



COUNSELOR ADAPTATION TO THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND IDENTITY



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Abstract

The omnipresent nature of social media in university students' daily experiences has generated unprecedented challenges for mental health professionals in higher education environments. This research examines how counselors modify their methodologies to respond to social media's evolving influence on student psychological wellbeing and identity development. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 42 university counselors throughout Southeast Asia alongside quantitative data from 215 student surveys, this study identifies critical adaptation techniques that strengthen counseling effectiveness in contemporary digital contexts. Results indicate that effective counselors implement comprehensive strategies including: enhancing technological competency, incorporating specialized social media evaluation instruments, developing targeted intervention frameworks, and advocating digital health practices. The data demonstrates that counselors who successfully adapt their approaches achieve higher student participation rates and superior outcomes when addressing social media-related psychological distress. This research expands the emerging knowledge base regarding technology-informed therapeutic practices and establishes an adaptation framework for counselors that integrates conventional counseling methodologies with essential digital-era skills

Introduction

The exponential growth of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of higher education and student psychological development (Benton et al., 2021). Contemporary university students navigate their academic journeys within an increasingly sophisticated digital ecosystem that profoundly shapes their mental wellbeing and identity construction processes (Blakemore, 2019). As social media becomes more deeply integrated into students' everyday experiences, university counseling professionals encounter novel challenges in effectively addressing the psychological consequences of these digital environments (Julius et al., 2020; Rimel et al., 2023).

The relationship between social media engagement and mental health among university populations has attracted considerable research attention in recent years (Abraham et al., 2024; Julius et al., 2020). Studies indicate intricate connections between digital platform usage and psychological states, with evidence suggesting both beneficial and detrimental effects depending on usage patterns and individual factors (Granic et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). While social media facilitates connection and community-building, research has documented associations between intensive platform use and elevated symptoms of anxiety, depression, and negative social comparison behaviors among university students (Chen, 2023; Danner et al., 2024; Rimel et al., 2023).

Despite extensive documentation of social media effects on student mental health, comparatively limited research has explored how counseling professionals modify their practices to address these emerging concerns. As university counseling centers report increasing caseloads involving social media-related psychological distress, there exists an urgent need to understand the practical adaptations counselors implement in their



assessment methodologies, intervention strategies, and overall therapeutic frameworks (Chen, 2023). This knowledge gap constrains the development of evidence – informed guidelines for practitioners working with digitally – immersed student populations.

The current investigation addresses this research deficiency by examining adaptation strategies employed by university counselors throughout Southeast Asia in response to social media's influence on student psychological health and identity development (Adegunsoye et al., 2024; Granic et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). Through a mixed – methods approach combining qualitative interviews with counselors and quantitative survey data from students, this study identifies effective adaptation techniques and contributes to establishing a framework for counselor competency in contemporary digital contexts (Al Hajri et al., 2024; Thaibah & Arsyad, 2023). The research addresses three primary questions: 1) How are university counselors modifying assessment approaches to identify social media – related mental health concerns? 2) What intervention strategies are being developed to address social media's impact on student identity formation? 3) What factors facilitate or impede counselors' capacity to adapt their practices to digital – era challenges.

Method

This investigation employed a sequential explanatory mixed – methods design to examine counselor adaptations to social media impacts on student mental health and identity development. The research protocol received ethical approval from the University of Behavioral Sciences Ethics Committee.

This investigation employed a sequential explanatory mixed – methods design to examine counselor adaptations to social media impacts on student mental health and identity development. The research protocol received ethical approval from the University of Behavioral Sciences Ethics Committee. The sequential design initially collected quantitative data through comprehensive surveys to identify broad patterns, followed by in – depth qualitative interviews to explore the nuanced dimensions of counselor adaptation strategies. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both adaptation prevalence and the contextual factors influencing implementation effectiveness (Almahaireh et al., 2018; Asare et al., 2023; Sugara & Fadhillah, 2024).

