

Social Media Engagement and Students' Character in Secondary School in Malaysia

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Abstract: *Social media has become an integral part of students' daily lives, profoundly influencing their attitudes and character. This study aims to investigate social media engagement among secondary school students and identify the positive aspects of their use of social media. The study employed a quantitative survey method involving 373 students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The data indicate that secondary school students spend a moderate amount of time on social media, and their preferred content is entertainment, followed by education, news, and religion. The data also reveal that students generally demonstrate positive character traits when engaging on social media, particularly in respect and trustworthiness, reflecting the internalisation of moral values in digital environments. However, lower scores in responsibility and, especially, citizenship highlight potential gaps in ethical digital behaviour and community involvement, indicating a need for greater educational reinforcement, particularly in promoting civic engagement, self-discipline, and community service through social media. These findings offer valuable insights for the development of targeted educational interventions in Malaysian schools, aiming to promote well-rounded digital citizenship. These insights also provide essential guidance for curriculum developers and educators in enhancing digital character education within the broader educational framework.*

Keywords: social media, engagement, school, students, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape and rapid technological advancements pose unique challenges to character development in the digital realm. Issues such as online hate speech, religious intolerance, and the digital divide necessitate culturally sensitive approaches to character education (Feng & Burroughs, 2017).

In contemporary educational discourse, there is growing recognition of the importance of character development alongside academic achievement. Education should not merely focus on imparting knowledge and skills but also on nurturing individuals with strong moral, social, and emotional character. Some theories propose a holistic approach to education that integrates character development throughout the learning experience, aiming to cultivate responsible, compassionate, and resilient individuals.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasises the role of observation, imitation, and modelling in learning. In character development, students learn by observing the behaviour of others, particularly teachers and peers, and internalising socially desirable traits through reinforcement and modelling. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory (1984) posits that moral reasoning develops in stages, progressing from a focus on self-interest to principled reasoning based on universal ethical principles. This theory offers a framework for understanding students' moral development and for designing educational interventions that promote moral growth.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) emphasised strengths, virtues, and personal fulfilment rather than merely treating psychological disorders. By fostering positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments, education can contribute to the holistic development of students' character.

Adkins Character Education Frameworks (Josephson, 2024) proposed several frameworks, including the Six Pillars of Character, which encompass trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. It is a structured approach to character development in schools. These frameworks offer guiding principles and practical strategies for integrating character education into the curriculum and school culture (Gail et al., 2010).

On the other hand, despite the benefits, social media presents several challenges for students in Malaysia. These include issues related to privacy, information overload, digital addiction, and online safety. Educational institutions and policymakers must develop strategies to promote responsible social media usage among students while addressing these challenges (Samsudin et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to examine social media engagement among secondary school students and to identify the positive outcomes associated with social media use among students in Malaysia.

2. Statement of the Problem

According to Datareport Global Digital Insight (2023), as of January 2023, there are 26.8 million social media users in Malaysia, representing 78.5% of the total population. Among teenagers, the Internet is used for various purposes, including communicating (96.3%), engaging in social media (89.3%), and accessing learning materials (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. Malaysia ranks eighth globally in access to TikTok advertisements, placing it among the highest user bases worldwide. This trend raises concerns about its potential impact on the nation's ability to cultivate informed and morally grounded citizens, as envisioned in the Malaysia Madani Policy (Prime Minister's Office, 2023) and the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Several studies have reported that social media use among Malaysian students is associated with decreased academic focus ($M = 4.03$), insufficient sleep ($M = 4.00$), and increased levels of stress and depression due to exposure to inappropriate or immoral content on social media ($M = 4.05$) (Juanis et al., 2022; Fazlinda Ab Halim et al., 2018). While social media platforms offer opportunities for character development, they also present significant risks to student well-being (Ahmad & Yusoff, 2021). Aslan and Shiong (2023) observed that hedonistic values embedded in mobile phones may influence students' character in the absence of adequate parental monitoring, thereby leading to serious issues in educational settings. Kamaruddin et

al. (2020) found that although Islamic content is available on social media, only a small percentage of students regularly engage with it.

Despite the growing integration of social media in education, there remains a lack of a clear, structured framework to guide its use in supporting students' character development in Malaysia (Razak et al., 2020). The ethical implications and responsible use of social media for character development among students in Malaysia receive insufficient attention (Kaur & Singh, 2019). In response to this gap, the present study aims to examine social media engagement among secondary school students in Malaysia, focusing on understanding the phenomenon and identifying the positive aspects of students' social media use.

