

Pre-Bedtime Social Media Use and Mental Health among Muslim Undergraduates: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of social media into daily life has raised growing concerns about its implications for students' mental health, particularly when engagement occurs during emotionally vulnerable periods such as before bedtime. This study explores the lived experiences of Muslim undergraduate students regarding pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived effects on mental health and emotional well-being. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study seeks to understand how students interpret and make meaning of their late-night digital engagement. Five Muslim undergraduate students from a Malaysian public university were purposively selected and participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted online. Data were analysed manually using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis revealed four interconnected themes: emotional regulation through social media use, emotional distress from negative and tragic content, social comparison and self-doubt, and cognitive overload and anxiety from digital saturation. Findings indicate that pre-bedtime social media use plays an ambivalent role in students' mental health experiences. On one hand, selective engagement with entertaining or motivational content provided temporary emotional relief and stress regulation. On the other hand, exposure to distressing news, comparison-inducing content, misinformation, and online conflict intensified anxiety, emotional fatigue, self-doubt, and cognitive strain. These effects were particularly pronounced during night-time use, when students reported reduced emotional resilience and difficulty disengaging from digital content. The study highlights the importance of recognising both the adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of pre-bedtime social media use. By foregrounding students' subjective experiences within a Muslim undergraduate context, this research contributes nuanced insights into the complex relationship between digital behaviour and mental health. The findings underscore the need for mindful, intentional digital engagement and culturally sensitive mental health initiatives to support students' psychological well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped daily routines worldwide, influencing how individuals communicate, access information, and regulate emotions. In Malaysia, social media use is especially pervasive, with approximately 26.8 million users spending nearly three hours per day on digital platforms (Husain et al., 2023). Among university students, social media has become deeply embedded in academic, social, and personal life. While these platforms offer opportunities for connection, self-expression, and emotional support, increasing concern has emerged regarding the psychological consequences of excessive and poorly regulated use, particularly during late-night hours when individuals may be more emotionally vulnerable.

Pre-bedtime social media use has received growing scholarly attention due to its potential implications for mental health. Engagement before sleep often involves emotionally stimulating content, social comparison, and information overload, which may heighten cognitive arousal and emotional reactivity. Research indicates that late-night digital engagement is associated with increased anxiety, emotional fatigue, difficulty disengaging from online interactions, and heightened psychological distress (Alonzo et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2024). For university students already navigating academic demands, identity development, and social pressures, these effects may further compromise psychological well-being.

Within the Malaysian context, mental health concerns among undergraduates are increasingly evident, with rising levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional distress reported in recent studies (Arifin et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2024). However, much of the existing literature focuses on general social media use or overall screen time, offering limited insight into how the *timing* of use, specifically pre-bedtime engagement, shapes students' lived mental health experiences. Moreover, the predominance of quantitative approaches may overlook the subjective meanings and emotional processes underlying students' digital behaviours. Addressing this gap, the present study explores Muslim undergraduate students' lived experiences of pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived impact on mental health through a phenomenological lens.

1.1 Problem Statement

Among university students, night-time social media use has become a habitual behaviour embedded in daily life. In Malaysia, growing evidence suggests that high engagement with social media during late-night hours is associated with increased anxiety, emotional fatigue, and psychological distress (Ali et al., 2023; Nordin et al., 2025). Such engagement frequently involves emotionally stimulating content, social comparison, and information overload, which may undermine emotional regulation and heighten vulnerability to mental health challenges (Gündoğmuş et al., 2020).

Within Muslim undergraduate populations, these concerns may be further shaped by cultural and religious values that emphasise balance, self-discipline, and emotional moderation. Although religiosity has been associated with improved emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Ijaz et al., 2017), excessive or poorly regulated social media use may create internal tension and emotional strain. Despite this, empirical research examining how Muslim undergraduates subjectively experience and interpret the mental health implications of pre-bedtime social media use remains limited. Existing studies tend to prioritise overall screen time, rely on quantitative designs, and are largely situated in Western contexts (Dissing et al., 2022; Kuhn et al., 2024), with few qualitative studies conducted in Malaysia or other Muslim-majority settings (Samat et al., 2020; Al-Garni et al., 2024). This gap underscores the need for contextually grounded qualitative inquiry into the mental health experiences of Muslim university students.