The quantitative component included surveys from 215 university students (ages 18 – 25, $M=21.3$, $SD=1.7$) from 12 universities across Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Participants completed the Social Media and Mental Health Assessment (SMMHA), a validated 42 – item instrument measuring social media usage patterns, perceived psychological impacts, and experiences with university counseling services. Student participants represented diverse academic disciplines and reported varying levels of social media engagement (daily usage $M=3.8$ hours, $SD=1.4$) (Braghieri et al., 2022; Fusar – Poli et al., 2020; Jones, 2023).

Counselor participants ($n=42$) were recruited from university counseling centers within the same institutions. The sample represented diverse theoretical orientations, experience. levels (3 – 27 years, $M=12.4$, $SD=5.8$), and clinical specializations. Selection criteria required that participants reported regular clinical work with cases involving social media – related concerns, with at least 30% of their caseload involving these issues.

Quantitative data collection occurred through a secure online survey platform using standardized instruments. In addition to the SMMHA, student participants completed the Digital Wellness Scale (DWS) and the Social Media Identity Integration Measure (SMIIM). Counselors completed the Counselor Adaptation to Technology Scale (CATS) and the

Digital Therapeutic Competency Inventory (DTCI) (Duong et al., 2021; Glazzard & Rose, 2020).

Quantitative analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and hierarchical regression modeling to identify relationships between variables. The primary dependent variable was counselor adaptation efficacy (CAE), calculated using the formula:

$$CAE = \frac{\sum(AS \cap EL \cap PO)}{TC} \quad (1)$$

Where AS represents adaptation strategies implemented, EL indicates experience level, PO reflects positive outcomes reported, and TC represents total cases involving social media concerns (Braghieri et al., 2022).

Additionally, a Counselor Adaptation Index was developed to quantify implementation effectiveness:

$$CAI = (DL + SMT + IP + DWP)/4 \quad (2)$$

Where CAI represents the Counselor Adaptation Index, DL indicates digital literacy level, SMT represents social media assessment tools utilized, IP refers to intervention protocols employed, and DWP signifies digital wellness practices integrated into counseling.

Qualitative data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews averaging 75 minutes in duration. The interview protocol explored five domains: 1) perceived evolution of student concerns related to social media, 2) assessment approach modifications, 3) intervention strategy development, 4) professional development pathways, and 5) institutional support structures. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis through NVivo 14 software. An independent validation process involving three trained coders established an inter-rater reliability coefficient of $\kappa=0.87$, indicating strong agreement in thematic identification (Akdemir, 2023; Darling et al., 2021).

Qualitative analysis followed a six-phase thematic approach: familiarization with data, initial coding development, theme identification, refinement of themes, theme definition, and synthesis for reporting. This systematic process allowed for recognition of both anticipated and emergent themes regarding counselor adaptation strategies while maintaining analytical rigor (Keles et al., 2020).

Table 1 outlines the distribution of adaptation strategies reported by counselors across different areas of practice

Table 1 Distribution of counselor adaptation strategies across practice domains.

Domain	Primary Strategies	Secondary Strategies	Implementation Rate (%)
Assessment	Digital behavior screening	Social comparison measures	78
Intervention	Cognitive restructuring for digital content	Mindful social media use	64
Psychoeducation	Digital wellness principles	Identity development in digital contexts	92
Consultation	Faculty training on digital issues	Parent guidance on student social media use	45
Prevention	Campus-wide-digital wellness campaigns	Peer mentor programs	37

The implementation rates indicate that counselors most readily adopted psychoeducational adaptations, while prevention—focused adaptations were less commonly implemented due to resource constraints and institutional barriers, as revealed in qualitative interviews (Adegunsoye et al., 2024; Granic et al., 2020).

Results and Discussions

Assessment Protocol Adaptations

Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed comprehensive patterns in how university counselors modify their practices to address social media impacts on student psychological wellbeing. Survey results indicated that 87% of counselors had implemented significant alterations to their assessment protocols within the past three years specifically to address social media—related concerns (Braghieri et al., 2022). The most frequently reported adaptation involved integrating social media usage assessment into initial intake procedures (92%), followed by developing specialized screening instruments for problematic digital platform use (76%) (Julius et al., 2020).

