

Students' Character Development in Engaging with Social Media in Malaysia: A Preliminary Study

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Received Date: 20/06/2025

Accepted Date: 13/10/2025

Published Date: 30/04/2026

Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of students' daily lives, profoundly influencing their attitudes and character. According to data released by DataReportal: Global Digital Insight, as of January 2023, the use of social media in Malaysia was 26.8 million, representing 78.5% of the total population. The highest use of the internet among teenagers is for online communication, at 96.3%; followed by social media, at 89.3%; and finding learning materials, which is relatively low, at 68.6%. On average, Internet users in Malaysia spend 2 hours and 47 minutes using social media daily, which is higher than the global average of 2 hours and 31 minutes. By employing a critical review analysis method, this study seeks to identify social media engagement among secondary school students in Malaysia. The study identified themes related to students' character development in engaging with social media in Malaysia, categorizing them as positive and negative influences on character development, self-regulation, identity formation, and the role of digital literacy and guidance. This preliminary study highlights the need for further research to explore the long-term effects of social media on students' character development in Malaysia. Policymakers, educators, and parents must work together to create an environment that maximizes the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks.

Keywords: *Character Development, social media, school students, Malaysia*

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, a nation renowned for its rich cultural diversity and rapid technological evolution, the intersection of social media and student character development presents both exciting opportunities and complex challenges. As young people increasingly turn to digital platforms, issues such as online hate speech, religious intolerance, and the digital divide demand a culturally attuned approach to character education (Feng & Burroughs, 2017).

Theories of learning and moral development provide critical insights into how students' interactions with social media can shape their values and behavior. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) highlights how students acquire character traits by observing and imitating the behaviors of others, particularly peers and educators, while receiving reinforcement and modeling socially desirable behaviors. Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1984) further enriches this perspective, proposing that moral reasoning evolves in stages, from self-interest to principled ethical understanding, providing a foundation for designing effective educational interventions to foster moral growth.

Additionally, the framework of positive psychology, as championed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), emphasizes cultivating virtues and personal strengths. Educational settings can nurture students'

holistic character development in digital and physical environments by promoting positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.

Character education frameworks, such as Adkins' Six Pillars of Character trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship, offer structured approaches to integrating values into school curricula and culture. These frameworks help guide practical strategies for embedding character education in students' everyday experiences (Gail et al., 2010). This preliminary study examines how Malaysian students engage with social media and assesses its impact on character development. By approaching the issue through interdisciplinary lenses, the study seeks to uncover the complexities that hinder a unified understanding and foster positive character traits in the digital age.

2.0 Statement of The Problem

The increasing use of social media among Malaysian students has been associated with academic distraction, lack of sleep, and exposure to inappropriate online content, which can lead to stress and depression (Julia Juanis et al., 2022; Fazlinda Ab Halim et al., 2018). Although social media platforms offer opportunities for learning, communication, and personal growth, they simultaneously present moral and behavioral challenges that affect students' well-being (Ahmad & Yusoff, 2021). Aslan and Shiong (2023) observed that hedonistic values embedded in social media and mobile content may shape students' attitudes and behaviors, particularly when parental or institutional monitoring is limited. Similarly, Hussin and Hashim (2021) emphasized that uncontrolled exposure to online content contributes to a decline in moral values among youth in Malaysia.

Despite the growing integration of social media into educational contexts, research still lacks a structured framework for effectively utilizing these platforms to promote character development among Malaysian students (Razak et al., 2020). The ethical implications and responsible use of social media for moral and character formation remain underexplored (Kaur & Singh, 2019; Rahman & Amin, 2022). Furthermore, educators play a limited yet crucial role in guiding students toward ethical digital citizenship and positive online engagement (Omar & Ismail, 2020). This highlights a pressing need for a systematic examination of how social media can be effectively and ethically leveraged to promote character development while mitigating its adverse effects among students in Malaysia.

3.0 Literature Review

Character development is a crucial aspect of education, influencing students' personal growth, academic achievement, and their contributions to society. In Malaysia, a country marked by diverse cultures, languages, and religions, fostering strong character among students is essential for maintaining social harmony and preparing responsible citizens for the future. Given this multicultural context, understanding the various influences on character development, including cultural values, education, religion, and digital media, is essential for designing effective educational strategies that nurture well-rounded individuals.