1.2 Research Objective

In response to these gaps, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of Muslim undergraduate students regarding pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived impact on for mental health and emotional well-being. Specifically, the study examines how pre-bedtime social media engagement influences students' experiences of stress, anxiety, and emotional regulation. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research provides a culturally sensitive and contextually grounded understanding of how late-night digital habits intersect with the mental health experiences of Muslim university students in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Undergraduate Students' Mental Health and Well-Being

Mental health is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning, as well as individuals' capacity to cope with stressors, maintain productive functioning, and experience psychological well-being (World Health Organization, 2025). Mental well-being extends beyond the absence of mental illness to include positive affect, emotional balance, resilience, and life satisfaction. In Malaysia, mental health concerns have become increasingly prominent among adolescents and young adults transitioning into higher education (Abdullah et al., 2022).

Within this context, university students are considered particularly vulnerable due to academic pressure, developmental transitions, financial strain, and social demands. Malaysian studies report concerning prevalence rates, with Ibrahim et al. (2024) identifying extremely severe levels of anxiety (26.5%), depression (12.4%), and stress (4.7%) among undergraduates, particularly in earlier years of study. Similarly, Arifin et al. (2023) found that over two-thirds of Malaysian students experienced moderate to high psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These findings highlight the scale of mental health challenges in higher education and underscore the importance of examining contributory lifestyle and environmental factors beyond academic stress alone.

Digital environments, particularly social media, have become integral to students' daily lives and emotional regulation practices. Research suggests that social media use produces both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Purposeful engagement may facilitate social support and emotional connection, especially during stressful periods (Ajewumi et al., 2024). In contrast, excessive or poorly regulated use has been consistently linked to anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion, often driven by social comparison, exposure to negative content, and information overload (Ahmed et al., 2024). Emerging evidence further suggests that the *timing* of social media use plays a critical role, with pre-bedtime engagement associated with heightened cognitive and emotional arousal and increased psychological strain (Alonzo et al., 2021). However, Malaysian research has largely focused on general usage patterns, leaving night-time digital behaviour underexplored.

2.2 Pre-Bedtime Social Media Use among Undergraduate Students

The widespread adoption of social media has reshaped university students' daily routines, particularly during night-time hours. In Malaysia, approximately 26.8 million users spend nearly three hours per day on social media platforms (Husain et al., 2023). Social media, defined as digital platforms that facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content (Kaye, 2021), is deeply embedded in students' academic, social, and leisure activities. University students are among the most active users, frequently engaging across multiple platforms late into the night (Kolhar et al., 2021).

Pre-bedtime social media use refers to engagement with digital platforms shortly before sleep, including scrolling feeds, watching videos, or interacting with online content. This behaviour has attracted increasing scholarly attention due to its potential to disrupt psychological and physiological processes essential for emotional regulation and rest. Studies consistently show that social media use before bedtime heightens cognitive and emotional arousal, delays disengagement, and increases psychological strain (Alonzo et al., 2021; Levenson et al., 2017).

Within the Malaysian context, earlier research demonstrated significant associations between night-time device use and sleep-related problems. Abdalqader et al. (2018) reported that evening and pre-sleep gadget use were strongly linked to insomnia symptoms among undergraduates. More recent findings suggest that these patterns persist, with Mohd Kamaruzihan and Soe (2023) reporting that over half of Malaysian university students experienced poor sleep quality alongside prolonged daily screen exposure. Despite these trends, studies specifically examining *pre-bedtime* social media use and its mental health implications remain limited, particularly in post-2020 research. Existing studies continue to prioritise overall screen time rather than timing-specific digital engagement, despite evidence that night-time use may exert a disproportionate impact on emotional well-being (Levenson et al., 2017).

