

## Relationship Between Social Media Usage, Self-Efficacy, Gender, and Perceived Social Support Among University Students

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Loneliness is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon globally. Psychological research has begun to focus on perceived social support as a solution to prevent or reverse the negative impacts of loneliness. Perceived social support, which is the feeling of being cared for by one's social networks, could possibly be increased through usage of social media, especially in the IR 4.0 era. In addition to that, self-efficacy could contribute to one's belief in the ability to form and maintain close relationships, and hence, it affects how much one feels supported by his/her social networks. The present study aims to determine the relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support. The study also aims to identify any gender differences in terms of perceived social support. Data from 211 university students in Kuala Lumpur was analysed using Pearson's correlation analysis and independent samples t-test. The findings show that there is a significant positive relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support. Therefore, future interventions on social media usage and perceived social support should take into account the factors of self-efficacy, and social media could be utilised as an intervention to increase perceived social support.

*Keywords:* social media, self-efficacy, perceived social support, university students

Studies show that levels of loneliness have increased globally (Suri, Garg, & Tholia, 2019), especially among young adults who have to experience major transitions in life (Fidler, 1976). Since loneliness and perceived social support have shown a consistent negative relationship, it is important to take a deeper look at how social support can be increased to reduce loneliness.

The importance of social support can be seen in that individuals who believe that they are being supported by their social networks have a buffer against stressors in

life, and this buffer is known as *perceived social support*. This buffer is able to protect from mental disorders (e.g. Lam, Cervantes, & Lee, 2014), improve physical health (e.g. Ng et al., 2015), and overall life satisfaction (Lee, Chung, & Park, 2016).

On the other hand, a lack of perceived social support is related to various negative outcomes such as social isolation, increased risks of psychological disorders, and even escalated mortality risks. Globally, the number of people struggling with depression exceeds 300 million (World

Health Organisation, 2018). In a study in England, loneliness has become a phenomena that affects more than 2.8 million people in the country (Office for National Statistics, 2018). More specifically, the young adult population of ages 16 to 24 were the most likely to report high levels of loneliness. It is therefore crucial to identify the factors that contribute to perceived social support in an effort to alleviate these startling statistics.

### **Literature Review**

Studies have attempted to look into various sources of perceived social support. In the theory of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986), behaviour, individual characteristics, and the environment affect one another. This theory has been employed in various psychological studies, such as in Knowlden and Sharma (2012), where they found a reciprocal association between parenting style, norms in the family, and the home environment with young children's adoption of health behaviors. In the present study, the environment refers to perceived social support, which the individual can derive from his or her family or peers. On the other hand, the individual characteristics refer to the level of self-efficacy among the adolescents, and behaviour refers to their social media usage.

There has been an increase in research on social support in lieu with the proliferation of social media usage. Social media usage has increased greatly in the past years; there were more 3.2 billion social media users globally in 2018 (Kemp, 2018). In Malaysia itself, the most common Internet activity after text messaging was the usage of social

networking platforms (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018). Since these online platforms provide a wider diversity of relationships, there is a possibility that online relationships provide higher perceived social support (e.g. Trepte, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2014). Social media platforms could be an extra channel to build and maintain interpersonal relationships in addition to offline interactions, thereby having a higher perception of social support.

However, there are contradicting findings; for instance, high social media usage has been found to be a destructive factor of romantic relationships (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015) as well as a significant predictor of social isolation among young adults (Primack et al., 2017). Hence it is undetermined whether social media usage is positively correlated with perceived social support.

Having a high perception of being supported by one's social networks could potentially include the element of self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's own ability to achieve goals (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy on its own predicts many positive outcomes, such as academic achievement (Honicke & Broadbent, 2015), job performance (Alessandri, Borgogni, Schaufeli, & Caprara, 2014), and emotional health (Botting, Durkin, Toseeb, Pickles, & Conti-Ramsden, 2016). It is undeniable that self-efficacy is a crucial personal resource from which people benefit.

