majority of the students, 59.79%, are categorized as Moderate users, meaning they use social media regularly but not as often as Active users. The total number of social media accounts per student shows that the most

common number of accounts is 4, which is held by 26.46% of the students. A relatively large portion of the students, 24.34%, have more than 5 social media accounts. In terms of frequency of time used to check social media, the majority of students, 35.45%, check social media between 5 and 10 times a day. 26.98% of the students check social media more than 10 times a day, while 22.22% check it on every notification.

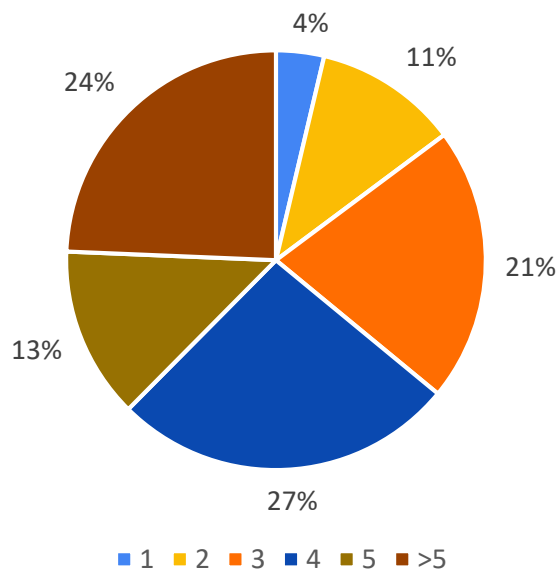


Figure 3: Number of social media account per Diploma in Pharmacy students

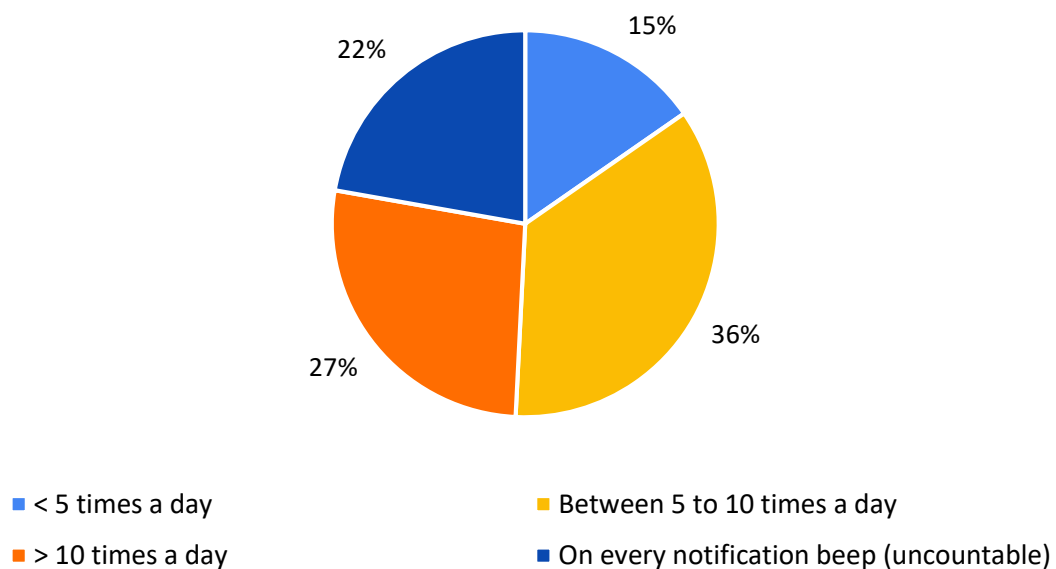


Figure 4: Frequency of time in using social media

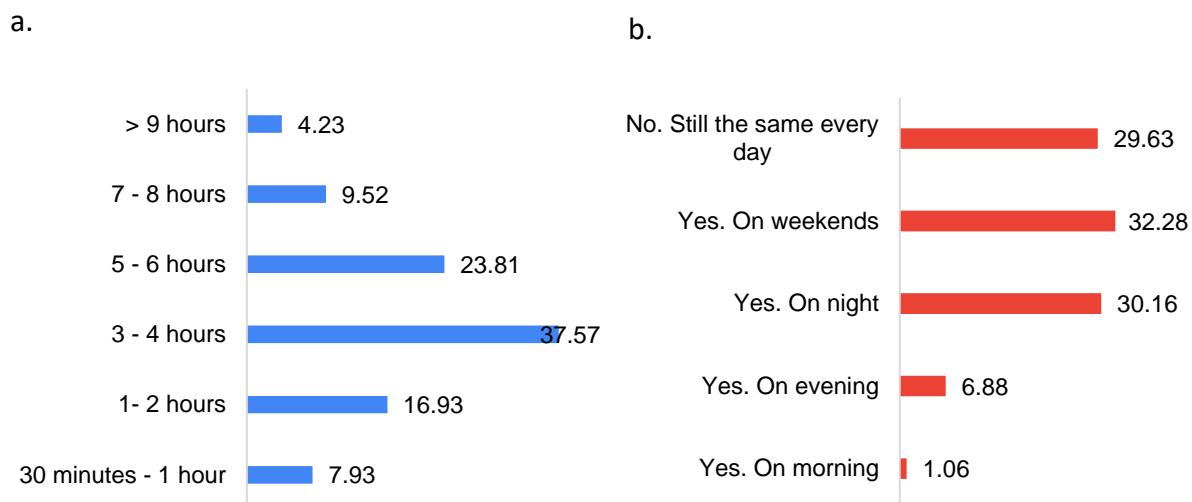


Figure 5 a. Total amount of time spent on social media per day. b. Upward Trend in social media usage time

Based on the time spent on social media, the majority of students (37.57%) spend 3-4 hours on social media, while 23.81% and 9.52% spend 5-6 hours and 7-8 hours respectively. A smaller group of 4.23% spends more than 9 hours on social media. The responses based on different time frames - morning, evening, night, and weekends - show that most participants (32.28%) have observed an increase in social media usage during weekends. Night-time usage also showed a significant increase, with 