3. Literature Review

Character development is a crucial aspect of education, as it significantly influences students' personal growth, academic achievement, and their contributions to society. Given Malaysia's rich cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, character development among its people, particularly students, is essential to cultivating a harmonious and progressive society. For example, Chin, Yeoh, and Othman (2014) observed that cultural values, such as collectivism, respect for authority, and filial piety, shape students' character. Therefore, it can be concluded that cultural values act as guiding principles for moral development and interpersonal relationships among Malaysian students.

Education plays a pivotal role in nurturing character virtues among Malaysian students. Lim and Lee (2019), in their qualitative study of Malaysian teachers' perceptions of character education, found that teachers view education as a platform for instilling values such as integrity, resilience, and empathy among students. Moreover, they emphasised the importance of a holistic approach to education that integrates character development alongside academic learning.

In addition, religion also plays a significant role in shaping students' character. A study by Abdullah and Hamzah (2016) examining the influence of Islamic education on the moral development of Muslim students in Malaysia found that Islamic education programs are crucial for fostering moral virtues such as honesty, compassion, and social responsibility.

Socioeconomic factors also influence the development of character among Malaysian students. Ahmad et al. (2018), in a quantitative study examining the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and character traits among Malaysian adolescents, found that students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds exhibited higher resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills than those from lower SES backgrounds.

Despite the continuous efforts to promote character development among Malaysian students, significant challenges persist. Yusof and Razak (2017) identified key obstacles to Malaysian educators' implementation of character education, including curriculum overload, insufficient teacher training, and societal pressures. These barriers hinder the effectiveness of character development initiatives within Malaysian schools.

Empirical evidence indicates that social media usage among students in Asia, including Malaysia, is both widespread and diverse. According to a study by the Pew Research Centre (2020), over 90% of young adults in Malaysia use social media platforms regularly, with

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter being the most popular choices. Platforms like WhatsApp and WeChat are extensively used for messaging and group communication among students (Ali & Hashim, 2019). A study also revealed that Malaysian urban adolescents, both male and female, mainly use the Internet for entertainment (Soh et al., 2013). In addition to recreational purposes, students often use social media for academic collaboration, as it facilitates peer-to-peer collaboration, group projects, and class discussions (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

While social media offers numerous advantages, concerns have emerged about the potential adverse effects of excessive use on academic performance, as evidenced by several empirical studies in Malaysia. For instance, a study by Lee and Abdullah (2018) found that moderate social media use positively correlates with academic performance, as it provides opportunities for collaboration and access to educational resources. In addition, when social media platforms are used for meaningful discussion and activism, they can increase youth's civic interest and participation (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016). However, excessive social media use, particularly during study periods, has been linked to increased distractions and diminished academic performance (Chen et al., 2019). Additionally, it may contribute to reduced critical thinking skills, particularly in evaluating arguments and formulating reasoned responses (Yahaya et al., 2010).

Social media plays a significant role in the formation and dynamics of social relationships among students in Malaysia. It serves as a platform for maintaining existing friendships, making new connections, and engaging in social activities. However, concerns exist about the impact of social media on interpersonal relationships and mental well-being. Research suggests that excessive use of social media may lead to feelings of social isolation, anxiety, and depression among students (Ahmad & Ghazali, 2020). Moreover, issues such as cyberbullying and online harassment are currently prevalent among Malaysian students, highlighting the adverse consequences associated with social media use (Othman et al., 2021).

Cultural factors also significantly influence social media usage among Malaysian students. Given the collectivist nature of Malaysian society, which prioritises group harmony and social cohesion, students predominantly use social media to maintain familial and peer relationships, share culturally relevant content, and engage in community activities (Hashim & Tan, 2020). Nevertheless, cultural norms may also impose social pressures and expectations in the context of online behaviour, leading to self-censorship and conformity (Chong et al., 2019). In light of gaps in the existing literature, there is a pressing need for research examining social media engagement among secondary school students in Malaysia, with a focus on uncovering the positive dimensions of social media use in this context.

