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Social media use intensity and self-esteem as predictors of psychological well-being among university students

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Abstract

Background: University students in emerging adulthood face academic and social demands that may affect their psychological well-being. High social media use intensity and low self-esteem may be associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

Purpose: To examine the simultaneous and individual contributions of social media use intensity and self-esteem to psychological well-being among active undergraduate students.

Method: This quantitative study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. A total of 379 undergraduate students were recruited through convenience sampling. Data were collected online using the Psychological well-being–Short Form, Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, and Social Media Use Intensity Scale and analysed using multiple linear regression in SPSS version 25.

Results: The regression model was statistically significant and explained 28.3% of the variance in psychological well-being, $R^2 = .283$, $F(2, 376)$, $p < .001$. Self-esteem was a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being, whereas social media use intensity was a significant negative predictor.

Conclusion: Self-esteem and social media use intensity were jointly associated with psychological well-being. Higher self-esteem predicted better mental health, whereas greater social media use intensity predicted poorer mental health. Universities may consider providing psychological counselling services to support students in managing digital stressors and promoting psychological well-being.

Keywords: Psychological well-being; Self-Esteem; Social Media Use; University Students.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being is an important indicator of optimal mental functioning, particularly among university students who are in the developmental stage of early adulthood. Psychological well-being is not merely the absence of psychological distress, but a condition in which individuals are able to function positively through dimensions such as self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Richter & Dixon, 2023). Students with high psychological well-being tend to adapt more effectively to academic demands and social environments, whereas low psychological well-being

is associated with stress, reduced motivation, and poor emotional regulation (Gilmour, Machin, Brownlow, & Jeffries, 2020). In recent years, university students have increasingly become active users of social media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become an integral part of daily life, not only for communication but also for self-expression and information seeking (Ahmed, Ho, Zazed, Van Niekerk, & Lee, 2016). Previous data indicate that young adults are among the most active users of social media, spending an average of more than three hours per day on social media platforms (Su & Chan, 2017). While social

media can provide social support and connectivity, excessive use may also contribute to negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, social comparison, and reduced life satisfaction (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Another important factor related to psychological well-being is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth and personal value (Orth & Robins, 2022). Individuals with high self-esteem tend to have greater emotional stability, better coping strategies, and more positive perceptions of life experiences (Haliza & Surawan, 2025). In contrast, low self-esteem is often associated with self-doubt, vulnerability to stress, and difficulties in maintaining psychological balance. Previous studies have consistently shown that self-esteem has a positive relationship with psychological well-being (Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2020). Although previous research has examined social media use and self-esteem in relation to psychological well-being, many studies have investigated these variables separately (Vianindia, 2022).

There is still limited research that analyses the simultaneous influence of social media use intensity and self-esteem on psychological well-being, particularly among Indonesian university students. Considering the high level of social media engagement among students and its potential psychological impact, further investigation is needed to understand how these variables interact in influencing well-being (Akbar & Aisyawati, 2021). It is expected that self-esteem will have a positive effect on psychological well-being, while social media use intensity will have a negative effect (Midgley, Thai, Lockwood, Kovacheff, & Page-Gould, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design to examine the associations of social media use intensity and self-esteem with psychological well-being among

university students. The population consisted of approximately 6,915 active undergraduate students aged 18–25 years at Universitas Malahayati, Bandar Lampung. A total of 379 students were recruited using convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error. Participants were required to be active undergraduate students aged 18–25 years, able to understand Indonesian, and willing to participate by providing informed consent.

Data were collected online using three instruments adapted to the Indonesian context: the Psychological well-being–Short Form (MHC-SF) developed by Keyes to assess psychological well-being; the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) to assess self-esteem; and the Social Media Use Intensity Scale based on the instrument developed by Ellison et al. (2007). All instruments used a four-point Likert scale. Prior to data collection, the instruments were assessed for validity and reliability. Details regarding the number of items, scoring procedures, adaptation process, validity, and Cronbach's alpha were based on the instruments used in the present study.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and research variables. Before regression analysis, assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, independence of residuals, and outliers were assessed. Multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the individual and joint associations of social media use intensity and self-esteem with psychological well-being, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Ethical approval was obtained from Universitas Malahayati under approval number 5279/EC/KEP-UNMAL/IV/2026 and all participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire.

