

COUNSELOR TRANSFORMATION IN FACING SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL IDENTITY AND STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of school counselors in responding to the challenges posed by social media trends on students' digital identity and mental health in the digital era. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semistructured interviews with six school counselors experienced in addressing social mediarelated issues among students. The findings reveal that counselors are actively developing digital competencies, adopting new communication tools, and implementing holistic strategies to support students' mental well-being and digital literacy. However, counselors face challenges such as lack of technological confidence, ethical concerns, and the need for institutional support and training. The study highlights the critical role of collaboration among counselors, educators, parents, and the community to foster healthy digital identities and improve youth mental health. This research contributes to the understanding of how counselor roles evolve in digital contexts and provides implications for policy and practice in educational settings.

Keywords: Counselor Transformation, Digital Identity, Student Mental.

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has brought a significant revolution to social, economic, and educational life. One of the most striking phenomena of this era is the deep penetration of social media into everyday life, especially among teenagers and students. Social media has evolved beyond a mere communication tool; it has become a space for identity formation, self-expression, and social interaction. For students, it serves as an important arena in shaping self-image and seeking social validation (Boyd, 2014). However, social media also presents serious risks to mental health and psychosocial balance. Social pressure, addiction, cyberbullying, and identity crises are tangible consequences of uncontrolled social media use (Fox, 2018).

In this context, school counselors are now facing more complex challenges than in previous eras. Their responsibilities are no longer limited to conventional counselling but now require an in-depth understanding of digital dynamics and their implications for students' mental well-being (Mitchell, 2016). Counselor transformation is thus an imperative response to the demands of the times. This requires enhanced digital competence, media literacy, and the development of new approaches that are responsive to the needs of students in the digital era (Amalia, 2021). Students' digital identity is shaped through their interactions on social media. Phenomena such as self-presentation, curated identity, and online performativity have created a new reality that influences students' confidence, self-esteem, and emotional stability (Turkle, 2011).

In many cases, students experience dissonance between their digital and real-life identities. This gap can trigger existential crises and psychological pressure, especially when digital

expectations do not align with personal realities (Sefton-Green, 2016). On the other hand, social media can also serve as a tool for personal development if used healthily. Counselors play a strategic role in guiding students to use social media wisely and to develop a positive digital identity (Nasrullah, 2015). Unfortunately, counselor education in Indonesia still largely focuses on traditional approaches. Curricula and training programs have yet to fully integrate contemporary issues such as digital identity and tech-based mental health challenges (Santrock, 2003). This mismatch between field realities and counselor readiness represents a structural challenge that must be addressed through reform in counselor education and the development of adaptive professional competencies (Sugihartati, 2020). Moreover, the evolution of social media algorithms that prioritize viral content and rapid consumption has worsened student mental conditions. They are increasingly exposed to negative content, misinformation, and even extremist ideologies without adequate guidance.

The rise of phenomena such as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), body shaming, and social anxiety are among the “symptoms of the digital age” that require systemic responses from professional counsellors (U. A. Oberst, E. Wegmann, B. Stodt, 2017). Therefore, counsellor transformation is not merely a technical adaptation but a shift in paradigm. Counselors are expected to develop a sociocultural understanding of the digital ecosystem and foster empathetic communication grounded in students’ media realities (Prasetyo, 2022). Counselors must also engage in interdisciplinary collaboration with teachers, psychologists, parents, and even educational technologists to establish a holistic and contextually relevant student support system (Brabazon, 2020). One important area of transformation involves the use of digital platforms as mediums for counseling. Appbased counseling, instant messaging, and video calls have become effective alternatives in the era of limited face-to-face interaction (Gibson, 2021). Nevertheless, these approaches also raise ethical and technical dilemmas, such as data protection, privacy concerns, and relational depth. Counselors must be specifically trained to manage these dynamics professionally (ACA, 2014). Interestingly, many students feel more comfortable opening up in digital spaces than in physical interactions. This highlights the importance of innovation in counseling methods to remain relevant to students’ current communication styles. Beyond individual approaches, counselors are also expected to develop preventive school-based programs such as media literacy campaigns, stress management training, and digital identity reinforcement. This global issue has attracted the attention of many researchers. Twenge (2020) found a negative correlation between excessive social media use and increased depression in teenagers, especially females.

In Indonesia, research by the Center for Research and Development on Education and Religion (2022) reported a significant rise in mild mental health disorders among students due to social media addiction, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselor transformation must also be supported by changes in systemic structures, including school policies, the integration of educational technologies, and active involvement from parents and the broader community. In the context of character education and moral development, social media has an ambivalent role: it can serve as a tool for *da'wah* and motivation, but also a space for moral degradation without proper control. Therefore, the transformation of counselors must be viewed within a broader framework: strengthening student mental resilience, guiding healthy digital identity formation, and providing safe spaces for psychological growth amid digital disruption;

This study aims to explore the various forms of transformation needed by school counselors, identify the key challenges of students' digital identities, and offer contextual, applicable counseling intervention models relevant to the digital age. Through this approach, it is hoped that the findings will contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of the counseling profession and serve as an important reference for policy formulation in education and student mental health in the digital era.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the transformation of counselors in addressing social media trends and their impact on students' digital identity and mental health. The qualitative design was chosen to allow an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and strategies of school counselors in the digital era. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school counselors at several junior and senior high schools in West Sumatra. The selection of participants was conducted using purposive sampling, focusing on counselors who had experience in addressing student issues related to social media use and mental health. A total of six counselors participated in this study.

