

Impact of Prolonged COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social Networking Sites Usage and Psychological Distress among University Students

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Abstract: The primary aim of this study is to determine the purpose of social networking sites (SNS) usage and the severity of psychological distress among university students after experiencing a prolonged coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A total of 112 university students completed the questionnaire adapted from the Social Networking Usage Questionnaire (SNUQ) and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale – 21 items (DASS-21). Descriptive results showed that the university students use SNS actively for entertainment purposes, followed by academic, social, and information purposes. The students also suffered from immense psychological distress, with anxiety being the highest, followed by depression and stress. The results indicated the potential of integrating SNS in instruction and urgency in resolving the critical psychological distress issue among university students.

Keywords: social networking sites; SNS; psychological distress; university students; COVID19

1. Introduction

It has been over two years since the Malaysian government declared the first movement control order (MCO) due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Since then, university students' teaching and learning experience has been disrupted as all tertiary institutions were mandated to close, and instruction was forced to be carried out via online platforms like social networking sites (SNS). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2020) has found that internet usage among university students increased significantly from 2018 to 2020, and they use the internet mainly for social, information, and entertainment purposes. This could mean that the SNS usage among the students increased too.

During the same period, studies have found that that university students are experiencing severe psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, and stress that is mainly due to the fear of contracting COVID-19, the challenges in remote learning and financial stress (Sandhya, 2021; Sundarassen *et al.*, 2020). According to Malaysian National News Agency (2022), Malaysia's border has reopened starting 1 April 2022. As the standard operating procedures become less stringent, there is a need to find out the current situation regarding the extent of SNS usage and the severity of psychological distress among university students. This is so that the educational stakeholders like policymakers, educators, and students can have clarity on suitable next steps in terms of the SNS usage and emotional distress among the tertiary students can be taken effectively.

2. Related studies

Psychological distress has become a worldwide phenomenon; over 300 million people suffer from depression globally, and nearly 800, 000 people take their own life each year; it was the second leading cause of death among people aged between 15 to 29 in 2019 (WHO, 2021). Malaysia is facing a similar issue too. Three of every ten Malaysians aged 16 and above suffer from mental distress, and it was predicted that this trend will continue to surge (Institute for Public Health, 2015; Institute for Public Health, 2019). This pertinent problem of emotional distress was further aggravated with COVID-19. Sundarassen *et al.* (2020) did a study with 983 university students in Malaysia. They concluded that one-third of the students underwent mild to extreme psychological distress. A survey by Sandhya (2021) found that 85% of 520 respondents with mostly university students, experienced depression, anxiety, and stress. Given the trend of heightened psychological distress among university students, it is crucial to determine their mental state in the current situation of the pandemic, as emotional wellbeing is the foundation of students' success in learning.

Since the emergence of SNS, the SNS technologies and users have grown drastically (Erfani *et al.*, 2021), even more so during the global crisis of COVID-19, as physical events were prohibited. Al-Dwaikat *et al.* (2020) conducted a study with 456 university students in Jordan and found that the students used SNS primarily for entertainment purposes. A survey done in Malaysia mentioned that socialization, searching for information, and entertainment were the more prominent purposes of internet usage (MCMC, 2020). Although it was shown that internet usage has increased, there lies an uncertainty on the purpose behind using SNS among university students in Malaysia.

3. Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to determine the purpose of SNS usage and the severity of psychological distress among university students during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of SNS usage measured in this study comprises social, academic, information, and entertainment use of SNS. As for psychological distress, three aspects are measured in this study, namely depression, anxiety, and stress. Specifically, this study will answer the following research questions:

1. What is the purpose of SNS usage among university students?
2. What is the extent of severity of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among university students?

4. Method

This study was conducted using a quantitative method utilizing a descriptive analysis. Using a table of random numbers which comprised numbers that has no order or pattern, the students were randomly selected. A total of 112 participants were randomly selected among the university students from the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science in Universiti Putra Malaysia. This study utilized two instruments, specifically the social networking usage questionnaire (SNUQ) developed by Gupta *et al.* (2018), together with the depression, anxiety and stress scale – 21 items (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond *et al.* (1995). By using online survey forms, the questionnaires were dispersed to the participants via email. As shown in Table 1, more than half of the respondents were between 18 to 22 years old, which are 71 (63.40%) of the total respondents.