4. Methodology

This research employed quantitative methods to comprehensively investigate various aspects of student character development in the context of social media engagement. Crosstab analysis, also known as cross-tabulation, was used as the primary analytical technique. Crosstab analysis is a widely accepted method for exploring the distribution and relationships between categorical variables (Field, 2013). It facilitates researchers to systematically examine how respondents' behaviours or preferences differ across distinct demographic groups, such as age and gender.

Given the categorical nature of the variables in this study (e.g., content types and demographic groups), crosstab analysis was deemed both appropriate and methodologically sound. As the primary objective was to describe engagement patterns rather than test for statistical significance, crosstab analysis was selected as the most effective and interpretable method. This approach aligns with best practices in educational and social research, where descriptive statistics are often employed to explore foundational questions before advancing to more inferential approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study population comprises 373 secondary school students from Forms 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in the state of Kuala Lumpur. The questionnaires in this study were adapted from the Adkins Character Education Framework developed by Josephson (2024), ensuring relevance to the constructs of character development. Data were analysed using quantitative descriptive methods in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), enabling systematic exploration of trends and patterns within the dataset.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by gender. A total of 373 students participated in the study. The sample consisted of 227 female and 146 male students, resulting in a female-majority sample (60.9%).

Table 1: Gender distribution

Category	Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	146	39.10%
	Female	227	60.90%
Total		373	100%

Table 2 presents the distribution of participants by age. The age of respondents ranges from 13 to 17 years, which corresponds to the conventional age range for lower and upper secondary school students in Malaysia.

Table 2: Age distribution

Category	Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	13	21	5.60%
	14	35	9.40%
	15	101	27.10%
	16	89	23.90%
	17	127	34.00%
Total		373	100%

Students aged 15 to 17 constituted the majority of respondents (84.9%), suggesting that social media engagement is most prevalent during mid-to-late adolescence. This developmental stage is particularly significant for character formation, as it aligns with heightened digital exposure and the intensification of identity development processes.

5.2 Social Media Engagement Among Secondary School Students

The first objective of this study is descriptive: to identify patterns of engagement with different types of social media content among students. Crosstabulation provides a clear framework for reporting the frequency and percentages of students engaging in specific content types (e.g., education, entertainment, religion) and for comparing these across groups (e.g., male vs female, different age cohorts, etc.). In this study, crosstab analysis was used to generate Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6, which compare content engagement and time spent on social media by gender and age groups. These tables reveal both the most accessed content across all students and significant demographic patterns. These insights are crucial for understanding the behavioural dimensions of social media use in education, thereby fulfilling the descriptive aim of objective 1.

a. Time Spent on Social Media Based on Gender-Based Analysis

Table 3 presents the distribution of participants by gender and the amount of time they spend on social media daily.

Table 3: Time Spent on Social Media based on Gender-Based Analysis

Time Spent on Social Media	Male (n)	Percentage (%)	Female (n)	Percentage (%)	Total (N)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	14	9.6%	14	6.20%	28	7.5%
1 to 2 hours	45	30.8%	70	30.8%	115	30.8%
2 to 3 hours	38	26.0%	72	31.7%	110	29.5%
3 to 4 hours	22	15.1%	34	15.0%	56	15.0%
More than 4 hours	27	18.5%	37	16.3%	64	17.2%
Total	146	100%	227	100%	373	100%

The findings of this study indicate that both male (56.8%) and female (62.5%) secondary school students reported moderate levels of social media usage, with the majority spending one to three hours online daily. This indicates a general similarity in time-use patterns across genders, reflecting broader global trends in adolescent social media behaviour, where daily engagement is typical and often integrated into students' social, academic, and entertainment routines (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

While the overall patterns are similar, notable gender-based differences emerge in the intensity and distribution of use. A slightly higher proportion of female students (31.7%) reported spending 2 to 3 hours per day on social media compared to their male counterparts (26.0%). This is consistent with prior studies suggesting that females may use social media more frequently for social connection and communication, such as chatting, sharing content, and maintaining peer relationships (Lenhart et al., 2015). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of males (18.5%) than females (16.3%) report spending more than four hours daily on social media. This extended usage may be attributed to prolonged engagement with activities such as gaming, video streaming, or general browsing, behaviours more commonly observed among male adolescents (Kircaburun et al., 2018). While the differences in time usage between genders are not substantial, they offer meaningful insight into how boys and girls may interact differently with social platforms, both in terms of frequency and underlying motivations.

b. Time Spent on Social Media Based on Age Group

This crosstab shows the distribution of 373 students across five age groups (13–17 years old) and the time they spend on social media each day. Table 4 shows that the majority of students reported spending 1 to 2 hours (30.8%) and 2 to 3 hours (29.5%) on social media daily.