2.3 Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature indicates that while social media plays an integral role in students' emotional lives, pre-bedtime engagement represents a critical yet underexplored context in which digital behaviour may intensify psychological vulnerability. The lack of qualitative, contextually grounded research, particularly within Malaysian and Muslim undergraduate populations, limits understanding of how students subjectively experience and interpret the mental health effects of late-night social media use. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore Muslim undergraduate students' lived experiences of pre-bedtime social media use and its implications for mental health and emotional well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore Muslim undergraduate students' lived experiences of pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived effects on mental and emotional well-being. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for examining complex, subjective experiences and culturally embedded meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures (Alase, 2017; Astalin, 2013). Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals experience a phenomenon in their everyday lives and on uncovering the essence of those experiences (Alase, 2017; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025), making it an appropriate design for this study.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich data from individuals who had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Dahal et al., 2024; Subedi, 2021). Five Muslim undergraduate students from a public university in Kuala Lumpur were recruited, consistent with phenomenological research, which typically involves small samples to allow in-depth exploration. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Muslim undergraduates enrolled at IIUM, use social media for at least two hours before bedtime, and be willing to reflect on how this practice affected their mental health and emotional well-being. All participants provided informed consent and had access to a stable internet connection to facilitate online interviews.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. The interview protocol was developed in alignment with the research objective and focused on students' experiences of pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived implications for mental health. The protocol was reviewed and validated by two experts in educational psychology and qualitative research methodology. The semi-structured format ensured consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on personally

meaningful experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a token of appreciation (RM 30) upon completion of the interview, which served solely as acknowledgment of their participation.

Data were analysed manually using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for phenomenological research, as it enables rich and detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences while maintaining methodological rigor. The first phase began with data familiarisation. The researcher familiarised herself with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' accounts. Second, initial codes were generated inductively by identifying meaningful units of text relevant to pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived mental health implications. Third, related codes were collated and organised into potential themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Fourth, these preliminary themes were reviewed and refined by comparing them against the coded data extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, the final themes were clearly defined and named to reflect their core meanings and relevance to the research objective. Finally, the themes were organised into a coherent analytic narrative, supported by verbatim extracts, to produce a transparent and rigorous account of how pre-bedtime social media use shaped students' mental health experiences. This approach enabled systematic identification of recurring patterns while remaining sensitive to participants' meanings and interpretations (Majumdar, 2019; Mackieson et al., 2018). Codes were developed inductively from the data and grouped into themes reflecting key aspects of students' mental health experiences related to pre-bedtime social media use.

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonymous codes, and informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

4. FINDINGS

The present study sought to explore how pre-bedtime social media use impacts Muslim undergraduate students' mental health and well-being, particularly in relation to stress, anxiety, and emotional states. Table 1 shows the four key themes identified through thematic analysis of the interview data, each reflecting a distinct dimension of students' lived experiences. The following sections present the themes in detail, supported by verbatim extracts from participants to illustrate how pre-bedtime social media use influences their mental health and emotional experiences.

Table 1: List of themes generated

Research Question	Themes
How does pre-bedtime social media use impact Muslim undergraduate students' mental health and well-being, specifically stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being?	Theme 1: Emotional Regulation through Social Media Use
	Theme 2: Emotional Distress from Negative and Tragic Content
	Theme 3: Social Comparison and Self-Doubt
	Theme 4: Cognitive Overload and Anxiety from Digital Saturation

4.1 Theme 1: Emotional Regulation through Social Media Use

This theme illustrates how participants used social media as a strategy for emotional regulation, particularly as a means of unwinding and managing stress before bedtime. Several students described intentionally engaging with specific types of content, such as entertainment, motivational messages, or personal interests, to achieve relaxation, comfort, and emotional relief at the end of the day. In these instances, social media functioned as a coping mechanism that supported temporary emotional regulation and psychological comfort.

One participant described scrolling through fandom-related content as a rare opportunity to relax amid academic demands, noting that it provided a sense of relief and emotional release after a long day:

“...most of the time when I use social media... I use it more to consume content from the fandoms that I’m in... and I feel very relaxed when I do this... scrolling through this content is the only time where I feel like I can really unwind.” (P1/DU54)

Similarly, another participant emphasised how mood-dependent content influenced their emotional state, explaining that calming visuals and sounds contributed to feelings of relaxation and happiness:

“...it really depends on the content... if I see something relaxing, I usually feel more relaxed and happier, like watching ASMR videos and things like that.” (P2/DU44)