However, existing studies have rarely examined the link between self-efficacy and perceived social support. Other studies

usually study self-efficacy and perceived social support as independent variables of other outcomes, such as resilience (Salifu & Somhlaba, 2015) and improved mental health.

Self-efficacy and perceived social support are also commonly studied as mediators of other variables. For instance, Dinh and Arenius (2016) found that self-efficacy mediated the negative correlation between low perceived social support and venture emergence in entrepreneurs. In other examples, Guan et al. (2016) found that the at-risk teenagers with sufficient self-efficacy had better restraint from drug use only through the mediator of family support.

These studies show that self-efficacy and perceived social support are commonly studied as mediators, but research regarding the direct relationship between these variables is rare. It is important to examine this relationship because it is possible that perceptions of social support rely heavily on one's self-efficacy. Individuals must be able to initiate social relationships before they can feel supported. Without the self-belief that they can build relationships and are worthy of support, they may not be able to achieve perceived social support at all.

In addition to social media usage and self-efficacy, gender is also a possible characteristic that contributes to perceptions of social support. According to the social role theory (Eagly, 1987), males and females have different societal expectations placed on them that determine how they behave. One significant contrast is that females in history had the role of nurturing children and caring for the community,

whereas males were expected to lead, hunt, and win battles. This meant that women were expected to value interpersonal connections and social support, while men were expected to value achievement and independence.

These differences could play out as psychological differences in terms of perceived social support. It may seem acceptable for females to seek assistance for a problem they face, thereby encouraging them to seek support and report feeling supported (Butler, Giordano, & Neren, 1985). On the other hand, men would be frowned upon if they opened up about their struggles and desired to seek help because of societal expectations, and this could lead to lower perceived social support. This was supported in a study by Adamczyk (2015) in which women reported higher perceptions of social support compared to men.

However, in recent studies, perceived social support was found to be independent of gender (Zaidi, 2014). In another study, males even reported higher levels of perceived social support compared to the females (Simpkins, Price, & Garcia, 2015). Another study on Facebook users likewise did not find any significant differences between gender in terms of perceived social support obtained from Facebook usage (Indian & Grieve, 2014). The lack of consensus in past studies on this matter indicates a need for additional data regarding the gender differences in perceived social support.

In addition, studies in social media usage, self-efficacy and perceived social support is

rare among Malaysian university students, and this study hopes to address this gap. Understanding their relationship is important because social media usage is increasingly replacing face-to-face interaction in higher education settings. Therefore, the present study aims to identify the correlation between social media usage (IV) and perceived social support (DV), as well as between self-efficacy (IV) and perceived social support (DV) among university students. We also aim to examine whether there are differences between males and females in their perception of social support.

Three research objectives were formulated for the present study:

1. To describe the levels of social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur.
2. To determine the relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur.
3. To identify the differences in gender in terms of perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur.

Based on the above, the alternative hypotheses for the present study are as follows:

H<sub>a1</sub>: There is a relationship between social media usage (IV) and perceived social support (DV)

among university students in Kuala Lumpur.

H<sub>a2</sub>: There is a relationship between self-efficacy (IV) and perceived social support (DV) among university students in Kuala Lumpur.

H<sub>a3</sub>: There is a significant difference in gender in terms of perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design and Sampling**

The present study is a quantitative research, specifically a correlational survey research design. The study was carried out in four universities in Kuala Lumpur. Based on a study population of >100,000, the targeted sample size was 204 participants (precision level = ±7%, confidence level = 95%).

Multistage cluster sampling method was used for the present study. In the first stage, four districts in Kuala Lumpur were randomly selected. Then, from each district, one university was randomly selected. Random sampling was carried out by distributing the research questionnaires in the public spaces of the randomly selected universities. Informed consent was obtained before data is collected. A total of 211 participants from four universities across Kuala Lumpur (HELP University, UCSI University, Asia Pacific University, and MAHSA University) were involved in this study.