Table 4: Time Spent on Social Media based on Age Analysis

	Age 13		Age 14		Age 15		Age 16		Age 17		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	
Less than 1 hour	3	14.3%	2	5.7%	6	5.9%	6	6.7%	11	8.7%	28
1 to 2 hours	7	33.3%	16	45.7%	28	27.7%	31	34.9%	33	25.9%	115
2 to 3 hours	6	28.6%	10	28.6%	32	31.7%	31	34.8%	31	24.4%	110
3 to 4 hours	3	14.3%	3	8.6%	15	14.9%	9	10.1%	26	20.5%	56
More than 4 hours	2	9.5%	4	11.4%	20	19.8%	12	13.5%	26	20.5%	64
Total	21	100%	35	100%	101	100%	89	100%	127	100%	373

The findings show that a smaller portion of students (7.5%) use social media for less than 1 hour, while 17.2% spend more than 4 hours daily on social platforms. The distribution of time spent on social media varies notably across age groups. The majority of 13-year-old students spend 1 to 2 hours on social media (33.3%), followed by 28.6% who spend 2 to 3 hours. Only 9.5% reported using it for more than 4 hours. Among 14-year-olds, the majority (45.7%) spend 1 to 2 hours on social media, 28.6% spend 2 to 3 hours, and 11.4% spend more than 4 hours.

A closer examination across age groups shows an increase in time spent on social media with age, consistent with prior research suggesting that older adolescents are more likely to use social media frequently and intensively (Rideout, 2016). Among 13- and 14-year-old students, most reported spending 1 to 2 hours on social media (33.3% and 45.7%, respectively), with a smaller but growing segment engaging for longer periods. This aligns with developmental theories suggesting that early adolescents are just beginning to explore social and digital spaces, are still largely influenced by parental guidance and time restrictions (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011).

Among 15-year-olds, 31.7% spend 2 to 3 hours daily, and 19.8% spend more than 4 hours. This trend continues among 17-year-olds, with 20.5% spending over 4 hours daily. This upward pattern may reflect increased autonomy, academic pressures, and peer interaction, all of which contribute to greater reliance on digital platforms for communication, entertainment, and even academic purposes (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Notably, 16-year-olds showed balanced usage, with nearly equal proportions spending 1 to 2 hours (34.9%) and 2 to 3 hours (34.8%), suggesting a potential transition period in which habits and routines begin to stabilise.

The growing intensity of social media usage among older students is important from both developmental and educational perspectives. Prolonged engagement, particularly beyond 3–4 hours daily, has been linked to risks such as reduced academic focus, sleep disruption, and digital fatigue (Twenge, 2017). However, moderate usage (1–3 hours) may support social connectedness and even academic learning when aligned with productive online behaviours (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

c. Content Preferences by Gender

Table 5 presents the analysis of time spent on social media by content type and gender among 373 secondary school students (146 males and 227 females). The findings reveal distinct preferences among male and female students regarding the types of content they engage with on social media.

Table 5: Time Spent on Social Media based on Gender Analysis

Content	Male		Female		Overall	
	(n=146)	Percentage	(n=227)	Percentage	(N=373)	Percentage
Education	19	13.00%	50	22.00%	69	18.50%
News	16	11.00%	24	10.60%	40	10.70%
Entertainment	78	53.40%	129	56.80%	207	55.50%
Religion	20	13.70%	8	3.50%	28	7.50%
Others	13	8.90%	16	7.00%	29	7.80%

Across both genders, entertainment content emerged as the most popular category, with 53.4% of male and 56.8% of female students reporting it as their primary use of social media. This suggests that, regardless of gender, students tend to use social media mainly for recreational purposes, possibly as a means of relaxation or social connection outside academic demands. These findings align with a study by Soh et al. (2013), which revealed that Malaysian urban adolescents are motivated to use the internet for entertainment, regardless of gender. Interestingly, female students showed a stronger inclination toward educational content (22%) compared to their male counterparts (13%). This may reflect a greater academic focus or preference among female students to use digital platforms for learning-related purposes. Conversely, male students demonstrated significantly higher engagement with religious content (13.7%) than females (3.5%).

