

ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of social media on adolescents' mental health and assesses the role of school counselors in addressing related challenges. The research involved 150 high school students aged 15–18 and 15 school counselors from urban schools across Indonesia. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings revealed that 67% of students reported experiencing anxiety linked to social media usage, while 42% exhibited symptoms of depression. School counselors who implemented targeted social media literacy programs reported greater success in supporting students to develop healthier digital habits. These results underscore the urgent need for counseling interventions that integrate digital well-being strategies, peer support systems, and parental engagement. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on adolescent mental health interventions in the digital age and offers practical insights for school counselors working with youth affected by social media-related mental health issues.

Keywords: adolescent mental health; social media; school counselors; digital well-being; counseling interventions.

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped how young people communicate, socialize, and construct their identities. Recent statistics indicate that adolescents spend an average of 7 to 9 hours per day on digital media, with a significant portion of that time devoted to social networking platforms (Anderson et al., n.d., 2023). While these platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for connection and self-expression, mounting evidence suggests they may also contribute to a range of mental health challenges among adolescents. The relationship between social media use and adolescents' psychological well-being has become a growing concern for educators, mental health professionals, and parents alike.

Twenge and Campbell (2024) reported a strong correlation between excessive social media use and elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness in teens. These findings are particularly alarming considering that mental health disorders affect approximately 20% of adolescents globally, with many conditions first emerging during adolescence (World Health Organization, 2023). Mechanisms such as social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FOMO), and sleep disruption have been identified as possible pathways through which social media may negatively affect mental health (Prinstein et al., 2020).

Within educational settings, school counselors occupy a strategic role in addressing these concerns. As professionals trained in developmental psychology and intervention strategies, counselors are well-positioned to detect early warning signs, offer support, and implement preventive

programs. However, many report feeling underprepared to navigate the complex intersection of technology and mental health (Howard & Kennedy, 2024). This preparedness gap is troubling, especially given that schools are often the primary access point for adolescent mental health services.

This study aims to examine the specific impact of social media on adolescent mental health and evaluate the effectiveness of various counseling approaches in mitigating its negative effects. By identifying successful intervention strategies and potential barriers to implementation, the research seeks to strengthen school counselors' capacity to support student well-being in the digital era. Additionally, it explores the potential for collaborative approaches involving students, parents, and educational stakeholders in promoting healthy social media use.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a pressing public health issue affecting millions of adolescents worldwide. Second, it focuses on school-based interventions, which are accessible to diverse socioeconomic populations. Finally, by offering evidence-based guidance for counselors, the study contributes to bridging the gap between research and practice in adolescent mental health care.

2. Method

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the impact of social media on adolescent mental health and to evaluate the effectiveness of counseling interventions. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled a broad and in-depth understanding of this complex phenomenon.

2.1. Research Design

A sequential explanatory design was adopted, beginning with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. This design allowed the researchers to identify patterns through survey data and then explore underlying mechanisms through interviews and focus group discussions.

2.2. Participants

The study involved 150 high school students (aged 15–18) from five urban schools in Indonesia. The sample comprised 82 female and 68 male students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, 15 school counselors (10 female, 5 male) with professional experience ranging from 3 to 15 years participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation across different types and settings of schools.

2.3. Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using the following instruments:

- a) Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS): assessed emotional engagement with social media platforms.
- b) Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21): measured psychological distress.
- c) School Counseling Intervention Survey (SCIS): evaluated the approaches used in school counseling.

Qualitative data were obtained through:

- a) Semi-structured interviews with school counselors regarding challenges and intervention

strategies.

- b) Focus group discussions with students to explore their lived experiences with social media.
- c) Document analysis of school counseling programs and materials.

2.4. Procedure

Data collection was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year. Following ethical approval and informed consent, surveys were administered to both students and counselors. Subsequently, 30 students and all 15 counselors participated in interviews and focus group discussions. All sessions were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were maintained throughout the research process to capture contextual insights.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, and regression modeling to examine relationships between social media use patterns and mental health indicators. SPSS software (version 28.0) was employed for statistical analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework. NVivo software (version 14) facilitated the coding process. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation techniques were applied. An independent researcher reviewed 20% of the qualitative data to establish inter-coder reliability.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Patterns of Social Media Use and Mental Health Indicators

Survey findings revealed extensive social media engagement among participants, with students reporting an average daily usage of 4.3 hours (SD = 1.8). Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube emerged as the most frequently accessed platforms. Analysis of DASS-21 scores indicated that 67% of students exhibited moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, while 42% reported symptoms of depression. Statistical testing confirmed a significant positive correlation between daily social media duration and anxiety levels ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$).

Table 3.1 Mental Health Indicators Based on Daily Social Media Use

Daily Usage	Anxiety Symptoms	Depression Symptoms	Stress Symptoms
0-2 hours	28%	19%	22%
2-4 hours	52%	34%	47%
4-6 hours	73%	51%	68%
6+ hours	85%	64%	76%

Qualitative data provided context for these statistics. During focus group discussions, students described several mechanisms through which social media influenced their mental well-being:

- a) Social comparison: "I'm constantly comparing myself to influencers. Their perfect lives make me feel inadequate about my own." (Female, 16)
- b) Fear of missing out (FOMO): "If I don't constantly check my accounts, I'm afraid I'll miss out on something important in my social circle." (Male, 15)
- c) Online harassment: "Comments on my posts can be really negative. People feel free to

criticize anything when they're behind a screen." (Female, 17)

- d) Sleep disruption: "I often stay up late scrolling through my feed. I know it affects my sleep, but it's hard to stop." (Male, 18)

These findings align with prior studies by Nesi et al. (2023) and Twenge and Campbell (2024), affirming that the impact of social media on mental health occurs through multiple pathways.