The interviews were conducted in person and via online platforms, depending on the accessibility and convenience of the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. The questions focused on the counselors' experiences, the challenges they encountered, the skills they developed, and the strategies they implemented in dealing with students' digital identity and mental health concerns. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied through multiple sources, including observation notes and relevant documents such as counseling reports and school mental health programs. Member checking was also carried out by returning interview transcripts to the participants for verification to maintain accuracy and credibility. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The steps included data familiarization, coding, identifying key themes, reviewing patterns, and interpreting the results in relation to the research questions and theoretical frameworks. This method allowed the researcher to uncover recurring themes and gain deeper insights into how counselors are transforming their roles in response to the influence of social media on students. The qualitative approach used in this study provides a rich and nuanced understanding of counselor transformation in the digital context and highlights practical implications for future counselor training and policy development in schools. Provide sufficient detail methods to allow the work to be reproduced. Methods already published should be indicated by a reference: only relevant modifications should be described.

3. Results and Discussion

This study reveals that the intensive use of social media among students has significantly impacted their digital identity and mental health. Students often compare themselves to the idealized representations they see on social media, which can trigger feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem (Pantic, 2014). This phenomenon emphasizes the need for counselors to actively assist students in understanding and managing their digital identities in a healthy manner (Manik, 2024). School counselors face considerable challenges in adapting their approaches to address issues

related to social media. They must develop digital competencies to comprehend the dynamics of social media and its impact on students. This includes understanding various social media platforms, how algorithms work, as well as current digital trends and challenges (Munawarah, 2024).

In practice, counselors have begun integrating technology into their counseling services. Some use instant messaging applications to communicate with students, while others utilize social media platforms to disseminate information and education about mental health (Mustaqim, 2019). These approaches allow counselors to reach students in ways that are more relevant and aligned with their digital habits. However, this adaptation does not come without difficulties. Some counselors report a lack of confidence in using technology, while others encounter challenges related to privacy and professional ethics (Fernanda, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for educational institutions to provide the necessary training and support to help counselors effectively enhance their digital skills. Additionally, counselors need to develop more holistic approaches in addressing issues of digital identity and mental health. This includes understanding the social and cultural factors that influence student behavior on social media, and strategies to foster resilience and well-being (Suryahadikusuma, 2017). In this context, collaboration among counselors, teachers, parents, and the broader community becomes vital. By working together, they can create an environment that supports the development of healthy digital identities and student mental wellness (Putra, 2020). This also involves efforts to enhance digital literacy among students so they can use social media wisely and responsibly (Fernanda, 2020).

The study also shows that students who receive effective counseling support tend to have a better understanding of their digital identities and demonstrate higher levels of mental well-being (Rahmawati, 2021). This affirms the crucial role of counselors in helping students navigate the challenges they face in the digital age. One of the key findings is that students who are aware of the potential harms of excessive social media usage tend to regulate their usage more effectively, especially when guided by a counselor (Pratama, 2019). This suggests the importance of proactive counseling approaches that educate students about digital wellness and help them set boundaries. Moreover, the integration of digital tools in the counseling process allows for more dynamic engagement with students, particularly those who may be reluctant to seek help through conventional face-to-face counseling (Enjellina, 2024). Digital platforms offer anonymity and accessibility, which are attractive to today's youth.

The need for ethical and professional guidelines in digital counseling is also a concern. Counselors expressed the necessity for clear protocols on online communication, data confidentiality, and maintaining professional boundaries (Mustaqim, 2019). Furthermore, the role of family in supporting student digital behavior is significant. Parents who are digitally literate and involved in monitoring their children's online activities contribute positively to student mental health outcomes (Putra, 2020). An important insight from this study is the growing trend of digital peer support groups facilitated by counselors, where students can share experiences and coping strategies in a safe online space. These groups have shown to improve emotional expression and peer empathy. Schools that implement whole-school digital wellness programs report better outcomes in both digital identity formation and mental health resilience among students. This suggests that counselor transformation must be integrated within institutional frameworks

(Munawarah, 2024). In conclusion, the transformation of the counselor's role in responding to social media trends is a significant step toward supporting the development of healthy digital identities and student mental health. By developing digital competencies, adopting holistic approaches, and fostering strong collaboration with stakeholders, counselors can play a more effective role in supporting students in this digital era.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the role of school counselors is undergoing significant transformation in response to the pervasive influence of social media on students' digital identities and mental health. Counselors are enhancing their digital skills and adopting innovative methods to effectively engage with students in the digital era. Despite facing challenges related to technology use and professional ethics, their proactive efforts are essential in promoting students' digital literacy and mental well-being. Furthermore, collaboration between counselors, educators, families, and communities emerges as a key factor in creating supportive environments for youth development. These findings underscore the necessity for continuous professional development and institutional support to empower counselors in navigating the complexities of social media impacts on students. Future policies and programs should focus on integrating digital competency training and ethical guidelines into counselor education to optimize their role in this evolving landscape.

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