For some students, social media was described as a source of immediate emotional relief during moments of distress. One participant referred to using the platform as a way to soothe negative emotions and restore emotional balance:

“Whenever I feel like something’s not right or I’m having negative feelings, I’ll open X (Twitter). It feels like a cure—something to calm my mind and help me relax.” (P3/DU42)

Others highlighted how content related to personal interests and positive life narratives fostered motivation and emotional uplift. One participant reflected on cooking and family-related videos as sources of joy and inspiration:

“Watching cooking videos makes me reflect on myself... it makes me feel like I can do it too. Cooking makes me happy. Seeing happy families and their achievements also motivates me and makes me feel happy.” (P4/DU66)

Another participant described motivational posts as emotionally reassuring, particularly messages that encouraged self-compassion and patience:

“...there are certain topics that help me feel comforted and relaxed... motivational posts that say things like, ‘Don’t be sad, you’re on your own journey.’” (P5/DU46)

Overall, these findings suggest that pre-bedtime social media use can function as a short-term emotional regulation tool, offering relaxation, reassurance, and psychological comfort. When used intentionally and selectively, such engagement may support students’ mental well-being by providing a temporary buffer against daily stressors.

4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Distress from Negative and Tragic Content

This theme captures participants’ experiences of emotional disturbance arising from exposure to distressing, tragic, or emotionally charged content on social media, particularly during night-time use. Several students reported that encountering news related to global crises, accidents, or personal tragedies evoked strong emotional reactions, including sadness, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and heightened self-reflection. Such content often disrupted emotional stability rather than providing comfort or relief.

One participant described how repeated exposure to news about global conflicts and human suffering, particularly involving women, triggered emotional distress and feelings of overwhelm:

"...there are some topics that really trigger me emotionally... especially big issues like the situation in Palestine or other horrific news. A lot of it focuses on the pain and suffering of women, and I think it's also because my content is quite feminist-based." (P1/DU59)

Similarly, another participant highlighted how unexpected exposure to sad narratives on social media platforms affected their emotional state:

"...if it's something sad... sometimes random sad stories come up on TikTok. They really make me feel very sad." (P2/DU46)

Participants also described intense emotional reactions to locally relevant tragedies. One student reflected on encountering news about a fatal bus accident, explaining how such content evoked deep emotional responses:

"...when I suddenly come across sad news, like the bus accident involving USIM... it's really heartbreaking. I get emotional easily and end up crying over stories like that." (P4/DU46)

Beyond immediate sadness, some participants reported engaging in deeper emotional and moral self-reflection after encountering tragic content. One participant described how viral news about a death prompted feelings of guilt, anxiety, and existential questioning:

"...when people were talking about the victims... it made me start thinking, 'Am I a good person?' or 'Have I lived a good life?' Sometimes I think about my own actions and feel anxious." (P5/DU50)

Overall, these findings demonstrate that exposure to negative or tragic content during pre-bedtime social media use can intensify emotional vulnerability and psychological strain. Rather than supporting emotional regulation, such content may heighten distress, rumination, and emotional overwhelm, thereby undermining students' mental well-being.

4.3 Theme 3: Social Comparison and Self-Doubt

This theme reflects how exposure to others' achievements on social media prompted social comparison among participants, often leading to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and emotional distress. Several students described comparing their own progress with that of peers, particularly in relation to academic success, personal milestones, or perceived productivity. These comparisons frequently generated pressure, competitiveness, and lowered self-worth, especially during pre-bedtime social media use when students were more emotionally reflective.

One participant described experiencing stress and competitive tension when encountering peers' achievements online, noting how such comparisons triggered feelings of inadequacy:

"...if I see another student who's more successful than I am, sometimes I feel jealous... and more competitive too. It's like, why are they doing so much better than I am? Sometimes it really stresses me out." (P2/DU54)

Another participant reflected on how achievement-oriented content intensified self-doubt rather than motivation. Although not explicitly framed as jealousy, exposure to others' accomplishments prompted negative self-evaluation and emotional discomfort:

“When I see things like, ‘You’re already this age but you haven’t achieved anything yet,’ and I look at other people’s achievements... it makes me doubt myself. I feel a bit sad and unmotivated. It’s like comparing myself with others, and those types of content usually bring me down before bed.” (P5/DU55)

These accounts illustrate how pre-bedtime social media use may amplify tendencies toward upward social comparison, particularly in achievement-focused environments. Such comparisons can heighten emotional vulnerability, leading to stress, sadness, and diminished self-confidence. Overall, the findings suggest that social comparison processes activated during late-night social media engagement may undermine students’ mental well-being by reinforcing self-doubt and negative self-appraisal.

