

Exploring the Adverse Impact of Social Media use Among Secondary School Students in Malaysia

**Halim Ismail^{1*}, Arifin Mamat², Hasniza Ibrahim³, Nazatul Akmar Mokhtar⁴,
Muhammad Noor Aiman Zailan⁵**

^{1,2,3,4,5} Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: halimismail@iium.edu.my

Abstract

In today's hyper-connected society, social media has become both an essential and potentially disruptive element in the lives of Malaysian secondary school students. This study examines the adverse effects of social media engagement on adolescents, with a particular focus on character decline. Data were collected through four semi-structured individual interviews and one group interview involving eight secondary school students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The analysis revealed three central themes: (1) time management, (2) self-discipline, and (3) mindset. Within time management, two subthemes emerged: (i) wasted time and (ii) interference with completing schoolwork, revision, or household duties. Uncontrolled use of social media was also shown to weaken self-discipline, with two subthemes identified: (i) addiction and (ii) neglecting meaningful routines, resulting in unproductivity. Regarding mindset, unrestricted access to online platforms was found to hinder adolescents' cognitive and psychological growth. Subthemes included (i) misleading content, (ii) spreading harmful rumours, and (iii) exposure to inappropriate material. These findings highlight the urgency of joint action among policymakers, educators, parents, and community organisations to address character erosion and foster disciplined, balanced, and emotionally resilient youth.

Keywords

Character Decline, Malaysia, Secondary School Students, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become deeply ingrained in the daily routines of Malaysian school students. Although these platforms provide avenues for connection and entertainment, their overwhelming influence gradually undermines students' ability to manage time, maintain self-discipline, and safeguard mental health. As digital platforms increasingly occupy young people's lives, their effects are felt beyond academics, influencing emotional resilience, sleep patterns, and interpersonal skills. Social media can support belonging, psychosocial adjustment, and identity growth, yet it also exposes youth to harmful consequences [1]. Research highlights that Malaysian adolescents spend considerable time on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, often neglecting academic tasks, sufficient rest, and genuine social interaction [2]. The endless exposure to curated content and viral trends encourages unhealthy comparisons, which can lower self-esteem and distort personal identity [3].

Moreover, the addictive qualities of social media weaken self-control, with many students finding it difficult to concentrate on learning due to constant notifications and algorithm-driven diversions. Evidence links prolonged social media engagement with anxiety, depression, and cyberbullying—an escalating concern in Malaysia, which holds the second-highest rate of youth cyberbullying in Asia [4]. Scholars note that Malaysians are especially vulnerable to social media dependency due to weak self-discipline, widespread internet access, peer influence, and supportive economic conditions. These factors trigger a chain reaction that negatively affects physical health, social relationships,

education, and future job prospects [5].

The growing spread of misinformation and risky online challenges further shapes harmful thought patterns and impulsive actions among adolescents. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate the negative impacts and erosion of character associated with social media usage among secondary school students in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While social media platforms provide educational content and opportunities for connection, uncontrolled or excessive usage often interferes with students' ability to organise their time productively. This literature review discusses three dimensions: the adverse effects of social media on academic performance and management, personality and behaviour, and students' mindset and self-perception.

Adverse Impact on Academic Management and Performance

The widespread use of social media has raised concerns about its implications for students' time management and academic achievement. Al-Furaih and Al-Awidi found that frequent engagement with these platforms leads to procrastination, reduced study time, and heightened academic stress among university students [6]. Similarly, Essien observed that excessive use of social media correlates with poor time allocation and declining academic outcomes [7]. Zainudin et al. further reported that 63.1% of students primarily used social media for entertainment, with 43.8% admitting to difficulties in managing their time and avoiding procrastination [8].

In the Malaysian context, Manasrah et al. identified a strong relationship between social media addiction and ineffective time management, noting that compulsive users frequently missed deadlines and recorded lower time management scores [9]. A study by Nana Katsitadze et al. found that 31.6% of respondents spent more than four hours daily on social media, well above the Global Web Index (GWI) average of 2 hours 20 minutes [10]. Additionally, 40.4% of participants admitted to not monitoring their online time. These findings highlight the urgent need for digital literacy and self-regulation to minimise the adverse effects of excessive social media use on academic discipline.