Engagement with news content appeared relatively low for both groups (11% for males, 10.6% for females), suggesting a possible lack of interest in current events among teenagers or a prioritisation of more entertaining, personally relevant content. The "Others" category remained minimal across both genders, suggesting that the major categories (education, news, entertainment, religion) largely encompass the students' main areas of interest.

In summary, the data indicate a shared preference for entertainment content among students, with notable gender-based differences in engagement with educational and religious content. These insights could be valuable to educators and policymakers as they tailor digital learning strategies and content dissemination to better align with student interests, while also encouraging a more balanced, purposeful use of social media.

d. Age-Based Preferences

Table 6 presents the percentage distribution of time spent on different types of social media content across five age groups (13-17 years old), focusing on five content categories: education, news, entertainment, religion, and other categories. The analysis reveals both consistent patterns and notable variations across age groups.

Table 6: Time Spent on Social Media based on Age Analysis

Age	Education	News	Entertainment	Religion	Others
13 (n=21)	14.30%	14.30%	57.10%	4.80%	9.50%
14 (n=35)	14.30%	8.60%	57.10%	8.60%	11.40%
15 (n=101)	18.80%	8.90%	56.40%	5.00%	10.90%
16 (n=89)	19.10%	14.60%	52.80%	10.10%	3.40%
17 (n=127)	19.70%	9.40%	55.90%	7.90%	7.10%

Entertainment content remains the most popular across all age groups, with engagement rates ranging from 52.8% to 57.1%. The highest levels of engagement were seen among 13- and 14-

year-olds (57.1%). This trend suggests that younger adolescents primarily use social media for recreational purposes, and although the percentage decreases slightly with age, entertainment remains the top category overall.

Educational content shows a gradual increase with age. While only 14.3% of 13- and 14-year-olds engage with educational content, this rises to 19.1% at age 16 and peaks at 19.7% at age 17. This upward trend suggests that as students mature, their use of social media for learning and academic purposes becomes increasingly prevalent, possibly due to the growing demands of academic responsibilities and exam preparation (e.g., national exams at age 17). The findings support the study that students often use platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, and Discord for peer collaboration, group projects, and class discussions. (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

News consumption does not follow a linear trend but peaks at age 16 (14.6%) before declining slightly at age 17 (9.4%). The higher percentage among 16-year-olds may reflect growing awareness of current events or participation in subjects that require civic or global engagement. On the other hand, religious content shows slight fluctuations across age groups, with the highest engagement (10.1%) at age 16. This may reflect identity development and values exploration in mid-adolescence. However, religious content remains among the least consumed overall, as suggested by Kamaruddin et al. (2020), who found that while they acknowledge the availability of Islamic content on social media, only a small percentage follow such pages regularly.

The “Others” category maintains a relatively low presence across age groups, peaking at age 14 (11.4%) and dropping to its lowest at age 16 (3.4%). This suggests most student engagement falls within the predefined categories of education, news, entertainment, and religion. However, the interest in educational content increases with age from 14.3% (age 13) to 19.7% (age 17). Meanwhile, the religious content peaks among 16-year-olds (10.1%). Furthermore, news consumption is higher among 13- and 16-year-olds, suggesting that early and mid-adolescents are engaged with current events. On the other hand, the “Others” category is most common among ages 14 and 15, potentially indicating exploration of varied interests.

5.3 The Positive Aspects That Can Be Derived from Social Media Utilisation

This section presents the findings and discussion related to the study's objective: to identify the level of social media engagement among secondary school students, with a particular focus on the positive aspects that may be derived from it. The investigation aimed not only to explore how frequently students use social media, but also to examine how social media interactions reflect and promote positive values such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

a. Trustworthiness

Table 7 shows the level of trustworthiness. Respondents generally perceived themselves as trustworthy when engaging with social media ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.93$). The highest-rated item (TRS4) suggests students believe they tell the truth online. The lowest score (TRS5) might indicate less consistent behaviour with keeping promises on digital platforms. The results presented in Table 7 provide insights into the perceived trustworthiness of secondary school students' social media engagement. The overall mean score of 3.88 ($SD = 0.93$) indicates that students generally agree that their social media behaviours reflect trustworthy characteristics.