4.4 Theme 4: Cognitive Overload and Anxiety from Digital Saturation

This theme captures how excessive exposure to information on social media—particularly irrelevant discussions, misinformation, emotionally charged content, and online conflict—contributed to cognitive overload and heightened anxiety among participants. Several students described feeling mentally overwhelmed by the sheer volume and unpredictability of content encountered during pre-bedtime social media use. Rather than facilitating relaxation, this saturation of information often led to irritation, rumination, emotional reactivity, and difficulty disengaging mentally at the end of the day.

Participants expressed frustration when repeatedly encountering inaccurate or irrelevant commentary, which drained cognitive resources and generated emotional irritation. One participant described how exposure to unrelated or misleading content triggered annoyance and mental fatigue:

“...posts with incorrect facts... things that don’t match actual facts make me feel frustrated. Sometimes people comment things that are completely unrelated, like suddenly bringing Kelantan into the discussion for no reason. It doesn’t even make sense, and I feel annoyed.” (P4/DU53)

For some students, cognitive overload escalated into anxiety when passive consumption shifted into active engagement, particularly during online disputes. One participant described how being drawn into a conflict on their feed resulted in panic and emotional distress:

“My FYP was filled with people defending a virtual K-pop group from haters. I got frustrated and responded without thinking. Then people started attacking me too, and I panicked, thinking, ‘What should I do now?’” (P3/DU59)

Exposure to distressing or controversial news content further intensified anxiety, especially when encountered unexpectedly before bedtime. Participants described how negative global news and viral controversies disrupted emotional calm and heightened stress:

“...usually it’s news, like world news, because these days the news is pretty bad. If I look at it right before bed, it can make me quite stressed.” (P2/DU63)

Attempts to self-regulate were not always successful, as some participants reported becoming trapped in cycles of escalating content that amplified anxiety rather than alleviating it:

“...sometimes my FYP gives me something funny that distracts me, but sometimes it goes down a rabbit hole and I feel more and more stressed. When that happens, I just turn off my phone and force myself to sleep.” (P1/DU89)

Others highlighted how controversial or comparison-inducing content intensified stress and emotional discomfort:

“...when certain content goes viral or appears on my FYP, it makes me feel stressed. Especially content that makes us compare ourselves to others—that’s what really causes stress for me.” (P5/DU64)

Overall, these findings illustrate how digital saturation before bedtime can overload cognitive capacity, heighten emotional reactivity, and trigger anxiety. Rather than supporting emotional regulation, excessive and unfiltered content consumption undermined students’ mental well-being by fostering frustration, rumination, and psychological distress. This theme underscores the risks associated with unregulated pre-bedtime social media use and highlights the need for greater awareness of how digital environments shape cognitive and emotional health.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined how pre-bedtime social media use shapes Muslim undergraduate students’ mental health and emotional well-being. Overall, the findings reveal an ambivalent pattern: while social media can function as a short-term emotional regulation tool, it also exposes students to psychological stressors that contribute to emotional disturbance, self-doubt, cognitive overload, and heightened anxiety. These findings reinforce the growing recognition that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful; rather, its psychological impact depends on content type, mode of engagement, and users’ emotional vulnerability during late-night hours.