Malaysia's multicultural society, comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous ethnic groups, significantly shapes students' character development. Cultural values, such as collectivism, respect for authority, and filial piety, guide moral growth and interpersonal relationships (Chin, Yeoh, & Othman, 2014). These values are embedded within family structures, community interactions, and educational settings, influencing students' ethical reasoning and social behaviors. Given Malaysia's unique blend of traditions, character development often reflects the nation's pluralistic identity, where cultural norms play a vital role in shaping students' moral perspectives. However, this diversity can also lead to differing interpretations of moral values, as each community emphasizes distinct cultural and ethical principles (Rahim & Dawood, 2021). This variation may partly explain inconsistencies in how character education outcomes are manifested across different student populations in Malaysia.

Beyond cultural influences, education is a structured platform for instilling key character virtues in Malaysian students. Lim and Lee (2019) conducted a qualitative study exploring teachers' perceptions of character education in Malaysia, highlighting the role of schools in fostering integrity, resilience, and empathy. The researchers emphasized the importance of a holistic educational approach integrating character development and academic learning. However, the extent to which schools can effectively cultivate these values often depends on the implementation of the curriculum, teacher preparedness, and institutional support (Mansor & Rahman, 2020). Variability in school environments, particularly between urban and rural contexts, can lead to mixed findings regarding the success of character education programs, as resource availability and teacher competencies differ significantly across regions.

Religion further contributes to character formation by providing moral guidance and ethical principles. In Malaysia's religiously diverse landscape, Islamic education, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping Muslim students' moral outlook. Abdullah and Hamzah (2016) examined the influence of Islamic education programs on moral development and found that they play a crucial role in fostering virtues such as honesty, compassion, and social responsibility. While Islamic education is central to Muslim students, other religious teachings also emphasize similar moral values, reinforcing the broader societal commitment to character development. Yet, challenges arise in integrating religious values within pluralistic educational settings, where balancing universal moral education with faith-specific teachings requires sensitivity and inclusivity (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008). Such tensions may further contribute to differing interpretations of moral education outcomes in Malaysia's multireligious society.

In recent years, social media has emerged as a significant external factor influencing the development of student character. Research indicates that social media usage among Malaysian youth is widespread, with over 90% of young adults regularly engaging with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2020). Ali and Hashim (2019) noted that messaging applications, such as WhatsApp and WeChat, are widely used for both academic and social interactions, demonstrating that social media plays a dual role in enhancing connectivity and shaping students' social behaviors. However, its impact on character development remains complex, as it presents both opportunities for moral engagement and risks of negative behavioral influences.

While social media offers benefits such as collaboration, information sharing, and digital literacy, concerns have been raised regarding its excessive use. Studies conducted in Malaysia show mixed relationships between social media engagement and academic performance. Lee and Abdullah (2018) found that moderate use of social media fosters collaboration and access to educational resources, positively correlating with academic success. However, Chen et al. (2019) highlighted that excessive social media consumption can lead to distractions, lower academic achievement, and issues such as digital addiction, information overload, and compromised privacy. These inconsistencies can be understood in light of contextual factors, such as family monitoring, digital literacy, and socio-economic background, which influence how Malaysian students use social media (Mustaffa & Ibrahim, 2021). In some cases, social media functions as a supportive learning tool, while in others, it becomes a source of distraction and moral disengagement.

Given these complexities, educational institutions and policymakers must develop strategies to promote responsible digital engagement among students. Future research should explore the long-term effects of social media on students' academic, social, and psychological well-being, particularly within Malaysia's unique cultural and educational context. Addressing these gaps will help formulate an educational framework that effectively balances cultural, religious, and digital influences, fostering holistic student development.

4.0 Methodology

This study employed the critical review analysis method, a systematic approach to synthesizing and evaluating existing literature (Snyder, 2019), to comprehensively identify key aspects of student character development within social media in Malaysia. This approach was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of how social media influences students' moral, ethical, and cognitive growth by integrating findings from multiple scholarly perspectives (Xie et al., 2020).

To ensure transparency and reproducibility, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established in the selection of sources. The inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and academic publications published between 2010 and 2024 that focused on students' character, ethics, or moral development within the context of social media use. Studies were selected if they addressed the Malaysian context or comparable Southeast Asian educational settings, and if they were written in English or Malay. Conversely, sources were excluded if they lacked empirical or conceptual relevance to student character development, consisted of non-scholarly materials such as blogs or opinion pieces, or concentrated solely on adult or higher education populations without relevance to school-aged students.

The analysis considered several key dimensions, including the clarity of the research design, the theoretical grounding of the study, the cultural and contextual relevance to Malaysia's educational and social landscape (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2021), and the clarity of findings and implications for moral and character education. Through this structured and critical process, the review ensured that only high-quality, contextually meaningful studies were synthesized. By adopting this method, the study maintained a structured and objective synthesis, strengthening the reliability and validity of conclusions drawn regarding student character development in the digital landscape. Integrating insights from diverse and credible sources enabled the study to provide a balanced, evidence-based, and culturally grounded understanding of how social media influences the ethical and moral formation of students in Malaysia.