30.16% of participants reporting an increase. On the other hand, 29.63% of participants stated that their social media usage has remained the same every day. However, only a negligible proportion of participants reported an increase in social media usage during morning hours (1.06%). In conclusion, the data suggests that there has been a noticeable increase in social media usage during specific times, particularly on weekends and at night. This pattern is concerning as it has been reported that young adults who spend long amounts of time using social media are more likely to experience sleep disturbance (Pirdehghan *et al.*, 2021).

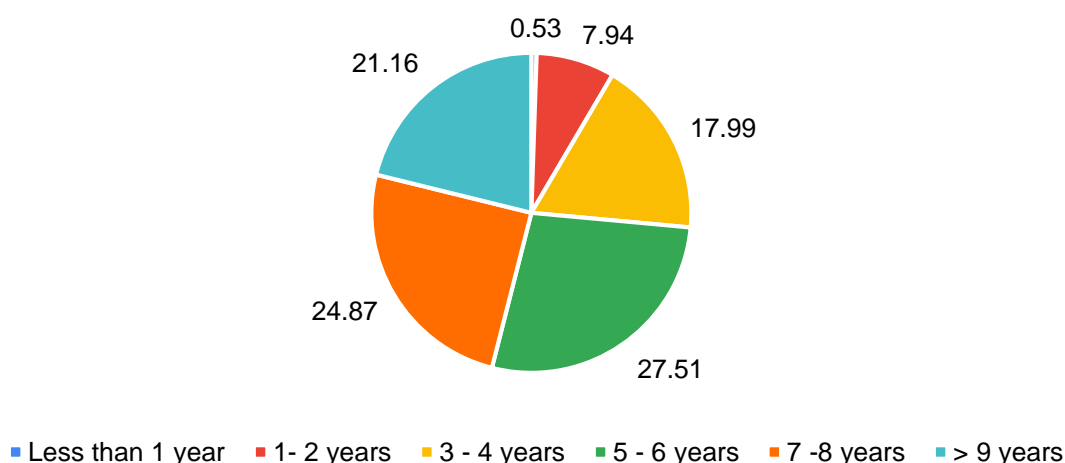


Figure 6: Length of time owning a social media account

Finally, the pie chart above illustrates the distribution of participants based on their ownership of a social media account for a specific length of time. Only 0.53% of the

participants reported owning an account for less than a year, while the majority of participants (27.51%) have owned an account for 5-6 years. Participants who have owned an account for 3-4 years and 7-8 years were also prevalent, with 17.99% and 24.87%, respectively. A small percentage of participants (7.94%) have owned an account for 1-2 years, while 21.16% have owned an account for more than 9 years. These findings suggest that the majority of participants are experienced social media users who have been using social media for a significant amount of time.