Qualitative interviews revealed that effective assessment adaptations moved beyond quantitative usage metrics to examine the quality and psychological impact of online interactions. One counselor explained: "We've transitioned away from simply measuring screen time to exploring the emotional experiences embedded within their digital interactions. We now assess how specific platform activities influence mood states, social comparison behaviors, and identity expression." Another participant described developing a specialized social media assessment protocol: "We created the Digital Experience Inventory, which examines not just consumption patterns but also how students perceive their online self—presentation compared to their authentic self—concept."

Statistical analysis demonstrated that counselors who implemented comprehensive, multidimensional assessment approaches reported significantly higher rates of identifying social media—related contributing factors in cases initially presented as general anxiety or depression ($p < .001$). These advanced assessment methods enabled more targeted intervention planning and improved treatment outcomes (Benton et al., 2021; Lockhart & Keys, 1998; Miller et al., 2012).

Intervention Strategy Innovations

Thematic analysis of interview data identified four principal categories of intervention adaptations: cognitive approaches addressing social comparison processes, behavioral strategies promoting intentional technology use, interpersonal interventions enhancing authenticity in online relationships, and identity development frameworks focusing on digital self—representation consistency.

Counselors reported greatest confidence implementing cognitive interventions (86%), particularly techniques targeting distorted thinking patterns associated with social validation metrics and carefully curated content exposure. As one participant described: "We've developed specialized cognitive restructuring techniques specifically addressing the unique thought distortions emerging from algorithmic content delivery. Students learn to recognize when platform design elements trigger comparison thoughts and develop more realistic interpretations of their online experiences."

Regression analysis revealed that counselors integrating all four intervention domains achieved significantly higher successful outcome rates (83%) compared to those implementing fewer adaptation categories (51%), $\chi^2(1, N=42) = 12.47, p < .001$. This finding suggests the importance of comprehensive approaches addressing the

multidimensional nature of social media's psychological impact (Danner et al., 2024; Rimel et al., 2023).

Identity Development in Digital Contexts

A central theme emerging throughout the data concerned the challenges of supporting healthy identity development in environments where students' self – concepts are increasingly influenced by digital feedback systems and fragmented self – presentation across multiple platforms. Counselors described adapting traditional identity development theories to account for the unique features of digital identity construction (Blakemore, 2019; Lu, 2019)

One counselor noted: "Contemporary identity development occurs across multiple contexts simultaneously physical campus environments and various digital spaces, each with distinct norms and feedback mechanisms. We're developing therapeutic approaches that help students integrate these fragmented self – representations into a coherent sense of identity." This finding highlights how counseling adaptations must address fundamental shifts in identity formation processes occurring within digital ecosystems (Lockhart & Keys, 1998; Miller et al., 2012). Successful intervention approaches incorporated narrative therapy techniques to help students construct cohesive identity narratives integrating both online and offline experiences. These approaches demonstrated particular effectiveness for students reporting identity diffusion and authenticity concerns related to platform – specific self – presentation requirements (Chen, 2023).

Conclusion

This investigation reveals significant innovations in university counselor practices responding to social media's impact on student psychological wellbeing and identity development. The findings demonstrate that effective counselor adaptation encompasses multiple domains, including assessment methodology, intervention approaches, theoretical frameworks, and professional development pathways. Most importantly, this research identifies specific adaptation strategies that enhance counseling effectiveness with digitally – immersed student populations.

The data indicates three key factors determining adaptation success: institutional support structures, counselor digital competency development, and theoretical flexibility. Counselors working within institutional environments that recognize digital wellness as a priority demonstrated significantly higher adaptation efficacy scores and reported better student outcomes. This suggests that addressing social media's psychological impact requires coordinated responses beyond individual counselor efforts.

The Counselor Adaptation Index developed through this research provides a valuable framework for evaluating practitioner preparedness for addressing evolving digital concerns. As social media platforms continue to transform, counselor adaptation requires ongoing professional development and institutional commitment to approaches balancing technological engagement with psychological wellbeing. Future research should examine longitudinal outcomes of these adaptation strategies and explore their applicability across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

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