5.0 Analysis and Results

The study revealed several key themes related to the impact of social media on students' character development in Malaysia. These themes provide a foundation for understanding the complex interplay between digital engagement and moral, ethical, and social growth, consisting of the positive and negative influences on character development, self-regulation, identity formation, and the role of digital literacy and guidance, as illustrated in Figure 1.

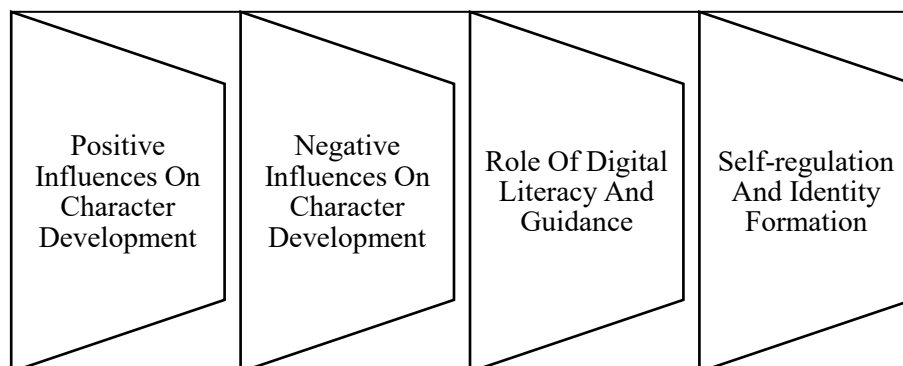


Figure 1. Key Themes Related to Social Media's Impact on Students' Character Development in Malaysia

5.1 Positive Influences on Character Development

Social media has become an integral part of students' lives in Malaysia, providing a platform for self-expression and personal growth. A study by Maliki et al. (2024) involving 500 Malaysian youths aged 18 to 30 found that most use emoticons and symbols on social media to enhance communication. This practice helps convey emotions effectively and improves well-being by fostering more evident interactions. Additionally, the study revealed that these youths display empathy and understanding toward others' posts, indicating that social media can nurture students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills.

Beyond self-expression, social media is a valuable educational tool for Malaysian students. Research by Sheng et al. (2022) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia found that 66.7% of pre-university students believed social media supported their academic learning. These platforms offer access to a diverse range of educational resources, enabling students to expand their knowledge beyond traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media promotes collaborative learning, idea exchange, and engagement with educational content, enriching academic performance and personal growth.

Moreover, social media shapes positive character traits such as empathy, tolerance, and global awareness. Exposure to diverse perspectives and cultures through online interactions helps students develop a broader understanding of societal issues and promotes inclusivity (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Platforms like YouTube and educational blogs also encourage self-directed learning, creativity, and critical thinking, further enhancing students' intellectual and social development (Zainal & Hassan, 2021). By fostering meaningful connections and broadening knowledge, social media has a positive influence on students' character in today's digital age.

5.2 Negative Influences on Character Development

While social media offers various benefits, it also presents significant risks to character development. Issues such as cyberbullying, addiction, and the spread of misinformation have been widely documented (Azizi & Hashim, 2020). Excessive use of social media has been linked to decreased attention spans, impulsivity, and a decline in face-to-face communication skills. Moreover, the pressure to conform to idealized online personas can lead to low self-esteem and anxiety among students (Prensky, 2001).

Among Malaysian students, social media usage has been associated with negative impacts on mental health and self-esteem. A qualitative study by Samantha and Zhooriyati (2022) involving adolescents from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor found that excessive social media use contributes to increased negative moods and diminished self-esteem. Participants reported that the constant exposure to curated online personas and the pressure to seek online validation led to feelings of inadequacy and heightened anxiety.

Additionally, the prevalence of cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content on social media pose significant risks to students' moral and ethical development. Research indicates that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to online harassment, which can lead to emotional distress and a decline in moral values (Wachs & Wright, 2018). Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by social media fosters toxic disinhibition, where individuals engage in behaviors online that they would typically avoid in face-to-face interactions, such as sharing harmful or unethical content (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

These negative influences highlight the urgent need for comprehensive digital literacy programs and parental guidance. Equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate social media responsibly can help mitigate its adverse effects and promote healthier character development.