5.1 Social Media as a Tool for Emotional Regulation

Participants frequently described using social media to unwind and manage stress after demanding academic routines. Selective engagement with entertaining, motivational, or personally meaningful content helped induce calmness and emotional relief. This supports existing evidence that social media can function as an emotion-regulation strategy when used intentionally and in moderation. Steinert and Dennis (2022) emphasised that social media shapes emotional experiences and digital well-being, suggesting that deeper understanding of this relationship can inform healthier platform use. Similarly, Cauberghe et al. (2020) found that adolescents relied on social media to cope with loneliness and anxiety during the COVID-19 lockdown, while Plackett et al. (2022) demonstrated that structured social media use interventions were associated with improvements in mental well-being, particularly reductions in depressive symptoms. In the present study, students exercised agency by curating content that fostered comfort and reassurance, positioning social media as embedded within everyday coping practices. Notably, this intentional engagement may also reflect culturally informed understandings of emotional balance within a Muslim context. Islamic teachings emphasise moderation (*wasatiyyah*), patience (*sabr*), and disciplined self-regulation in managing stress, values that have been associated with enhanced emotional awareness and psychological well-being (Ijaz et al., 2017). Participants’ emphasis on choosing calming or morally reassuring content suggests efforts to restore inner balance rather than merely seeking distraction. However, this form of digitally mediated regulation appeared fragile. Its effectiveness depended heavily on the nature of content encountered, and emotional relief was often temporary. Thus, while social media served as a short-term coping resource, its benefits were contingent and easily disrupted during emotionally vulnerable pre-sleep periods.

5.2 Emotional Distress from Negative and Tragic Content

In contrast to the regulatory benefits described in Theme 1, exposure to distressing or tragic content elicited emotional exhaustion, sadness, and heightened vulnerability. Participants reported difficulty

disengaging from news about global crises, personal loss, or injustice, suggesting a mechanism of sustained cognitive arousal and emotional carryover that interfered with psychological downregulation before sleep. These findings are consistent with Zhao and Zhou (2020), who linked disaster-related social media exposure to increased depressive symptoms among individuals experiencing high stress. Similarly, Buchanan et al. (2021) found that even brief exposure to COVID-19–related content reduced positive affect and optimism, while Mousoulidou et al. (2024) demonstrated that negative headlines intensified adverse emotional responses regardless of framing. Together, this body of evidence supports the present finding that emotionally charged digital content can amplify strain, particularly during vulnerable night-time periods.

Beyond emotional contagion, participants' accounts revealed deeper moral and existential reflection. Several students described questioning their character, actions, or spiritual standing after encountering tragic news. Within a Muslim cultural framework that emphasises moral accountability, compassion, and awareness of life's transience, exposure to suffering may evoke not only sadness but also introspective self-evaluation. Religious practices associated with mindfulness and self-examination have been linked to heightened emotional awareness (Ijaz et al., 2017), which may partly explain why distressing content prompted reflective rumination rather than passive consumption.

5.3 Social Comparison and Self-Doubt

Another salient finding concerns the role of social comparison in shaping emotional well-being. Participants frequently evaluated their own progress against peers' achievements, resulting in self-doubt, perceived inadequacy, and diminished self-worth. This reflects upward social comparison; a process consistently associated with negative affect and lower self-esteem. Verduyn et al. (2020) found that passive consumption of social networking content intensifies comparison tendencies and undermines subjective well-being, while experimental research demonstrates immediate declines in mood and self-esteem following exposure to idealised peer portrayals (Midgley et al., 2020).

Within the Malaysian higher education context, where anxiety and psychological distress remain prevalent (Arifin et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2024), such comparisons may carry heightened emotional weight. Academic achievement is often closely tied to future security and family aspirations, potentially amplifying pressure to perform. For Muslim undergraduates navigating identity development, exposure to curated success narratives may therefore intensify self-criticism, particularly during reflective pre-sleep periods. While Islamic ethical teachings encourage humility and gratitude, they also emphasise purposeful striving and excellence, creating a tension in which comparison may motivate improvement yet simultaneously undermine self-confidence.

5.4 Cognitive Overload and Anxiety from Digital Saturation

Participants also reported mental strain arising from excessive information, misinformation, and online conflict, which contributed to cognitive overload and anxiety. The constant influx of unfiltered content depleted cognitive resources, leading to frustration, rumination, and emotional reactivity. These findings are consistent with cognitive load perspectives, which posit that excessive information processing impairs mental functioning. Empirical evidence supports this view: Tian et al. (2025) found that social media overload predicted emotional exhaustion and anxiety among Malaysian users, while Sunil et al. (2022) reported that prolonged exposure to overwhelming digital content increased social media fatigue and psychological strain. In the present study, digital saturation frequently escalated from passive browsing to active participation in online disputes, further intensifying emotional distress.