Furthermore, the data indicates that a large majority of students are regular social media users who spend a significant amount of time on it each day. The longer students have been using social media, the more likely they are to spend more time on it.

Reason for Social Media Use

Table 2

Reason for social media use among Diploma in Pharmacy students

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Social Media helps me to feel less lonely	108	57
I use Social Media to pass time when I am bored	153	81
Social Media lets escape my worries	72	38
I start using Social Media when I have nothing better to do	104	55
Social Media help me in research and studies	132	70
Social Media help to search job or online business or scholarship	88	47
Social Media help to gain knowledge	150	79
Social Media give me information about others	137	72
Social Media help me to express my emotions to others easily	69	37
I use Social Media to let others know I care about their feelings	63	33
I use Social Media to talk about my problems and get advice	54	29
I use Social Media to express my anger to others who will sympathize	15	8
Social Media is part of my self-image	15	8
Social Media portrays an image of me to others	24	13
People can use Social Media to judge me	13	7
I use Social Media to gain favorable approval among friends	12	6
Social Media allows me to communicate with my friends	167	88
Social Media allows me to stay in touch with family	158	84
Social Media allow me to find companionship	84	44
Social Media enables me to find more interesting people than in real life	69	37

The data provided above shows that the majority of students (81%) use social media to pass time when they are bored, followed by gaining knowledge (79%), and staying in touch with friends (88%) and family (84%). A significant proportion of students (70%) reported that social media helped them in their research and studies, and 47% reported using it to search for jobs, online businesses, or scholarships.

Interestingly, a large proportion of students (57%) reported that social media helps them feel less lonely, indicating that social media use may be a coping mechanism for loneliness. Additionally, a smaller percentage of students (44%) reported that social media allows them

to find companionship, and 37% reported that it enables them to find more interesting people than in real life, indicating that social media may be a way to expand their social network. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of students reported using social media for negative reasons such as to escape worries (38%), to express their anger to others who will sympathize (8%), and to gain favourable approval among friends (6%). It is worth noting that a small percentage of students (7%) reported that people can use social media to judge them, indicating potential concerns around privacy and security.

All-in-all, the data indicates that Diploma in Pharmacy students primarily use social media to fulfil their social and informational needs, with a minority of students utilizing it for negative purposes. This finding is consistent with research that emphasizes the potential benefits of social media for teenagers during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of mitigating the effects of physical distancing measures (Hamilton *et al.*, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020).