5.3 Self-Regulation and Identity Formation

Social media plays a crucial role in self-expression and identity exploration, both of which are essential aspects of character development during adolescence. These platforms allow Malaysian students to explore and present various facets of their identities while engaging with diverse cultural and religious influences (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). A study by Ismail (2020) found that Malaysian youth frequently interact with new media technologies both in and out of school, using them as tools for learning and identity exploration. Students experiment with different personas, receive feedback, and refine their self-concept through these interactions.

Beyond personal identity, social media also influences students' ability to regulate their time and behavior. While these platforms facilitate self-directed learning and community building, they also introduce distractions that can disrupt focus and academic responsibilities. The constant influx of information and notifications can make it difficult for students to manage their time effectively. Additionally, anonymity and perceived distance in online interactions can lead to disinhibition, causing individuals to act in ways they might avoid in real-life settings, sometimes deviating from societal norms and personal values.

Fostering self-regulatory skills is crucial to ensuring that social media has a positive influence on identity formation and character development. By equipping students with the tools to navigate online spaces responsibly, educators and parents can help mitigate the adverse effects of social media while maximizing its potential for personal growth.

For this purpose, character education frameworks like Adkins' Six Pillars of Character — trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship — can offer structured approaches to integrating values into school curricula and culture, helping guide practical strategies for embedding character education in students, as illustrated in Figure 2.

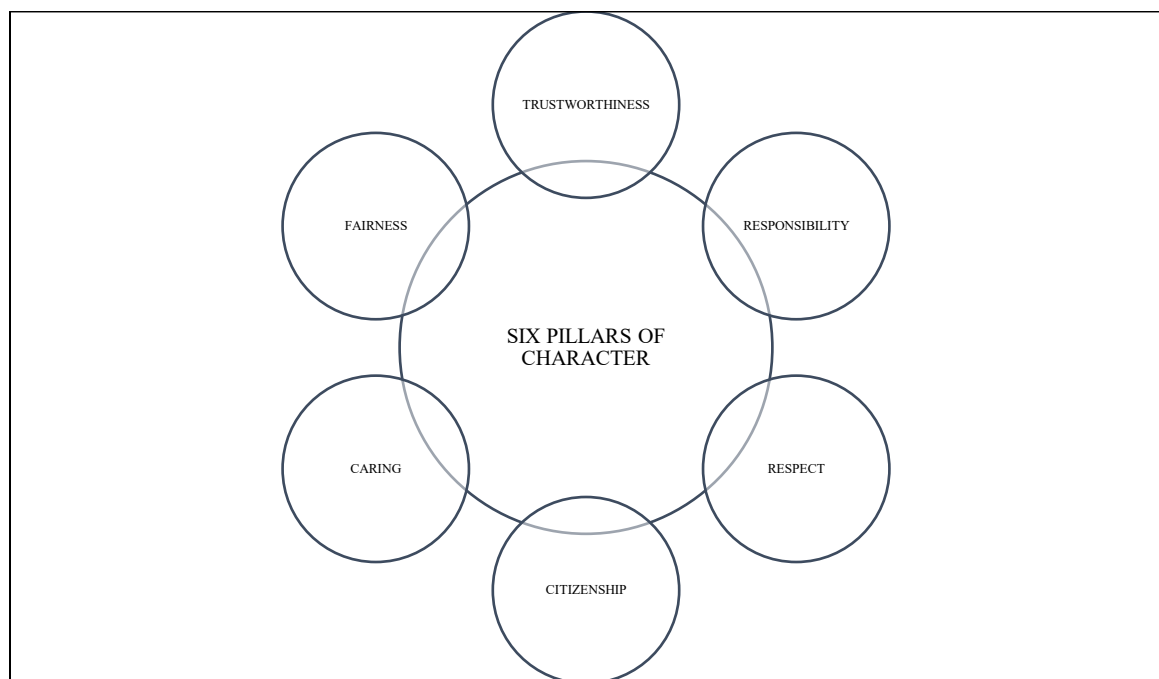


Figure 2. Adkins' Six Pillars of Character. Gail Nelson Bones (2010).

5.4 Role of Digital Literacy and Guidance

Digital literacy and parental guidance play a crucial role in shaping students' character development in Malaysia, especially in the context of pervasive social media usage. As digital platforms increasingly influence students' behaviors, structured programs that teach responsible online engagement, critical content evaluation, and ethical digital interactions become essential (Zainal & Hassan, 2021). Without proper guidance, students may struggle to strike a balance between the benefits and risks of social media.