Beyond informational excess, participants experienced overload as a disruption of internal balance. Several described consciously disengaging once stress became apparent, indicating awareness of emotional

dysregulation and attempts at self-correction. Within a Muslim cultural framework that emphasises moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and disciplined self-regulation, excessive digital immersion may be perceived as inconsistent with internalised values of composure and equilibrium. Thus, pre-bedtime cognitive saturation reflects not only technological overload but also tension between habitual engagement and aspirations toward emotional balance.

5.5 Integrative Interpretation

Taken together, the findings position pre-bedtime social media use as a psychologically ambivalent practice that operates through multiple, intersecting mechanisms shaping students' mental health. While selective engagement with comforting or motivational content functioned as a short-term emotion regulation strategy, this relief was fragile and easily disrupted by exposure to negative news, social comparison cues, and cognitively overwhelming content. This pattern suggests that pre-bedtime social media use constitutes a vulnerability window in which reduced self-regulatory capacity and heightened emotional sensitivity intensify both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. The findings therefore extend existing literature by demonstrating that the mental health implications of social media are not solely determined by frequency of use, but by timing, content characteristics, and users' emotional states at the point of engagement.

The study further contributes to digital mental health scholarship by illustrating how multiple psychological mechanisms, namely emotional contagion, upward social comparison, cognitive overload, and rumination, co-occur within late-night digital contexts, often within the same individual. This nuanced, experiential account challenges binary interpretations of social media as either beneficial or harmful, instead highlighting its contingent and situational nature. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, the findings complement predominantly quantitative research and offer depth to understanding how emotional regulation attempts may inadvertently transition into emotional dysregulation during pre-bedtime use.

Importantly, this study adds contextually grounded insight from Muslim undergraduate students, a population underrepresented in digital mental health research. While not positioning religiosity as a direct protective factor, the findings reveal how cultural and value-based orientations toward moderation, self-discipline, and emotional balance shape students' reflections on their digital habits. In doing so, the study advances a culturally sensitive perspective on pre-bedtime social media use, underscoring the need for mental health and digital well-being interventions that attend not only to usage patterns, but also to timing, emotional vulnerability, and socio-cultural context. Collectively, these contributions deepen understanding of how late-night social media engagement intersects with stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being, and provide a foundation for more targeted and contextually responsive approaches to supporting undergraduate mental health.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim undergraduate students regarding pre-bedtime social media use and its perceived effects on mental health. The findings indicate that pre-bedtime social media use plays a dual and complex role in students' psychological well-being. On one hand, social media functions as a coping mechanism that provides emotional comfort, temporary stress relief, and a sense of connection, particularly during periods of academic or personal strain. On the other hand, excessive or prolonged engagement before bedtime was associated with heightened anxiety, cognitive overstimulation, emotional fatigue, and difficulties disengaging from online content. Importantly, students were not passive recipients of these effects; they demonstrated agency by exercising self-regulation strategies such as setting personal boundaries, limiting screen time, and becoming more mindful of their emotional states during

night-time social media engagement. These findings highlight the nuanced ways in which digital behaviour intersects with students' mental health experiences.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The research was conducted within a limited timeframe and involved a small sample of five participants from a single university, which restricts the transferability of the findings to broader populations. Recruitment challenges and reliance on self-reported interview data may also introduce recall and social desirability bias. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable, contextually grounded insights into an underexplored aspect of undergraduate mental health. The findings carry important implications for higher education institutions, counsellors, and student support services, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts. Universities may benefit from incorporating mental health-focused digital well-being initiatives that raise awareness of night-time social media use and promote healthier emotional regulation strategies. At the individual level, the study encourages students to cultivate greater self-awareness, moderation, and intentionality in their digital habits to protect their psychological well-being. Future research is recommended to include larger and more diverse samples, employ longitudinal or comparative designs, and examine platform-specific patterns to deepen understanding of the relationship between pre-bedtime social media use and mental health among university students.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Raihan Khadijah Aminudin Baki: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, validation, and writing-original draft; **Aishah Hanim Abd Karim:** Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, supervision, and writing-reviewing and editing draft.

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