**Instruments**

Social media usage will be assessed using the Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) by Olufadi (2016). The SONTUS measures the amount of time spent on social media in the past week. It comprises 29 items that are rated on an 11-point Likert scale that identifies the frequency of social media usage in different situations and places. The internal consistency of the SONTUS is strong (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ).

Self-efficacy will be assessed using the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1981). The GSE measures one’s belief in their capabilities to overcome life tasks. It comprises 10 items that are rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of the GSE is fairly strong (Cronbach’s  $\alpha > .80$ ).

Perceived social support will be assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988). The MSPSS measures one’s perceptions of feeling supported by their social networks in terms of family, friends, and significant other. It comprises 12 items that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of the MSPSS is fairly strong (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Data Analysis**

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. After analysis, it was found that the data distribution met the normality assumption for each variable. Skewness for all variables (social media usage, self-efficacy, perceived social support) were within the range of +1 and -1, indicating a normal distribution of scores.

To determine the relationships between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support, Pearson’s correlation analysis was used. To identify gender differences in terms of perceived social support, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

**Results**

**Demographic Characteristics**

Among the 211 participants of the present study, 48.3% were male (n=102) and 51.7% (n=109) were female. 22.3% of the participants were from UCSI University (n=47), 26.1% from MAHSA University (n=55), 26.5% from HELP University (n=56), and 25.1% from Asia Pacific University (n=53). Table 1 summarises the demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 1  
*Demographic Profile of Participants*

	n	%
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	102	48.3
Female	109	51.7

Total	211	100
<u>University</u>		
UCSI	47	22.3
MAHSA	55	26.1
HELP	56	26.5
APU	53	25.1
Total	211	100

**Table 2**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Usage, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Social Support*

Scores	M	SD	Median	Min	Max
Social Networking Time Usage	12.59	3.32	12	6	23
General Self-Efficacy	27.72	5.25	28	10	40
Perceived Social Support	60.45	12.77	62	24	84

**Levels of Social Media Usage, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Social Support**

The first research objective (To describe the levels of social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur) was met using a descriptive analysis of the data.

The levels of each variable are displayed in Table 2.

Perceived social support scores were also analysed in terms of gender. Table 3 social support for each gender, including a breakdown of its subscales.

Table 3

*Perceived social support scores for males and females (N = 211)*

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Perceived Social Support	Male	102	60.8	12.4
	Female	109	60.1	13.2
Family	Male	102	20.8	5.79
	Female	109	19.9	5.49
Friends	Male	102	20.4	4.37
	Female	109	19.7	5.34
Significant Other	Male	102	19.6	5.33
	Female	109	20.5	6.04

Table 4

*Pearson’s Correlation Coefficients between Social Media Usage, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Social Support*

	Perceived Social Support		
	Pearson’s r	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Social Networking Time Usage	.197	.004*	211
General Self-Efficacy	.271	.000*	211

\*Note:  $p < .005$

**Relationships between Social Media Usage, Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Social Support**

The Pearson’s correlation analysis was conducted to meet the second research objective (To determine the relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur.)

Table 4 displays the findings from the correlation analysis.

Since  $p < .005$  at two-tailed test for both variables, findings conclude that there is a significant relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support. Pearson’s correlation coefficients ( $r = .197$  and  $r = .271$ ) show that both social media usage and general self-efficacy have weak but positive relationships with perceived social support.

**Gender Differences in Perceived Social Support**

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the third research

objective (To identify the differences in gender in terms of perceived social support among university students in Kuala Lumpur).

Consistent with these results are the findings of Oh and Syn (2015) as well as Karapanos, Teixeira, and Gouveia (2016), who found that using social media more frequently meant having more social engagement with their networks, which

Table 5 displays the results of this analysis.