This suggests a moderate to high level of ethical awareness and digital responsibility, aligning with the values expected in responsible digital citizenship (Ribble, 2012).

Table 7: The Level of Trustworthiness

	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
TRS1	Verifying information before posting	3.96	0.99
TRS2	Honesty in opinions shared on social media	3.89	0.894
TRS3	Upholding moral values when interacting online	4.05	0.877
TRS4	Correcting misinformation	4.09	0.944
TRS5	Boost in self-confidence through social media use	3.42	0.954
Overall		3.88	0.93

Note: TRS = Trustworthiness

Among the individual items, the highest-rated statement was TRS4: “Correcting misinformation” ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.94$), indicating that students are proactively engaged in maintaining the accuracy of content shared within their digital networks. This reflects positively on their digital literacy skills and ethical awareness, particularly in an age marked by the widespread dissemination of misinformation and fake news (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It also suggests that students' willingness to take social responsibility in online spaces is an encouraging sign for promoting truthful communication and critical thinking.

However, the lowest-rated item was TRS5: “Boost in self-confidence through social media use” ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.95$). While still above the neutral threshold, this score suggests that students may be less consistent in experiencing personal growth or self-assurance through their online behaviour. This may reflect the complexity of social media's impact on self-image and confidence, which can vary depending on peer interactions, feedback, and exposure to idealised content (Twenge, 2017). It may also suggest that trustworthiness is perceived primarily as a moral or social value rather than as a contributor to personal psychological benefits.

In summary, the findings suggest that students generally perceive themselves as trustworthy digital citizens, particularly in areas related to information accuracy and moral conduct. These results are promising for educators and policymakers aiming to foster character education and ethical digital literacy. However, the lower confidence rating highlights a need for additional support to help students develop positive self-concepts and healthy digital habits that reinforce integrity and self-confidence online.

b. Respect

Table 8 indicates that students exhibit high levels of respectful behaviour in their social media interactions, with an overall mean score of 3.97 ($SD = 0.88$). This makes respect the most positively endorsed character trait among the six measured elements. The high scores suggest that students value courteous digital communication and recognise the importance of maintaining social harmony and empathy in online spaces.

Table 8: The Level of Respect

	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
RPT1	Treating others respectfully on social media	4.16	0.834
RPT2	Using positive language in comments	4.09	0.854
RPT3	Tolerance of diverse viewpoints	3.91	0.871
RPT4	Promoting good values like respect	3.85	0.934
RPT5	Increase in respect for others through social media	3.82	0.921

Overall	3.97	0.88
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Note: RPT = Respect

The highest-rated item, RPT1: “Treating others respectfully on social media” ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.83$), reflects a strong internalisation of respectful behaviour in digital environments. This is closely followed by RPT2: “Using positive language in comments” ($M = 4.09$), suggesting that students are mindful of their tone and language when engaging with others. Such behaviours align with the principles of digital etiquette and responsible online communication, which are central to digital citizenship frameworks (Ribble, 2012). These findings indicate that social media, when used positively, can serve as a platform to promote civility and kindness among peers.

The lowest-rated item within this construct was RPT5: “Increase in respect for others through social media” ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.92$). Although the mean still falls within the “Agree” range, this suggests that social media may not significantly enhance students' respect for others beyond existing attitudes. This reflects a possible limitation of digital platforms in fostering empathy, especially when interactions lack face-to-face nuance or when online discourse becomes polarised (Twenge, 2017). Nevertheless, the generally high scores indicate that most students recognise and uphold respectful conduct as a key value in their online behaviour.

In summary, the data highlights respect as a strongly embedded value in students' social media engagement. This reinforces the idea that digital platforms, when used constructively, can support the development of positive social behaviours and character education. Schools and educators can build on this by incorporating respect-oriented digital citizenship programs, peer-moderated discussions, and ethical communication guidelines into their curricula to further enhance social-emotional learning in the digital age.

c. Responsibility

Table 9 shows a moderate level of perceived responsibility regarding secondary school students' social media use, with an overall mean score of 3.63 ($SD = 0.95$). The highest-rated item was RSY2: “Awareness of the consequences of shared content” ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.78$), indicating that most students are highly aware of the potential impact of their online actions.

