

Use of Social Media and Depression in First-Year Undergraduate Students during COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most educational institutions switched to online learning as a standard education delivery model. The use of social media has since become an essential and integral component of students' lives, both as a tool to facilitate learning as well as for social connections. The current study examines the use of social media and its association with depression among newly enrolled first-year university students during the national lockdown. Three hundred and eight-six ($N = 386$) participants aged between 19–21 years from one faculty of a public university were recruited online for the study. Self-reports on daily time spent and emotional investment (frequency of visits) on social media were obtained. Depression was assessed using the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS) Depression Scale. Results from binary logistic regression showed that high levels of investment in a variety of social media activities were associated with symptoms of depression. Compared to the users at the lowest level, students in the higher usage groups had significantly increased odds of depression ($AOR = 2.94$, 95% $CI = 1.22–7.08$; $AOR = 2.49$, 95% $CI = 1.04–5.94$, respectively), even after controlling for all covariates. Total time spent, however, was not found to associate with depression. Additionally, indigenous students from East Malaysia who mostly reside in rural areas recorded a significantly higher odds of experiencing depression during the pandemic ($AOR = 3.32$, 95% $CI = 1.23–8.90$, $p = .02$) compared to the Malays. Given the pervasive use of social media during the Covid-19 lockdown, the findings of the study suggest that educators at higher education institutions can leverage on the ubiquitous use of social media among students to disseminate targeted educational messages regarding mental health.

Keywords: social media, depression, first-year university students, COVID-19 lockdown