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**TWITTER USAGE AND THE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
WELLBEING**



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### Abstract

Social media can contribute to wellbeing by increasing online socialization among youth and providing them with a freedom in terms of communicating and socializing. Social media allows youth to establish friendship and support thus giving them avenues to experience many of the positive elements in life. The article aims to investigate how Twitter usage promote well-being among college students. It is based from an in-depth interview with eight undergraduate students using the PERMA well-being model namely Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. The results show that the element of the PERMA model that relates to positive emotions, engagement and relationship were described most often. The findings of this study showed that Twitter do give respondents the emotional support and companionship. Respondents do engage in self-disclosure on Twitter where individuals share personal feeling, thoughts, along with inner thoughts and emotional states. This study found that on Twitter, young people maintain weak-tie based relationships giving opportunities for users to create and maintain larger networks of relationships from which they could benefited from.

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## 1. Introduction

For last decades, researchers have been studying how social media contributes to wellbeing and the pursuit of happiness. The proliferation of computer-mediated communication since the ubiquity of the Internet in 1990s means social interactions have taken beyond face-to-face, where many of the subtle cues that people use to communicate are missing when communicating online. On social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter users can broadcast and express anything with lack of restraint in comparison to communicating in-person (Diener, 2012; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is safe to argue that youth nowadays rely on social media so much for the purpose of learning, socializing, entertainment, innovation and many more.

Social Networking sites (SNS) have dominated the means of computer-mediated communication in today's culture. One of the influential social networking platforms is Twitter. Twitter has become an increasingly relevant tool particularly in political communication. Bouvier and Rosenbaum (2020) argue that Twitter plays important role in creating communities and giving voice to underrepresented groups through the everyday conversations people often have.

## 2. Problem Statement

Past studies showed that social media could have negative effects on people's wellbeing. Due to unrealistic social comparisons, the use of social media was reported to deteriorate mood and leads to the decline of wellbeing (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014). Feelings of envy is perceived as the by-product of social media usage and the negative effects were further amplified with using Facebook passively (Tandoc et al., 2015).

The argument on the negative effects of social media usage, however, is still questionable because the direction of this relationship remains to be established. Youth that are anxious or depressed for example may tend to spend more time on social media in order to regulate their low mood and negative feeling (Van Der Goot et al., 2012). In addition, there are many studies that has found no links between social media use and wellbeing (Jelenchick et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2009).

Increasingly, more studies have found that social media use is able to give positive effects on the users' wellbeing. A study by Akbari and Mahdian (2011) suggested the social media effectiveness in reducing psychological problem such as depression. Naeemi et al. (2014) found that the communication provided by Facebook has a positive effect on youth psychological wellbeing. This is in line with studies that found communicative use of social media provides positive psychological wellbeing outcomes because it enables communication for those who are not in a physical, face to face connection (Ellison et al., 2011). Wu (2014) examines China's leading social network, WeChat, and found that it positively impacts users' wellbeing due to the strong community based connections and increased opportunity for sharing experiences with selective group of friends through visual communication.

While research on young people's social media behaviors and wellbeing is growing, there is relatively little research on the positive elements in the usage of social media among youth, particularly in Malaysia. There are major gaps in research and evidence about their activities and communications, particularly on the benefits of social media on youth wellbeing. Such understanding of social media usage

by youth is important, in order to enable policy and practice to leverage the benefits of young people's social media practices for their wellbeing.

### **3. Research Questions**

The aim of this article is to examine to what extent social media can contribute to wellbeing. Five indicators of well-being theory based on Seligman's PERMA model (2018) will be used in this article; they are Pleasure, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Specifically, this article will probe about the usage of Twitter on 1) how it is being used by youth purposely and 2) to what extent it can lead to wellbeing based on element of PERMA framework.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

#### **4.1. PERMA Model**

PERMA model was developed by Martin Seligman who concluded that the three dimensions that contribute to happiness are pleasure and gratification, embodiment of strengths and virtues and meaning and purpose (Seligman, 2018). The model is rooted in positive psychology, which posits on the importance of positive emotions and characters for individuals to have optimal functioning life (Seligman et al., 2005). It based on the concept from the field of positive psychology, which argues that subjective wellbeing and associated elements such as life happiness and optimism have numerous positive effects on life outcomes such as health, education and success (Diener, 2012). PERMA model is the most recent construct based on the concept of human "flourishing". Throughout the years Seligman has added two more elements of well-being which form the model with acronym PERMA; Pleasure, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.

Pleasure or positive emotions are a range of positive emotions including love, joy and interest.. This element can be seen as using positive emotions to achieve life satisfaction, resilience, mindfulness, work outcomes, social rewards and physical health. Engagement refers to someone who is fully engaged in the task in hand and living at the present moment. This is referred to as 'flow' in the field of positive psychology. It means someone who is so intensely focused on what he or she is doing that time seems to stop (Seligman, 2012). Experience the flow is seen as top character strengths and individuals who are capitalizing their strengths, happier and less depressed (Seligman et al., 2005). Relationships refer to the interactions individuals have with others including feeling loved, valued and supported by others. This element believes that humans need positive relationships which have a strong impact on their wellbeing (Seligman, 2012). Relationships are positively associated with self-esteem and that perceived increases in friendship and companionship quality are related to increases in well-being.