Table 9: The Level of Responsibility

Items		Mean	Std. Deviation
RSY1	Not letting social media interfere with studies	3.38	1.057
RSY2	Awareness of the consequences of shared content	4.18	0.781
RSY3	Posting content aligned with personal values	3.67	0.916
RSY4	Balancing home responsibilities with social media	3.80	1.057
RSY5	Social media promotes self-discipline	3.13	0.947
Overall		3.63	0.95

Note: RSY = Responsibility

This awareness is significant, as it aligns with the growing global emphasis on digital literacy and online safety, in which students are taught to evaluate and consider the ethical and legal consequences of their digital footprint (Livingstone et al., 2014). However, items related to personal self-regulation received notably lower ratings. RSY5: “Social media promotes self-discipline” recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.95$), followed by RSY1: “Not letting social media interfere with studies” ($M = 3.38$).

These findings suggest that while students understand the external implications of their digital behaviour, they may struggle with internal self-management, particularly in balancing social media with their academic responsibilities. This concern aligns with prior research highlighting social media as a potential source of distraction and time mismanagement, especially among adolescents whose executive functioning and time-regulation skills are still developing (Twenge, 2017).

In summary, the findings indicate that while students demonstrate high awareness of content consequences, their ability to regulate personal behaviour and maintain academic or household responsibilities while engaging in social media remains limited. This highlights the need for targeted digital citizenship education that emphasises responsible posting and promotes self-regulation, time management, and healthy media habits. Educators and parents can play a vital role in reinforcing these aspects through digital use guidelines, modelling of responsible behaviour, and open dialogue about the pressures and distractions of online life.

d. Fairness

The findings in Table 10 indicate that secondary school students demonstrate a moderate level of fairness in their social media engagement, with an overall mean score of 3.73 (SD = 0.91). This suggests that students are generally conscious of ethical and equitable behaviour when interacting in digital spaces. However, there remains room for growth, particularly in more nuanced aspects of fairness, such as open-mindedness in online discourse.

Table 10: The Level of Fairness

	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
FAR1	Listening to diverse perspectives	3.80	0.883
FAR2	Crediting original creators	4.04	0.863
FAR3	Embracing diversity in online interaction	3.65	0.887
FAR4	Open-mindedness in online debates	3.51	0.972
FAR5	Social media enhances fairness	3.64	0.924
Overall		3.73	0.91

Note: FAR = Fairness

The highest-rated item within the fairness construct was FAR2: “Crediting original creators” (M = 4.04, SD = 0.86). This suggests that students recognise the importance of intellectual property rights and are inclined to acknowledge the sources of content shared on social media. This behaviour reflects a growing awareness of digital ethics and responsible content use, which are core components of digital citizenship education (Ribble, 2012).

Moderate agreement was also found in items such as FAR1: “Listening to diverse perspectives” (M = 3.80) and FAR3: “Embracing diversity in online interaction” (M = 3.65). These responses suggest that students generally accept diverse viewpoints in digital spaces, which reflects a positive attitude towards inclusivity and intercultural respect. Such behaviours are important in fostering digital empathy and creating safe online environments where students feel heard and valued, regardless of their background (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

Notably, the lowest-rated item was FAR4: “Open-mindedness in online debates” (M = 3.51, SD = 0.97), suggesting that students may struggle to embrace diverse opinions in online discussions fully. This could be attributed to the polarising nature of online platforms, where algorithm-driven content may reinforce echo chambers, making respectful disagreement and

dialogue more difficult. It may also reflect the complexities of emotional development during adolescence, as students are still learning to navigate conflict and differing viewpoints with maturity and composure. This finding aligns with a study by Yahaya, N. et al. (2010), which revealed that the majority of Malaysian secondary school students exhibited only moderate or low levels of critical thinking, particularly in evaluating arguments and constructing reasoned responses.

e. Caring

Table 11 reveals that secondary school students demonstrate a moderate level of caring behaviours in their social media interactions, with an overall mean of 3.69 (SD = 0.96). The findings show that the highest-rated item was CRG3: “Encouraging positive peer interaction” (M = 3.96, SD = 0.93), suggesting that many students actively foster a supportive, friendly environment when engaging with peers online. This aligns with the idea that social media, when used constructively, can serve as a platform for community building and emotional support (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). Similarly, CRG5: “Social media increases care and concern” (M = 3.81) indicates that students perceive that digital engagement can strengthen relationships and enhance emotional awareness.