Table 1. *Distribution of Respondents by Age*

Range	Frequency	Percent
18 – 22	71	63.40
23 – 27	38	33.90
Above 27	3	2.70
Total	112	100.0

5. Main findings

5.1 Purpose of SNS usage

The purpose of SNS usage was measured regarding how frequently the university student used SNS for social, academic, information, and entertainment purposes. The overall mean scores for social, academic, information, and entertainment are 3.60, 3.84, 3.61, and 4.05, respectively. Table 2 shows the students' responses regarding their purpose of using SNS during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic measured by 17 items. Among the four purposes, university students use SNS most often for entertainment, followed by academic, social, and information. They also used SNS the least for seeking help from lecturers and searching for career-related information.

5.2 Psychological distress

A total of 21 items were used to measure the severity of psychological distress among the university students. Figure 1 illustrates that the percentage of students suffering from depression, anxiety, and stress were 33.5%, 48.5%, and 27.5%, respectively. The university students were most anxious, followed by depression and stress during this prolonged global crisis.

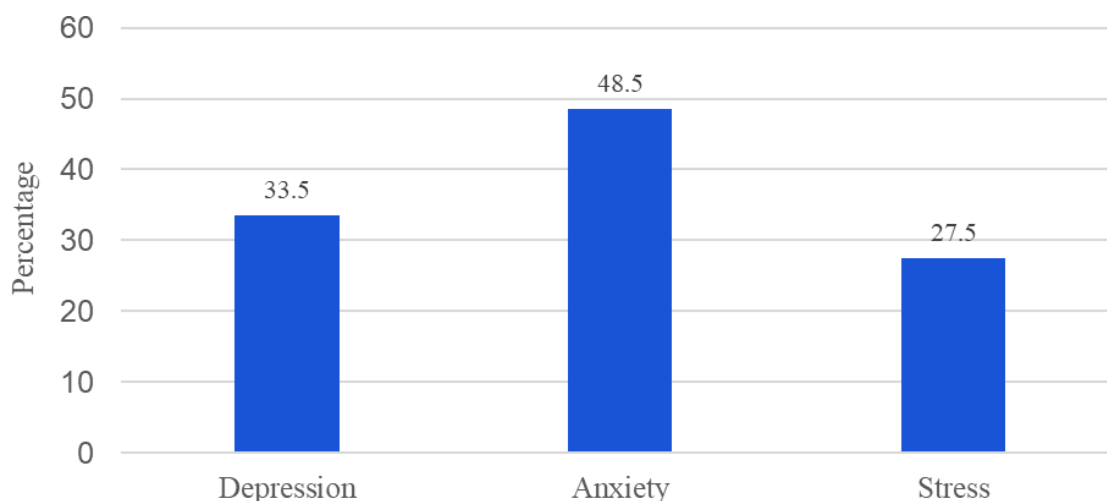


Figure 1. Percentage of Severe to Extremely Severe Psychological Distress

Table 2. *Frequency and Percentage of SNS Usage*

Items	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. I use social networking sites to become more sociable. ^a	14	6.6	30	14.2	47	22.2	57	26.9	64	30.2
2. I use social networking sites to keep in touch with my relatives. ^a	11	5.2	33	15.6	46	21.7	49	23.1	73	34.4
3. I prefer using social networking sites to attend social gathering. ^a	22	10.4	31	14.5	43	20.3	42	19.8	74	34.9
4. I use social networking sites to seek help from my lecturers. ^b	13	6.1	41	19.3	57	26.9	57	26.9	44	20.8
5. I use social networking sites for online academic group discussion. ^b	5	2.4	14	6.6	40	18.9	62	29.2	91	42.9
6. I use social networking sites to do research work. ^b	8	3.8	27	12.7	35	16.5	48	22.6	94	44.3
7. I use social networking sites to learn about my curricular aspect. ^b	6	2.8	25	11.8	54	25.5	56	26.4	71	33.5
8. I communicate with my friends via social networking sites for preparation of exam. ^b	14	6.6	17	8.0	40	18.9	59	27.8	82	38.7
9. I use social networking sites for collaborative learning. ^b	12	5.7	18	8.5	54	25.5	57	26.9	71	33.5
10. I use social networking sites to solve my academic problem. ^b	5	2.4	18	8.5	35	16.5	61	28.8	93	43.9
11. I use social networking sites for getting jobs related information. ^c	9	4.2	40	18.9	58	27.4	51	24.1	54	25.5
12. I use social networking sites to share new ideas. ^c	12	5.7	39	18.4	53	25.0	48	22.6	60	28.3
13. I use social networking sites for reading news. ^c	6	2.8	24	11.3	52	24.5	55	25.9	75	35.4
14. I use social networking sites for sharing pictures. ^d	7	3.3	38	17.9	40	18.9	41	19.3	86	40.6
15. I use social networking sites to get relief from academic stress. ^d	3	1.4	12	5.7	23	10.8	54	25.5	120	56.6
16. I use social networking sites for watching movies. ^d	9	4.2	15	7.1	29	13.7	48	22.6	111	52.4