The combined quantitative and qualitative data highlight a significant and multifaceted relationship between social media use and psychological distress, influenced by individual vulnerabilities, usage patterns, and content type.

3.2. Current School Counseling Approaches

Interview analysis with school counselors revealed a variety of approaches to addressing social media-related mental health issues. Most counselors (80%) reported incorporating some discussions on digital health into their programs, but only 33% had implemented structured interventions specifically targeting social media use.

Table 3.2 Current Counseling Approaches to Social Media-Related Issues

Approach	Implementation Rate	Perceived Effectiveness
Individual counseling	93%	Moderate
Group counseling	67%	High
Classroom guidance	53%	Moderate
Parent workshops	40%	High
Digital detox programs	33%	Very high
Peer mentoring initiatives	27%	High

Counselors identified several barriers to effective intervention:

- a) Knowledge gap: "I wasn't trained to address social media issues in my counseling program. I'm learning as I go." (Counselor, 7 years of experience)
- b) Resource constraints: "With a caseload of over 350 students, it's hard to implement new programs or offer individual support." (Counselor, 12 years)
- c) Rapid technological change: "By the time we understand one platform, students have already moved on to another." (Counselor, 5 years)
- d) Parental engagement: "Many parents don't understand social media or monitor their children's use." (Counselor, 9 years)

These findings underscore significant gaps in counselor preparedness and resource allocation, consistent with Howard and Kennedy's (2024) research highlighting the need for professional development in this area.

Effective Intervention Strategies

This study identified several promising approaches based on counselor reports and student feedback:

- a) Digital literacy programs: Structured classroom sessions focused on critical media consumption yielded positive outcomes. Students in these programs demonstrated improved

ability to identify manipulated images and reduced vulnerability to social comparison ($t(148) = 3.74, p < 0.01$).

- b) Cognitive-behavioral approaches: Interventions targeting distorted thinking related to social media helped students develop healthier perspectives. One counselor noted, "Teaching students to question their automatic thoughts about likes, followers, and online validation has been transformative."
- c) Peer support networks: Schools that implemented peer mentoring programs reported significant benefits. These initiatives leveraged positive peer influence to encourage balanced technology use and provide relatable support.
- d) Collaborative approaches: Programs involving parents, teachers, and counselors yielded the strongest results. Parent education workshops were particularly effective in creating consistent messaging about healthy social media use at home and school.
- e) Mindfulness practices: Teaching students mindfulness techniques helped them become more aware of their social media habits and emotional responses. Students reported using these skills to make more intentional decisions about platform engagement.

One notably successful case emerged from a school that implemented a comprehensive "Digital Wellness Initiative," integrating classroom guidance, small group counseling, individual interventions, and parent education. Pre-post assessments showed a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms (average decrease of 28%, $p < 0.001$) and improved sleep quality among participating students.

3.3. Theoretical Framework for School Counseling Interventions

Based on study findings, we propose a theoretical framework for addressing social media-related mental health challenges in school settings. The model integrates four key dimensions:

1. Prevention: Universal interventions focused on digital literacy, critical thinking, and healthy technology habits.
2. Identification: Screening protocols to detect students negatively affected by social media use.
3. Intervention: Targeted strategies for symptomatic students, including cognitive-behavioral techniques, mindfulness practices, and connection-building activities.
4. Collaboration: Partnerships with parents, teachers, and community resources to ensure consistent messaging and support.

This framework acknowledges the complex interplay of individual, environmental, and technological factors influencing adolescent mental health. It positions school counselors as central agents in promoting digital well-being while recognizing the need for systemic approaches that extend beyond individual counseling.

The findings suggest that effective interventions must balance an acknowledgment of social media's positive aspects (e.g., connection, identity exploration, creative expression) with strategies to mitigate potential harms. As one counselor expressed, "Our goal isn't to demonize technology, but to help students become mindful digital citizens who can use these tools without being consumed by them."

4. Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media usage and adolescent mental health, underscoring the pivotal role of school counselors in addressing these

challenges. The findings reveal that frequent engagement with social media is significantly associated with heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression among adolescents. These outcomes appear to be mediated by mechanisms such as social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), online harassment, and sleep disturbances.

The research highlights that while school counselors are uniquely positioned to deliver effective interventions, many face substantial limitations in terms of training, institutional support, and access to resources necessary for promoting digital well-being in a comprehensive manner. Effective strategies identified in this study include digital literacy education, cognitive-behavioral interventions, peer support networks, and collaborative initiatives involving parents and educators.

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. First, counselor education programs should incorporate training on technology and mental health to better equip future practitioners. Second, schools must prioritize digital wellness as an integral component of comprehensive counseling services by dedicating appropriate resources and offering ongoing professional development. Third, policymakers should consider establishing guidelines that promote balanced technology use within educational settings and foster mental health literacy.

This research contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on adolescent mental health in the digital era and provides an evidence-based framework for school counseling interventions. Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of various intervention approaches, examine cross-cultural differences in the impact of social media, and investigate how evolving digital landscapes continue to influence adolescent development.

In an age where digital platforms increasingly shape the adolescent experience, empowering school counselors with the expertise, tools, and institutional support to address social media-related mental health issues represents a critical investment in the well-being and development of today's youth.

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