Decline in Personality and Behaviour

Meier et al. revealed that frequent use of social media is linked to reduced self-control and increased impulsivity among students [11]. They argued that features such as infinite scrolling, real-time notifications, and personalised algorithms reinforce compulsive checking habits, undermining focus and goal commitment, ultimately fostering procrastination. Similarly, Błachnio et al. demonstrated a negative association between Facebook addiction and self-discipline, showing that low self-control heightens susceptibility to compulsive use and weakens the ability to prioritise academic tasks [12]. Their research also highlighted the cyclical relationship between weak regulation and increasing reliance on social media as a coping strategy for stress.

Sharma and Sharma reported that excessive daily use of platforms like Instagram and Snapchat among high school students resulted in behavioural problems, such as tardiness, incomplete work, and inattentiveness [13]. These patterns reflected symptoms of digital dependency that impaired classroom discipline and management. Correspondingly, Ojedokun and Eraye found that compulsive social media use in Nigeria contributed to absenteeism and disobedience, attributing these issues to lack of sleep, poor focus, and internalisation of disruptive online behaviours [14]. Al-Menayes also linked heavy dependence on social media to fragmented attention, reduced motivation, and weakened adherence to study schedules, indicating a broader decline in academic self-discipline [15].

Adverse Impact on Self-Perception and Students' Mindset

Ogders and Jensen highlighted that repeated exposure to harmful online content, including violence, sexual material, cyberbullying, and unrealistic ideals, distorts adolescents' self-perception and values [16]. Their review confirmed that heavy digital media use contributes to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, particularly among adolescents with minimal parental supervision or poor media literacy. Nesi and Fazida Karim et al. likewise emphasised adverse outcomes such as online rumours, reduced face-to-face interaction, unrealistic portrayals of life, peer pressure, and mental health challenges [17], [18].

Excessive reliance on social media also reshapes adolescents' mindsets by fostering external validation and performance-based identity. Twenge and Campbell reported rising narcissism and comparison behaviours among teenagers who frequently used image-based platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where feedback loops of likes and followers reinforced self-worth tied to online popularity [19]. Beyond this, exposure to extremist ideologies and misinformation on unregulated spaces such as YouTube or Reddit poses further risks. Livingstone et al. cautioned that, without proper guidance, adolescents may internalise polarised narratives or develop desensitisation to violence, discrimination, and mental illness [20].

Overall, these studies suggest that although social media has certain benefits, its unregulated use poses a threat to adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Consequently, this study will examine the detrimental effects of social media engagement on secondary school students in Malaysia, with a particular focus on its impact on character formation.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the negative influence of social media use on character development among secondary school students, four semi-structured individual interviews and one group interview were conducted with eight participants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The sample included both upper and lower secondary students, consisting of three females and five males. A key advantage of using interviews is the ability to obtain thick and detailed descriptions, particularly useful for addressing "how" and "why" questions that cannot be fully captured through survey methods [21]. All sessions were carried out face-to-face with parental and student consent. The data collected were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, overarching themes, and subthemes reflected in participants' responses [22]. ATLAS.ti software was employed to code, organise, and manage the qualitative data, which facilitated systematic retrieval and comparison of themes across interviews.

FINDINGS

The widespread use of social media has profoundly influenced the psychological and behavioural patterns of adolescents, often contributing to the erosion of key character values. A major issue identified is poor time management, as continuous scrolling and the pursuit of instant gratification interfere with productivity and hinder the achievement of long-term goals. In addition, weak self-discipline makes it challenging for students to resist addictive algorithms, resulting in procrastination and reduced involvement in real-life interactions. Social media also shapes their perspectives and ways of thinking, encouraging superficial validation over reflective and critical engagement. Collectively, these subthemes highlight how the uncontrolled use of digital platforms undermines essential aspects of personal growth, underscoring the need for heightened awareness and

corrective interventions. The figure below presents the main themes that emerged from the findings:

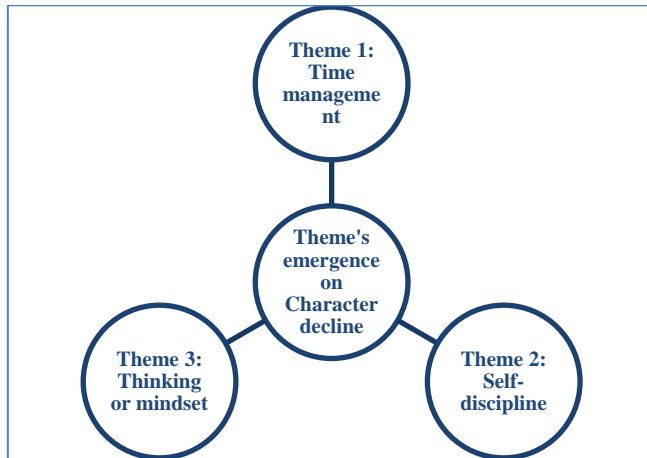


Figure 1. Themes on character decline in social media use among school students

Theme 1: Time Management

Although social media can support aspects of character development, it also carries adverse effects that disrupt adolescents' holistic growth. Regarding time management, two subthemes were identified: (1) time wastage and (2) interference with schoolwork.

