

# **From Connection to Crisis: Emerging Mental Health Challenges in the Digital Age**

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*“Ms Rajeswary Appahu, 30, was found dead in her home on Jul 5, a day after she lodged a police report in Kuala Lumpur over fears of being raped and killed...[She]had named two people in her police report, alleging that they were tormenting her by trolling her on TikTok.”*

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Almost a year ago, a young lady, a social media influencer, perished by suicide after experiencing online harassment and abuse while livestreaming [1]. The appalling event blatantly illustrates the intricate relationship between digital technology, social media and mental illness. Akin to physical aggression, cyberbullying can lead to profoundly detrimental consequences, including physical injury, psychological trauma, and in extreme cases, death; whether through severe bodily harm, suicide precipitated by sustained victimization, or fatal retaliatory acts.

Through digital means, hostile behaviour such as cyberbullying can precipitate psychological distress or reputational harm and turn social connections into a crisis. The dangerous environment of the online web now is getting closer to children, young adults and other vulnerable people than ever before. The aggressive act is not only perpetrated by strangers without borders but also within domestic milieus [2-4]. In a recent cross-sectional online survey of 1,838 women aged 18–62 years in Malaysia, nearly half reported experiencing cyber intimate partner violence at least once, with such behaviours showing a positive correlation with face-to-face violent acts [5]. Elsewhere, meta-analyses and systematic reviews indicate various violent behaviours, including extortion, sexual assault, paedophilia, cyber-intimate partner violence, and many ferocious acts have become more prevalent [3,4]. The recent emergence of artificial intelligence amplifies the viral nature of online content by altering or faking voices, images, or videos [2-4]. The pervasive violent behaviours that were previously covert can turn global and stay permanently on the internet, leaving the victim without escape or respite. Deprived of support, susceptible individuals who are introverted, non-assertive and socially isolated feel trapped within the abusive digital web [2]. The persistent abuse and harassment lead to anxiety and depression, and the only way to escape, from their perspective, is death through suicide [2,6,7].

In other examples of worrying scenarios, the constant exposure to idealised images and curated lives can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and loneliness [6,7]. Social isolation, distress and phobia of face-to-face interpersonal connection experienced by individuals who are depressed can also encourage them to interact indirectly with unknown digital figures [6,7]. For individuals, in particular adolescents and young people with personality problems such as borderline personality disorders, exposure to online forums and platforms hosting pro-suicide content or communities that normalise or even glorify suicidal behaviour is dangerous [8]. Moreover, in the era of “K-pop” influences among youngsters, a tendency toward sensationalism and detailed descriptions of suicide methods by unethical journalists or unauthorised influencers may increase the risk of copycat behaviour—a phenomenon known as the Werther effect [9,10]. Suicide has also been demonstrated to occur following dysfunctional social exposure to the machine learning system, which can auto-generate coherent responses but at times, simulate unsafe dialogue [11]. More work is required to demonstrate the impact of artificial intelligence on our social behaviour and mental health.

Increased screen time, internet addiction, gaming disorder, pornographic addiction and fear of missing out (FoMO) are other new emergent psychological problems related to digital misuse [6,12]. In Malaysia, local researchers have shown that these emerging digital behaviours are observed across diverse populations, impacting both laypersons and professionals, including members of the medical community [13-15]. These virtual trends are significantly associated with elevated anxiety levels, cyberbullying, poor sleep quality, anxiety and depression [12-15]. Elsewhere, a large-scale study suggested that prolonged screen times among children are associated with lower psychological well-being, less curiosity, poor self-control, more distractibility and a higher tendency for anxiety and depression [6,16]. Besides children, adults with increased screen time also have a high tendency for cognitive fatigue, mood disturbances and emotional dysregulation [17]. Digital addictive behaviours also result in sleep disturbances, disrupt circadian rhythm and poor sleep hygiene [18]. Furthermore, within a family sphere, excessive use of digital technology is associated with less face-to-face communication among family members, poor family quality time and increased levels of isolation, particularly among children [19]. Digital use and social media can result in various detrimental consequences; more research is needed to understand their full impact.

Every cloud has a silver lining—while digital means and social media can disseminate negativity and misinformation, they can also be leveraged as a powerful platform for mental health promotion, violence prevention, as well as tools for enhancing social connection and support systems [20]. Moreover, awareness campaigns, crisis helplines, and tele-counselling are gradually integrated into social media platforms [11]. A recent systematic review highlights the positive impact of online interventions in promoting help-seeking behaviour and reducing stigma associated with mental illness [21]. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have shown benefit in delivering accessible content on psychiatric disorders and management, tips for mental well-being, and healthy lifestyles, particularly among young people who may not engage with traditional health services [22]. In addition, through efficient data analyses and identification of the most effective therapies, artificial intelligence can both provide recommendations for the best treatment plans and contribute to enhancing research related to mental health [23].

The dual role of digital means and social media requires a balanced approach—capitalising on its preventive potential while minimising its negative effects through digital literacy, ethical use, and policy implementation. Despite the emergence of new psychopathology, the growing use of digital technology and social media presents huge prospects for discovery, innovation, and transformative invention in mental health, behavioural sciences and the management of psychiatric disorders.

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