Table 11: The Level of Caring

	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
CRG1	Offering support to peers with challenges	3.64	0.961
CRG2	Sharing content with good values	3.67	0.939
CRG3	Encouraging positive peer interaction	3.96	0.929
CRG4	Using social media to express empathy	3.36	1.058
CRG5	Social media increases care and concern	3.81	0.902
Overall		3.69	0.96

Note: CRG = Caring

Table 11 shows that the lowest-rated item was CRG4: “Using social media to express empathy” (M = 3.36, SD = 1.06). Although this still falls within the “Agree” range, the comparatively lower score may suggest that while students are willing to help or share good content, they may find it more difficult to convey or articulate empathy through digital means. This difficulty could be attributed to the inherent limitations of online communication, such as a lack of facial expressions or tone of voice, which are crucial for empathetic exchanges (Turkle, 2015). Additionally, some adolescents may be cautious about expressing vulnerability or emotional support publicly on social media platforms.

Overall, the findings indicate that students recognise the role of social media in promoting care and support, but their ability to express deeper emotional empathy may still be developing. This points to an opportunity for educators and parents to cultivate emotional literacy and empathetic communication skills in digital contexts. Structured learning experiences such as digital storytelling, reflective dialogue, and peer mentoring programs can help students effectively translate their caring intentions into meaningful online actions.

f. Citizenship

The findings in Table 12 regarding the citizenship construct suggest that students demonstrate a moderate but limited level of digital civic engagement, with an overall mean score of 3.39 (SD = 0.95), the lowest among the six-character traits examined in this study. This suggests

that while students may value the concept of being responsible digital citizens, their active participation in community and civic-oriented activities on social media remains limited.

Table 12: The Level of Citizenship

	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
CTZ1	Using social media to contribute to the community	3.36	0.936
CTZ2	Verifying community-related information	3.41	0.936
CTZ3	Joining volunteer opportunities online	3.14	1.031
CTZ4	Being a role model in the digital space	3.19	0.951
CTZ5	Social media nurtures patriotism	3.86	0.901
Overall		3.39	0.95

Note: CTZ = Citizenship

Among the measured items, the highest-rated was CTZ5: “Social media nurtures patriotism” ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.90$). This suggests that students perceive social media as a platform that can foster national identity and pride, possibly through exposure to cultural celebrations, national events, or inspirational narratives about the country. This finding is consistent with studies suggesting that digital media can foster collective identity and civic awareness, particularly when used to reinforce national values and unity (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016).

However, the overall low mean scores in items such as CTZ3: “Joining volunteer opportunities online” ($M = 3.14$) and CTZ4: “Being a role model in the digital space” ($M = 3.19$) highlight a concerning lack of active civic participation and leadership among students in digital contexts. While students may observe or support community initiatives passively (e.g., through liking or sharing), their actual involvement in volunteering, advocacy, or modelling responsible behaviour online appears limited. These scores suggest that students demonstrate a degree of civic awareness, particularly regarding the importance of verifying community-related information before sharing it. However, this awareness has not yet translated into consistently proactive behaviours.

This underscores the need for greater civic and media literacy education, where students not only understand their role in digital communities but are also empowered to act on that understanding responsibly and constructively. The findings highlight a crucial need to expand digital citizenship education beyond basic online safety and etiquette to encompass civic responsibility, community engagement, and leadership in digital spaces. Educational programs should aim to cultivate active digital citizenship by encouraging students to engage in virtual community initiatives, advocate for social causes, and model ethical behaviour in online environments. Such efforts can foster a more robust and action-oriented sense of civic responsibility among students when using social media.

6. Conclusion

The data indicates that secondary school students use social media moderately, with the majority spending between 1 and 3 hours online daily. Content preferences primarily focus on entertainment, followed by education, news, and religion. Overall, students exhibit positive character traits in their social media engagement, particularly in respect and trustworthiness, suggesting a degree of moral value internalisation in digital contexts. However, lower scores in the domains of Responsibility and, especially, Citizenship highlight potential gaps in ethical

digital behaviour and community involvement. These findings highlight the need to develop targeted educational interventions in Malaysian schools to promote well-rounded digital citizenship. In particular, greater emphasis is needed on fostering civic engagement, self-discipline, and community-oriented behaviours through social media. These insights provide valuable direction for curriculum developers and educators aiming to strengthen digital character education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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