A frequently cited issue during the interviews was excessive time spent online. Most students acknowledged spending between four and twelve hours daily, particularly during school holidays, browsing the internet and engaging with social media. These findings are consistent with Nana Katsitadze et al., who reported that students often exceed four hours of daily usage [10].

"It wastes time, especially when using TikTok. Even though the videos are only about 10 seconds long, it encourages endless scrolling through an infinite stream of content."(Student B)

Although some participants initially had academic intentions, they admitted to difficulty in regulating screen time, especially when usage shifted from educational to entertainment purposes. This inability to set boundaries disrupted schoolwork, revision, and even household duties:

"It wastes my time. I find it difficult to divide my time between resting and doing schoolwork, and other responsibilities."(Student A)

These findings align with those of Al-Furaih and Al-Awidi and Zainudin et al., who also highlighted students' struggles with procrastination and poor time management [6], [8].

Theme 2: Self-Discipline

The interviews also revealed that uncontrolled social media use has a negative impact on adolescents' self-discipline. Two subthemes emerged: (1) addiction and (2) unproductive routines.

Addictive use was linked to the dopaminergic reward cycle, where students sought instant gratification from online content, reinforcing compulsive scrolling and weakening

self-discipline:

"TikTok does not fulfil our intention of finding educational content. It eventually turns into entertainment, and we get carried away with the videos." (Student C)

Participants also reported unproductive routines, such as neglecting exercise, breakfast, or household tasks, due to prolonged use:

"We have wasted our one hour of morning exercise just spending time on social media, when in fact the morning should be used to do what is necessary, like making the bed, showering, or having breakfast." (Student C)

These findings align with earlier studies by Blachnio et al. and Meier et al., which demonstrated that low self-discipline increases vulnerability to compulsive use, diminishes task prioritisation, and heightens impulsivity [12], [11].

Theme 3: Thinking or Mindset

Participants also expressed concerns about the cognitive and psychological effects of social media, with three subthemes emerging: (1) misleading content, (2) spreading harmful rumours, and (3) exposure to inappropriate material. These findings correspond with Nesi (2020), who identified rumour-spreading, reduced face-to-face interaction, and peer pressure as dominant risks.

"One of the challenges in learning is that the content can sometimes be misleading. I once followed a coding tutorial ... but it turned out to be incorrect and was just for fun. I only realised this after confirming it with ChatGPT." (Student B)

"They seem to be influenced by the negative contents of social media... It is not that change is impossible — it is possible — but once someone has become accustomed to such situations, it becomes difficult to change." (Student E)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study identified three key themes related to the adverse effects of social media use among Malaysian secondary school students: time management, self-discipline, and mindset. Students reported spending significant amounts of time, particularly during holidays, on social media, which interfered with their schoolwork, revision, and household responsibilities. Compulsive use weakened self-discipline, fostering addiction and unproductive routines, while unrestricted access also distorted adolescents' thinking, exposing them to misleading content, rumours, and inappropriate influences.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that policymakers introduce clear guidelines and digital literacy policies, especially for non-school periods. Teachers should embed media literacy and time management strategies into the curriculum to encourage purposeful and supervised use of digital platforms. Parents must monitor children's online behaviour and promote healthy daily routines at home. Community organisations, including religious bodies and youth groups, should also provide value-driven alternatives that reduce dependence on social media. A coordinated effort among all stakeholders is crucial to minimise adverse effects

and foster disciplined, emotionally resilient, and critically aware youth.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

The study is limited by its qualitative design and small sample size, involving only a select group of students from Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the findings may not be fully generalizable to Malaysia's broader student population, particularly rural or socio-economically diverse groups. Additionally, the research focused solely on students' perspectives, excluding those of teachers, parents, or school administrators, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding.

Future research should employ mixed methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data for broader validation. Large-scale studies across different states and demographic groups would improve generalizability. Further investigations could examine the role of digital literacy initiatives and parental mediation in mitigating negative impacts, as well as the long-term academic and psychological consequences of excessive social media use. Exploring potential gender differences in its effects would also provide valuable insights for targeted interventions and policy formulation.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia MOHE for funding this research via the Fundamental Research Grant Initiative for Early Career (FRGS-EC24-004-0004). Also, thanks to the Ministry of Education MOE for the permission to conduct the research, Research Management Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia (RMC-IIUM), and Kulliyyah of Education IIUM. Likewise, we would like to thank all the researchers who contributed to the study's progress.