Digital literacy equips students with critical skills to navigate the complex online landscape. It enables them to discern credible information, engage responsibly, and protect themselves from potential online threats. A study by Tung and Chung (2023) highlights a significant relationship between perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and digital literacy among first-year Malaysian university students, emphasizing the need to foster these competencies. Integrating digital literacy into educational curricula enhances students' ability to think critically and make ethical decisions, key components of character development in the digital age.

Parental guidance complements digital literacy by reinforcing these skills in real-world scenarios. Parents play a crucial role in monitoring and guiding their children's online activities, fostering open communication, and setting appropriate boundaries to mitigate risks associated with social media use. Mukhriz Mahathir (2019) stressed that parents should not take their children's character development lightly, underscoring the profound influence of parental involvement in shaping values and behaviors. By actively engaging in their children's digital lives, parents can help reinforce digital literacy, promote healthy online habits, and support the holistic development of their character.

To conclude, the Malaysian socio-cultural setting offers a distinctive contribution to global discourses on digital character education by reflecting a complex interplay of multicultural values, religious principles, and rapid digitalization. As a pluralistic society shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous traditions, Malaysia emphasizes collectivist values, respect, and moral responsibility, which serve as important foundations for nurturing positive digital character and ethical online behavior (Kamaruddin & Zain, 2022). However, the same cultural diversity, when juxtaposed with increasing social media exposure, has also introduced challenges such as cyberbullying, identity confusion, and moral relativism among youths, reflecting tensions between traditional norms and globalized digital cultures (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2021).

Within this dynamic, digital literacy plays a crucial role in enabling students to critically navigate online spaces. The integration of religious and moral education, particularly Islamic values, provides a moral grounding and self-regulation framework that is consistent with local educational policies (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). Moreover, Malaysian educators' emphasis on guided digital engagement and community-based learning highlights the importance of mentorship and parental involvement in fostering digital citizenship, thereby providing a model that bridges moral education with media literacy (Yaacob et al., 2023). Thus, Malaysia's socio-cultural context enriches global understanding of digital character education by demonstrating how moral traditions, digital skills, and socio-religious values can coexist and inform holistic character formation in the digital age.

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a complex relationship between social media and character development among Malaysian students. On the positive side, social media platforms provide avenues for self-expression, emotional growth, and interpersonal connection. As seen in the study by Maliki et al. (2024), emoticons and symbols are effectively used to communicate emotions, thereby enhancing emotional well-being. Additionally, social media plays a significant role in academic learning by offering

access to educational resources and fostering collaborative learning, as evidenced by the work of Sheng et al. (2022). These platforms also expose students to diverse perspectives and global issues, promoting empathy, tolerance, and critical thinking, crucial components of character development.

However, the study also highlights several negative influences of social media on students' character. The overuse of social media has been linked to mental health challenges, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and decreased face-to-face communication skills. The constant comparison to idealized online personas and the pressure to conform to societal standards contribute to feelings of inadequacy, particularly among adolescents (Prensky, 2001). Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by social media platforms can encourage unethical behavior, including cyberbullying and the dissemination of harmful content. These findings underscore the importance of addressing the risks associated with social media, particularly its potential to erode moral and ethical values in young individuals.

The study also reveals the pivotal role of self-regulation and identity formation in students' use of social media. While students use these platforms to explore their identities, the curated nature of online content can distort self-perception and promote social comparison, leading to issues with self-worth. The constant flow of information and notifications can disrupt students' ability to manage their time effectively, further complicating their development. This highlights the need for digital literacy and self-regulation programs to help students navigate social media challenges in a manner that supports their personal and academic growth. Fostering these skills will enable students to use social media responsibly, maximizing its potential for positive character development while minimizing its adverse effects.

In conclusion, the study underscores the dual impact of social media on students' character development in Malaysia. While it offers opportunities for self-expression, emotional growth, and academic enrichment, it also presents risks, including cyberbullying, social comparison, and the spread of misinformation. A balanced approach, supported by digital literacy education and parental guidance, is crucial for helping students navigate the digital world responsibly. Educators and parents can foster healthy character development by promoting self-regulation and critical thinking. This preliminary study suggests that further research is necessary to investigate the long-term effects of social media on students in Malaysia. Policymakers, educators, and parents must collaborate to create an environment that maximizes the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks.

7.0 Acknowledgment

We thank the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia MOHE for funding this research via the Fundamental Research Grant Initiative for Early Career (FRGS-EC) FRGS-EC/1/2024/SSI09/UIAM/02/4, Research Management Center, International Islamic University Malaysia (RMC-IIUM), and Kulliyyah of Education IIUM. Likewise, we thank all the researchers who contributed to the study's progress.

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