17.	I use social networking sites to look at humorous posts. ^d	9	4.2	22	10.4	34	16.0	46	21.7	101	47.6
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Notes: ^a Social purpose, ^b academic purpose, ^c information purpose, ^d entertainment purpose.

6. Discussion

This study aims to determine the purpose of using SNS among university students and the severity of their psychological distress due to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. This study has found that most students spend a large portion of their time using SNS. The high mean scores shown in all four purposes indicate that the students actively use SNS as an alternative in terms of social, academic, information, and entertainment when physical events are prohibited, mainly for entertainment purposes. MCMC (2020) and Al-Dwaikat *et al.*, (2020) also had similar findings when studying the SNS usage of university students during the epidemic.

Intriguingly, this study showed that the students use SNS least to seek lecturers' help. This infers that the students prefer reaching out to their peers or working independently when solving academic problems; it also suggests that students and lecturers are not accustomed to communicating online; either party may prefer interacting in person. This study also showed that the students seldom use SNS to search for career-related information. This might be because, as most of the participants in this study are in their early years of university studies, career prospects are a lower priority than excelling in their academic achievements.

This study's findings have shown that many students suffer from acute depression, anxiety, and stress regarding the psychological distress of university students. Almost half of the students reported severe to extremely severe anxiety, which is worse than the findings presented by Sundarasan *et al.* (2020) and Cao *et al.* (2020). Around one-third of the students underwent severe to extremely severe depression and stress, which is incongruent with what was concluded by Sandhya (2021) and AlDwaikat *et al.* (2020). This can be caused by the accumulated negative emotions due to the fear of being infected by the new COVID-19 variants such as the Omicron variant, the challenges they faced in confronting learning loss, uncertainties in their future, together with readapting to the new normal. It is evident that the psychological distress among university students has been exacerbated during this prolonged pandemic.

7. Conclusion

This study found that university students are still avid users of SNS even when lockdown has been lifted. They use SNS primarily for entertainment, academic, social and information purposes. This suggests that SNS can be a powerful educational tool in implementing instructions even after the pandemic. With SNS, students' engagement can be transcended from the traditional brick-and-mortar instruction to not only a social experience but also ubiquitous. When students are more engaged in lessons and connected to their peers, their learning can become more concrete.

However, the already pertinent issue of psychological distress among university students has become more alarming than ever during this challenging time. This is a wake-up call for all educational stakeholders like policymakers, institutions, and parents to address mental health issues among the students before more of them submit themselves to addictions such as alcoholism and drugs, or even worse, self-harm and suicide. It is recommended that future studies can be carried out to examine the relationship between the purpose of SNS usage and psychological distress, as well as whether the variables predict one another.

8. Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study is that the data were collected via only a self-reporting questionnaire; such responses are prone to response bias, response sets, and response style (Fraenkel *et al.*, 2011). The data collected were based solely on the participants' honesty and perception of their SNS usage and psychological distress. This can be complemented with qualitative data collected through interviews and ethnography studies. Also, as the participants of this study are university students from two faculties in

Universiti Putra Malaysia, the generalizability of the findings in this study can be further expanded by having a larger number of participants from more diverse backgrounds.

9. Implications of the study

This study implies that educational stakeholders and policymakers should consider integrating SNS in teaching and learning to enhance students' engagement. The lower SNS usage for contacting lecturers indicates that students' feedback on their preference for using SNS in learning must be considered. This provides a student-centred plan that can enable the integration of SNS more effective. This study also indicates that mental health monitoring systems and support must be accessible to the students in institutions. This is because the results from this study have shown that many students are struggling emotionally. Mental health professionals like psychiatrists and counsellors should be placed in the institutions, and simple guidelines should be provided to the students so that those in need would know how to seek emotional support.

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