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RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents (N=379)

Variable	Results
Age (n/%) (Mean±SD) (Range) (Year)	(21.9±2.1) (18-25)
18-20	102/26.9
21-23	164/43.3
24-25	113/29.8
Primary Social Media Used (n/%)	
WhatsApp	246/64.9
Instagram	72/19.0
TikTok	57/15.0
YouTube	4/1.1
Study Year (n/%)	
1 st -2 nd	158/41.7
3 rd -4 th	221/58.3
Psychological well-being (n/%)	
High	216/57.0
Moderate	141/37.2
Low	22/5.8
Self-Esteem (n/%)	
High	232/61.2
Moderate	128/33.8
Low	19/5.0
Social Media Use Intensity (n/%)	
High	214/56.5
Moderate	141/37.2
Low	24/6.3

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics and study variables of the 379 respondents. The respondents had a mean age of 21.9 ± 2.1 years, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years. Most respondents were aged 21–23 years (164; 43.3%), followed by 24–25 years (113; 29.8%) and 18–20 years (102; 26.9%). Regarding the primary social media platform used, WhatsApp was the most frequently used (246; 64.9%), followed by Instagram (72; 19.0%), TikTok (57; 15.0%), and YouTube (4; 1.1%). Most respondents were in their 3rd–4th year of study (221; 58.3%), while 158 (41.7%) were in their 1st–2nd year. Regarding the study variables, the majority of respondents demonstrated a high level of psychological well-being (216; 57.0%), while 141 (37.2%) had a moderate level and 22 (5.8%) had a low level. Similarly, most respondents reported high self-esteem (232; 61.2%), followed by moderate (128; 33.8%) and low (19; 5.0%) levels. More than half of the respondents also reported high social media use intensity (214; 56.5%), whereas 141 (37.2%) had moderate intensity and 24 (6.3%) had low intensity.

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Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Psychological well-being	21.00	70.00	48.76	8.53
Self-Esteem	106.00	198.00	158.49	16.71
Social Media Use Intensity	14.00	45.00	29.67	7.38

Distribution of variable categories to provide a clearer description of respondents' conditions, each variable was categorized into high, moderate, and low levels based on the mean and standard deviation. The results indicated that the majority of respondents were classified as having high levels of psychological well-being (57.0%), high self-esteem (61.2%), and high social media use intensity (56.5%).

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis

R	R ²	F	Sig.
0.532	0.283	73.942	< 0.001

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that self-esteem has a positive and significant effect on psychological well-being among university students. This finding suggests that students with higher levels of self-esteem tend to experience better psychological well-being. Self-esteem reflects an individual's evaluation of personal worth and competence (Cohen & McKay, 2020). Students who possess positive self-evaluations are generally more confident in facing academic and social challenges, enabling them to function more effectively in daily life. Self-esteem is positively associated with psychological well-being and well-being. The study also found that social media use intensity has a negative and significant effect on psychological well-being (Manago, Walsh, & Barsigian, 2023).

This result indicates that higher levels of social media use are associated with lower levels of psychological well-being. Excessive use of social media may increase exposure to social comparison, unrealistic life standards, and the need for external validation, which can negatively affect emotional well-being (Alfasi, 2019). Intensive social media use may reduce direct social interactions and interfere with daily functioning. Excessive social media use is associated with lower psychological well-being among young adults (Istiqomah, Kristianingsih, Wakhidah, & Nur, 2023).

Simultaneously, self-esteem and social media use intensity contributed 28.3% to the variance in psychological well-being. This finding demonstrates

that both internal and external factors play important roles in shaping students' psychological well-being (Bleidorn, Arslan, Denissen, Rentfrow, Gebauer, Potter, & Gosling, 2016). The remaining 71.7% of variance may be explained by other factors not examined in this study, such as social support, emotional intelligence, resilience, coping strategies, and academic stress. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to explore additional variables to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing students' mental health (Salameh, 2023). Psychological well-being encompasses several psychological dimensions (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Self-esteem appears to function as a protective factor that enhances psychological well-being, whereas excessive social media use may act as a risk factor that reduces students' ability to achieve optimal mental functioning (Faradiba, Paramita, Triwahyuni, & Purwono, 2023). Therefore, efforts to improve student mental health should focus not only on promoting healthy digital behaviour but also on strengthening self-esteem and positive self-development (Mjøsund, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Self-esteem was positively associated with psychological well-being, whereas social media use intensity was negatively associated with it. Together, both variables explained 28.3% of the variance in the psychological well-being. The findings are consistent with the view that psychological well-being reflects

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more than the absence of distress and may be associated with both personal and behavioral factors. Universities may consider self-esteem enhancement and digital literacy programs, while students may benefit from more mindful social media use. Future studies should examine additional factors associated with psychological well-being, such as social support, emotional intelligence, resilience, and coping strategies.

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