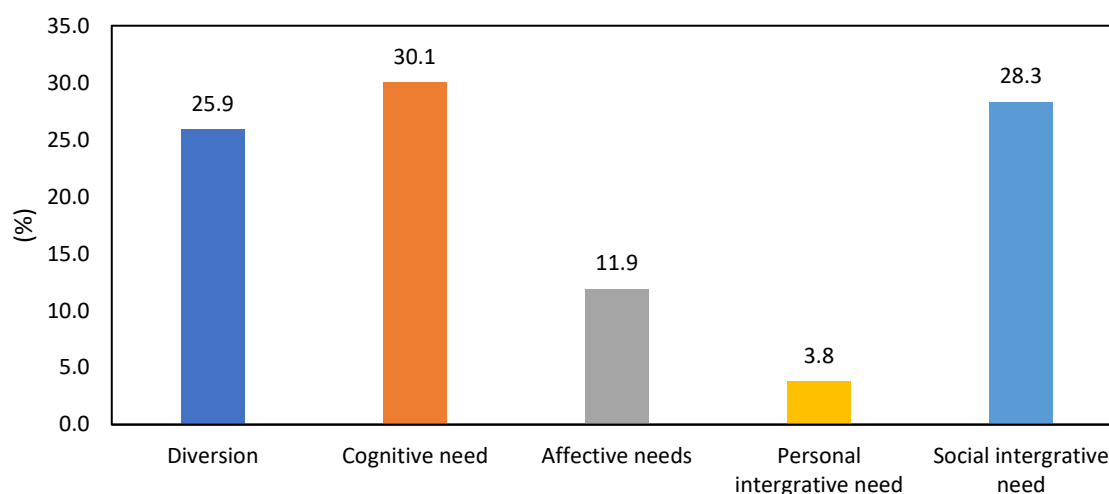


Figure 7: Reasons for using social media among Diploma in Pharmacy students

Upon further analysis of the five categories (Diversion, Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal integrative needs, and Social integrative needs), it became evident that Diploma in Pharmacy students primarily utilize social media to fulfil three main needs i.e. cognitive, social integrative needs and as a diversion. These needs include gaining knowledge, seeking job opportunities, staying in touch with friends and family, and finding companionship. Social media is also used for diversion and affective needs, such as passing time, escaping worries, and expressing emotions. However, personal integrative needs, such as self-image and gaining approval from friends, are not prominent reasons for using social media among these students. The statistical analysis of the data between the groups was conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis test and found to be significant ($p < 0.05$).

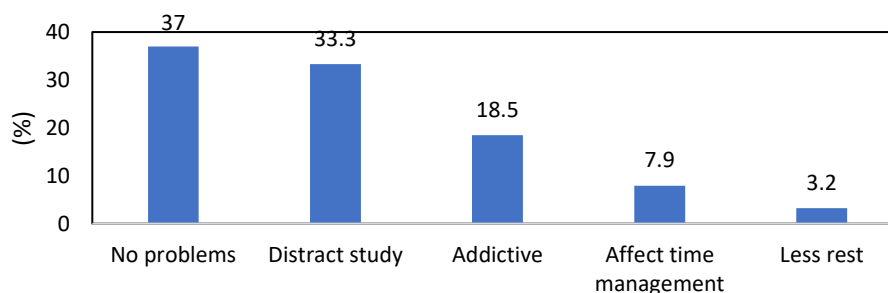


Figure 8: Problem faced due to social media usage

Out of the 189 participants, 37% reported no problems with their social media usage. However, a considerable percentage (63% in total) of participants reported facing problems due to their social media usage. The most commonly reported problem was distraction from study, with 33.3% of participants reporting this issue. Addiction to social media was the next most commonly reported problem, with 18.5% of participants reporting that their social media usage was addictive. Other problems reported by participants included an effect on time management (7.9%) and less rest (3.2%).

Overall, the data suggests that a significant proportion of participants faced problems due to their social media usage, particularly in terms of distraction from study and addiction. These findings are consistent with prior research that has linked excessive social media usage to negative impacts on academic performance and well-being (Twenge *et al.*, 2020; Gómez-Galán *et al.*, 2020). Based on a study by Gómez-Galán *et al.* (2020) on social network consumption and addiction among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that university students are more likely to have problems with excessive use of social media and a lack of personal control than an obsession with social media. In a recent study conducted by Saputri & Yumarni (2023), it was found that there is a significant relationship between social media addiction and depression among university students in Indonesia. A possible explanation for the psychological stress associated with social media use could be the extensive coverage of COVID-19 (Huckins *et al.*, 2020), which is affected in part by the way social media is programmed (O'Brien *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is important for individuals to be aware of the potential negative consequences of social media usage and to take steps to limit their usage if necessary.

In conclusion, this study was able to achieve its objectives of identifying the most popular social media platforms used by university students during the pandemic, investigating the factors that influence university students' social media consumption, and identifying the problems that university students encounter while using social media. The results of the study show that social media use among university students during the pandemic has increased significantly, with Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp being the most popular platforms. The main factors that influence social media consumption among university students are entertainment, communication, and academic purposes. However, the study also revealed some negative aspects of social media use, including addiction, distraction, and mental health problems. Overall, these findings suggest that there is a need for university students to develop a more balanced approach to social media use, taking into account the potential benefits and risks.

Contributions

This research on trends in social media use among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic makes significant theoretical and contextual contributions to the existing knowledge in this field. Firstly, the study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social media usage among university students, which is a timely and relevant topic given the current global situation. The research findings provide insights into how the pandemic has influenced social media use and shed light on the emerging trends in this area.

Secondly, the study adds to the existing literature on social media use among university students, particularly in the field of health promotion. By identifying the reasons behind social media use and the problems associated with it, the study contributes to a better understanding of the role of social media in the lives of university students. The research also

highlights the need for interventions that promote healthy social media use, which can have a positive impact on the mental health and academic performance of university students. Overall, the theoretical and contextual contributions of this research are significant, as it addresses a gap in the literature and provides valuable insights into the emerging trends in social media use among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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