Digital Footprints and Mental Resilience: A Study of Social Media's Influence on Student Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Scholars are increasingly exploring the psychological and emotional effects of social media on mental well-being, making it a growing research area. Limited empirical studies exist that specifically examine how athletes balance academic demands and engage with social media platforms in their pursuits. This study intends to determine the social media platforms favored by student-athletes and the amount of time they dedicate to them. Additionally, this study seeks to uncover the attitudes of student-athletes while participating in social media and explore the connection between social media use and self-esteem in this group. A purposive sampling approach was used to target individuals with prior involvement in the student sports carnival or "Karnival Sukan Mahasiswa." The survey was administered via an online platform utilizing Google Forms. In this study, the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) by Jenkins-Guarnieri et al. (2013) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) were utilized to assess the self-esteem of student-athletes. The findings indicated that TikTok (60%) was the most frequently used daily social networking site among student-athletes, followed by YouTube (53%) and Instagram (43.5%). Moreover, the findings highlighted that while social media platforms offer chances for networking, self-expression, and advocacy can also contribute to stress and mental pressure. In conclusion, social media's influence on student-athletes has dual facets where it enables networking and self-expression, yet also potentially causing stress. Further exploration is needed to comprehend its complexities, emphasizing lasting psychological effects and improved strategies.

Keywords: Digital Footprints, Mental Resilience, Social Media, Student Athletes

INTRODUCTION

In the current era of digital technology, social media platforms have evolved beyond their initial purpose as recreational platforms and have become complex spaces for many forms of social engagement, self-representation, and even the cultivation of personal image. The profound impact of social media is especially conspicuous within the young adult population, who actively and extensively participate in these digital platforms (Wagstaff, Sarkar, Davidson & Fletcher, 2016). Considerable discourse has been dedicated to examining the favorable attributes of social media in heightened social interconnectedness and enhanced information accessibility. However, there is a growing apprehension about the psychological and emotional consequences associated with its usage. The influence of social media on mental well-being is an emerging area of scholarly investigation and the past literature reviews have

predominantly concentrated on the broader public, neglecting specific subgroups that may demonstrate distinct patterns of involvement with social media and subsequent effects on mental well-being.

The demographic of student-athletes is an example of a population that has received limited study attention. Student-athletes frequently turn to social media as a means of managing the simultaneous pressures of academic pursuits and competitive sports, utilizing it as a coping mechanism, a source of encouragement, and even as a platform for cultivating their personal brand (Ruiz, Alfonso-Fuertes & Vives, 2022). Considering the demands of their lifestyle, student-athletes may possess a distinct vulnerability to both favorable and unfavorable outcomes associated with their engagement in social media platforms. However, there is a scarcity of empirical research that has specifically examined the convergence of athletic endeavors, academic demands, and the use of social media platforms. The lack of comprehensive research in this area provides the context for the current study, which focuses on student athletes at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Negeri Sembilan Branch based on the institution's strong emphasis on social sciences, including psychology and sociology.

The existing scholarly literature has extensively examined the diverse aspects of social media's influence on mental well-being, including but not limited to self-esteem, body image, and overall life satisfaction (Fardouly, Willburger & Vartanian, 2017; Jozani, Ayaburi, Ko & Choo, 2020). Moreover, motivation to pursue and engage in sports in the first place among the collegiate athletes is bounded with individual intrinsic and extrinsic factors which possibly involving the influence in social media (Aina, Omar, Sazali, Mim & Zainuddin, 2023). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these studies frequently employ a generalization approach, wherein their findings are applied to wide-ranging demographic categories. Consequently, this approach fails to address specific sub-groups, such as student-athletes, leaving pertinent inquiries unaddressed. Limited study exists regarding the perceptions of student-athletes towards the use of social media within the framework of their distinctive lifestyle, characterized by the simultaneous presence of academic and athletic obligations. Similarly, the examination of the influence of social media on crucial indicators of mental health, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction, is still insufficiently investigated in this demographic. The deficiencies in the current body of scholarly work provide a strong rationale for undertaking a targeted investigation.

Given these identified gaps, the primary objectives of this study are three-fold. First, it aims to identify preferred social media sites and the time (the period before or after) for the student athletes to be on social media. Second, it seeks endeavors to unravel the attitude of student athletes when engaging on social media. Third, it unravels the relationship between social media usage and self-esteem among student-athletes.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study primarily adopts a quantitative research approach, utilizing a survey methodology to investigate the correlation between social media usage and the mental well-being of student athletes at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Negeri Sembilan Branch. The choice of a quantitative approach allows for the objective measurement and statistical analysis of the collected data, offering a robust framework to identify patterns, make predictions, and generalize findings to a broader population (Bhandari, 2020). The survey is executed through an online platform of Google Forms to facilitate data collection from geographically dispersed respondents (between different campuses in UiTM Negeri Sembilan). The online approach not only enables real-time monitoring but also ensures data is automatically archived for subsequent analysis.

Sample Selection

The study's population encompasses all student-athletes enrolled at UiTM Negeri Sembilan Branch. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to focus on participants who have participated in the student sports carnival or Karnival Sukan Mahasiswa (KARiSMA XXVII 2022). This sampling method ensures that the collected data is both relevant and directly correlates with the study's objectives.