Table 5  
*Gender Differences in Perceived Social Support*

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Perceived Social Support	.400	209	.690
Family	1.103	209	.271
Friends	1.034	205.4	.302
Significant Other	-1.075	209	.284

The results of the independent t-test ( $t = .400, p=.069$ ) shows that  $p>.05$  at two-tailed test.. Therefore there is no significant gender differences in terms of perceived social support. The subscale breakdown also shows that there are no significant gender differences in the perception of social support from family, friends, and significant others either.

**Discussion**

The findings from this study indicate weak positive relationships between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support, and the results support hypothesis H<sub>a1</sub> and H<sub>a2</sub>. However, no gender differences were found in terms of perceived social support, indicating that the hypothesis H<sub>a3</sub> cannot be supported.

allowed them to grow their social support. Facebook activities were also shown to be positively associated with perceived social support (Lu & Hampton, 2016). In clinical settings, social media has also become a powerful tool to increase social support and aiding recovery in mentally ill patients (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). Perhaps social media is able to move away from its negative connotations and provide a solution to increasing social support after all.

In support of the positive relationship between self-efficacy and perceived social support, Maddy, Cannon, and Lichtenberger (2015) has found positive relationships between these variables as well. This reflects the initial proposition by



Bandura (1997), who suggested that an individual needs to first believe in their ability to maintain social connections before they are able to glean support from them.

In terms of the lack of gender differences in perceived social support indicated by this study, findings by Hsieh, Liu, and Simpkins (2019) and Indian and Grieve (2014) have highlighted non-significant differences in gender as well. To investigate this lack of differences, Koenig and Eagly (2014) found that expectations of gender roles are adopting an egalitarian stance due to occupations becoming less gendered; for example, it is now more widely accepted when males become nurses or when females become politicians. Further research regarding the evolution of gender roles and its effect on differences in perceived social support should be conducted to investigate the contradiction in these findings.

### **Conclusion**

The present study fills an important gap in Malaysian literature on the relationship between social media usage, self-efficacy, and perceived social support. The findings have implications on university students and beyond.

### **Implications of the Present Study**

University students will be able to understand how their social media usage could positively impact their social connections and increase their perceived social support. Since self-efficacy is also related to an increase in perceived social support, it is therefore essential for students

to factor in their self-beliefs when forming relationships.

Lecturers and parents can better understand the role social media plays in enhancing the perceived social support of their students and children. With proper awareness and guidance from lecturers and parents, social media is able to bring benefits in terms of interpersonal connections. It is also necessary to implement teaching strategies and parenting methods that contribute to students'/children's self-efficacy as a precedent of increasing perceived social support.

Finally, academic institutions can invest in ways for their students to use social media appropriately, such as through workshops or even intra-university social media platforms. These platforms may also give students a chance to build their self-efficacy, through skills training, social gatherings, and motivational programs, to improve perceived social support among students.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

A sample size of 211 participants may not have been the most precise for generalisable results. Additionally, sample bias may also have occurred as the questionnaires were equally distributed to the randomly selected universities without reflecting the actual population sizes of each university.

In terms of the questionnaire, a possible limitation would be social desirability, where participants may wish to report less social media usage or higher self-efficacy to

protect their image. In addition to that, the participants may have been unable to accurately estimate the amount of time spent on social media, which may lead to inaccurate results. In addition, even though we found a significant correlation between social support and self-efficacy with social media usage, we could not draw a firm conclusion from the findings as we did not control for potentially confounding variables such as year of study and the presence of psychological distress.

### Recommendations for Future Research

In future research, a larger sample size would increase the accuracy of representativeness. More clusters can be incorporated to reach more locations in Kuala Lumpur. Stratified sampling can also be used to ensure that questionnaires are distributed according to the proportion of students in each university.

To encourage honest answers, online surveys may provide anonymity to protect participants' reputations. In this way, more accurate results may be achieved.

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