REFERENCE

- [1]. Kelly A. Allen, Tracii Ryan, DeLeon L. Grey, Dennis M. McInerney & Lea Waters. (2014). Social Media Use and Social Connectedness in Adolescents: The Positives and the Potential Pitfalls. *Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology* 31(1):18-31 DOI:10.1017/edp.2014.2
- [2]. Roziya Abu, Linda Setiawati, Susanti Agustina, Suci Yanti Ramadhan, Lutfi Khoerunnisa (2025). Exploring the Impact of Social Media Usage towards Mental Health among University Students in Malaysia. DOI: International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science. Volume VIII Issue IIIS December 2024 <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803479S>
- [3]. Elizabeth Lee (2025). Dangers of social media. The Star. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2025/05/04/dangers-of-social-media>
- [4]. Vaasundareeni K. Gopinathan, Nuzha Mohamed Taha, Siti Quayum Azira Aziz (2025). Cyberbullying and Mental Health: Experiences of International Secondary School Students in Selangor, Malaysia. DOI: International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science. Volume IX, Issue XVII, April 2025. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.917PSY0023>
- [5]. Faridah Nazir, Norliza Omar, Muhamad Afzamiman Aripin, Mohd Hizwan Mohd Hisham (2020). A Case Study of Social Media Addiction Among Malaysians. *Solid State Technology*, Volume: 63, Issue: 4.
- [6]. Al-Furaih, S. A., & Al-Awidi, H. M. (2023). Social media use and academic procrastination: The mediating role of self-regulation among university students. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28, 7755–7772. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11736-2>
- [7]. Essien, E. A. (2025). Impact of Social Media on Students' Academic Performance. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000122>
- [8]. Zainudin, F. S., Arham, A. F., Mohamad Yusaini, S. N. A., Ahmad Kamal, A. A. (2023). Social Media Usage: The Impact on Malaysian Student Life. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(12). DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i12/20192
- [9]. Manasrah, A. M., Hashim, H., Yunus, M. M., & Embi, M. A. (2022). Social media addiction and its impact on students' time management: A study among Malaysian undergraduates. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 400–412. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i1/12123>
- [10]. Nana Katsitadze, Natalia Kharadze, Dea Pirtskhalaishvili (2025). The Impact of Social Media On Students' Effective Time Management. *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies*. Vol. 11 No. 1, 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30525/2256-0742/2025-11-1-200-210>
- [11]. Meier, A., Reinecke, L., & Meltzer, C. E. (2022). "Facebocrastination"? Predictors of using Facebook for procrastination and its effects on students' well-being. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 124, 106934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106934>
- [12]. Błachnio, A., Przepiorka, A., & Pantic, I. (2019). Association between Facebook addiction, self-esteem and life satisfaction: A cross-sectional study. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 55, 701–705. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.10.026>
- [13]. Sharma, M., & Sharma, D. (2021). Impact of social media on behavioural discipline of secondary school students. *International Journal of Education and Psychological Research (IJEPR)*, 10(2), 47–51.
- [14]. Ojedokun, O. A., & Eraye, C. M. (2020). Social media use and school discipline: A study of selected secondary schools. *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*, 13(1), 74–90.
- [15]. Al-Menayes, J. J. (2015). Social media use, engagement and addiction as predictors of academic performance. *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 7(4), 86–94. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v7n4p86>
- [16]. Odgers, C. L., & Jensen, M. R. (2020). Annual research review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: Facts, fears, and future directions. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(3), 336–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13190>
- [17]. Jacqueline Nesi (2020). The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health: challenges and opportunities. *N C Med J* 81: 116 121. DOI: 10.18043/ncm.81.2.116.
- [18]. Fazida Karim, Azeezat A Oyewande, Lamis F Abdalla, Reem Chaudhry Ehsanullah, Safeera Khan. (2020). Social Media Use and Its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review. *Cureus Open Access Review Article*. Doi: 10.7759/cureus 8627

- [19]. Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 12, 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003>
- [20]. Livingstone, S., Kardefelt-Winther, D., & Stoilova, M. (2019). Children's data and privacy online: Growing up in a digital age. UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/955-childrens-data-and-privacy-online-growing-up-in-a-digital-age.html>
- [21]. Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. London: Sage Publications
- [22]. Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115.