Instrumentation and pilot study

Two primary scales were utilized to measure the variables under study. First, the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright and Johnson (2013) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) were adapted and adopted to gauge the self-esteem levels among respondents (Nabiryo, 2023; Rosenberg, 1965). This scale consists of 10 items and has demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha (α) score of 0.91 as presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Rule of Thumb (Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel & Page, 2015)

Cronbach alpha (α) score	Interpretation
0.01-0.60	Non-acceptable
0.61-0.70	Acceptable
0.71-0.80	Good and acceptable
0.81-0.90	Good
0.91-1.00	Excellent

Data Collection Procedure

The study received ethical clearance from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) research ethics committee (Ref: 100-KNS(PJI.9/19). The distribution was facilitated through team representatives participating in the KARiSMA XXVII 2022 sports event. Data collection spanned over a 10 day period throughout the event ongoing.

By meticulously outlining the above aspects, this methodology section aims to provide a transparent and replicable roadmap for the research. The adherence to ethical guidelines and the rigorous steps taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the instruments further accentuate the study's academic rigor.

RESULTS

In this study, the findings in Table 2 revealed that the top three social networking sites used by student-athletes are TikTok (60%) as their daily social networking sites. This is followed by YouTube (53%) and Instagram (43.5%).

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of social competence and antisocial behavior score

Items	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
TikTok	101	60.1
YouTube	89	53.0
Instagram	73	43.5
Others	33	19.6
Twitter	29	17.3
Facebook	21	12.5
Snapchat	10	6.0

The result from Table 3 has shown that most student-athletes admitted that using social media is part of their everyday routine (M=4.16, SD=.98), followed by some who admit they enjoy checking their social media accounts (M=3.92, SD=.76). A few student-athletes admitted that they do not like to use social media (M= 1.90, SD=.81). This result is consistent with the previous study identifiying that student-athletes frequently see social media as a tool that could help them to communicate with their friends and family and gain more exposure, fans, and audience participation study (Park, Williams & Son, 2020). In addition, they use social media to keep updated on their athletic achievement as well as position themselves as representatives of brands, probably attracting sponsorships and career opportunities.

Table 3. Attitude on social media as part of student-athletes' daily life

Items of Social Media Use	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)
Using social media is part of my everyday routine	4.16	0.98
I enjoy checking my social media accounts	3.92	0.76
Social media play an important role in my social relationships	3.86	0.84
I would like it if everyone used social media to communicate		
I respond to content that others share using social media	3.64	1.09
I feel disconnected from friends when I have not logged into social media	3.40	1.01
I prefer to communicate with others mainly through social media	3.27	1.08
I would be disappointed if I could not use social media at all	3.20	1.12
I get upset when I can't log on to social media social		
I don't like to use social media	3.01	1.28
	2.98	1.44
	1.90	.81

The result in Table 4 showed the Pearson Correlation results between two variables which is social media usage and self-esteem indicating that there was no significant negative relationship between social media usage and self-esteem of student-athletes with a $P > 0.05$.

Table 4. Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Self-Esteem of Student-Athletes

		Self-Esteem
Social media usage	Pearson Correlation	-.10
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.18
	N	168

DISCUSSION

The findings from social networking sites lines up with study by Ham, Lee, Hayes and Bae (2018) which found social media use has increased throughout all age groups and demographics. The growing number of smartphones and easy access to the internet, which has contributed to this rise, has raised the amount of time student-athletes spend daily on social media sites. The personal lives and interests of the student-athletes are regularly the content posted on their social media including their hobbies, travels, and interactions with friends and family. This content makes the athletes more relatable and likable by humanizing them (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010). However, student-athletes should be aware and cautious to avoid oversharing and revealing sensitive information that might risk their privacy or harm their reputation (Kim & Kim, 2019). On the other hand, past study indicated their social media as a platform to advocate for social causes they are passionate about. Athletes can encourage positive change and gain support from their followers by speaking out on important problems (Zhigang, Kai, Chao, Hongyan, Lei & Zhao, 2022). Futhermore, it also noted that social media users, especially student-athletes, must be aware of possible opposition or criticism from people who may hold an opposite view (Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015).

The quantitative findings of this study also support the study by Chuang and Jin (2021), that some student-athletes do not like to use social media because they feel pressured to keep up a carefully managed and attractive online image, which calls into question their sincerity and makes them fearful of negative public opinion. They are also aware of the difficulties and demands that come with its use, whereby managing time and energy while balancing social media commitments and athletic commitments can be difficult (Filo et al., 2015). On the same note, student-athletes are often affected by social media's negative effects on their mental health, which result in negative emotions, including

anxiety, stress, and problems with the image, despite the positive reinforcement that social media can provide (Park, Williams & Son, 2020).

The findings of self-esteem seems to decrease because of constant comparisons to the lives of the students carefully trimmed and the pressure to win approval from others (Zainuddin, Ravichandran, Abd Rahman & Md Yusof, 2022). On another note, the possibility that gender may act as a moderator in the relationship between self-esteem and social media shows that continuous use of social media can have a negative impact on self-esteem for both male and female participants, where the female participants show a stronger relationship between self-esteem and social media use (Orben, Dienlin, & Przybylski, 2019). Consequently, the above findings validates the study by Plackett, Sheringham and Dykxhoorn (2022), as there is a negative relationship between social media and self-esteem, where more social media use can lead to lower self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the impact of social media on student-athletes can be viewed as both advantageous and disadvantageous. Although social media platforms provide opportunities for networking, self-expression, and advocacy, they can also contribute to stress and mental strain. Further investigation is warranted to delve into the intricate nature of this association, with a potential emphasis on examining enduring psychological consequences and potential strategies to enhance the social media encounter for this population. This research not only contributes to the current literature but also establishes a basis for more refined and focused investigations in the future. This is particularly important in a time where the integration of digital and physical aspects of life is increasingly inseparable.

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