To have a sense of meaning is the fourth element of PERMA where an individual need to feel belonging to or doing something that is valuable and worthwhile (Seligman, 2012). Meaning also refers to how individual get closer to his or her truer self as the source of meaning. Individuals are said to be fairly happy and satisfied if they have a more meaningful lives. The final element of PERMA is accomplishment, which relates to achievement, mastery and competence. According to Seligman (2012),

accomplishment is described as a determination to accomplish something. Achieving goals has been found to enhance wellbeing over time.

This article will explore each of the elements of PERMA as indicators to measure and consider the wellbeing of youth when using Twitter and examine how Twitter can lead to their happiness. Further, this study will investigate how Twitter gives impact on their life that includes their judgments of life satisfaction, positive and negative emotional responses. This study will also look at how internal experience are measured from an individual's own perspective such as self-reported based on their usage of Twitter.

## **5. Research Methods**

Twitter is an interactive social media platform, which allows users post tweets, micro-blogging with a 280 characters' limit. Twitter is seen as valuable online communication tool for communicating ideas, vision and thoughts globally. As a communication tool, Twitter allows exchange of ideas between people interested in similar areas of expertise as well as the opportunity to engage in critical debate. Twitter also allows people to search for the very latest topic through hashtag function and explore their interest. By using hashtags users can become a part of a community of like-minded individuals with interest in a similar social cause.

For that reasons, it is also possible that people who actively participate in Twitter to feel more connected and happier (Valkenburg et al., 2017). The engagement between Twitter and its followers probably can create a room for humans to feel connected, joy and bring satisfaction in life because they meet their interests, communicate, expressing feelings and many more (Haidt, 2006). This article presents findings of a qualitative study consisting of eight semi-structured interviews (four females and four males) with college students in the 1st to 4th year of their undergraduate degrees at the Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Participants aged from 19 to 23 were acquired through a snowball sampling strategy and the interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour.

The interview session was carried out in November 2019. The interviews were conducted with the students based on Seligman's (2018) five components of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The interviews investigated into the activities of Facebook usage among respondents. The interviews began with the users discussing their general reasons for using Twitter, how they feel when using Twitter, to what extent Twitter gives them any meaning in life, how attached they are to their Twitter followers and if there is any way Twitter can help them to accomplish something in their life. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure confidentiality, the respondents were identified as Respondent 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. The data were transcribed manually and analysed based on the concept of PERMA, which underpinned this study.

## **6. Findings**

Findings from the interviews indicate that the element of the PERMA wellbeing model that relates to positive emotions, engagement and relationship were the most dominant and described most often

relating to Twitter usage. Positive feelings and being interested and engaged and feeling connected with something through the use of Twitter was repeatedly identified as very important in the feeling of wellbeing and happiness among respondents. Respondents do engage in self-disclosure in hope to receive emotional support, instrumental support and companionship.

### **6.1. Positive emotions**

Based on the findings, majority of the respondents stated that they experienced positive emotions such as happy, joy, calmness and excited through the usage of Twitter. They particularly highlighted how funny posts on Twitter such as memes elicit positive mood and helped them to forget their daily problems.

*Twitter will change my mood especially when I felt sad or unhappy because there are a lot of funny things like memes, jokes on Twitter. People are sharing a lot of cool and great things that make me excited and become happy (Respondent 1, Personal Communication, 16 November 2019)*

*If I read positive posts, I will feel a bit happy and forget my problem for a while (Respondent 4, Personal Communication, 20 November 2019)*

*Whenever I feel sad or down, I will scroll down twitter and found many funny post that can make me ignore the sad feelings. (Respondent 5, Personal Communication, 24 November 2019)*

*I think sometimes Twitter can change my daily mood. For example, when I felt down and stressed, I scrolled twitter and read funny posts so that I would be happy and forget about my sadness. Sometimes, I am using Twitter for getting inspirations and motivations from positive people on Twitter such as Mufti Menk, Dr. Ben and many more. (Respondent 4, Personal Communication, 20 November 2019)*

### **6.2. Engagement and Interests**

In terms of engagement, respondents reveal how Twitter usage motivates them to fully engage in their interest. Twitter allow them to discover their interest by providing resources and environments and keeps the respondents motivated on their interests. Consequently, these support the positive cycle of self-rewarding experience and provides a better sense of wellbeing.

*An example of post that makes me feel excited is about anime. I definitely feel excited to post, reply or retweet it because anime is my interest. (Respondent 2, Personal Communication, 18 November 2019)*

*Information about the mystic things for example about the ghost and 'Jin'; those posts that I will feel excited to read when it is posted by influencers. (Respondent 6, Personal Communication, 24 November 2019)*

*Examples of posts that can trigger my happy mood are about body shaping. Posts about changes in shape of body-from obesity to thin, from chubby to fit and beautiful, really make my mood triggered. I am curious about that obvious change, so will read all posts about that. If their tips were making senses to me, I would try their recommendations and tips to get the same results. (Respondent 3, Personal Communication, 18 November 2019)*

### 6.3. Relationships

Relationships were frequently identified element of the PERMA model in the findings. Respondents indicate increased support or peer friendships among their online friends when respondents disclosing their emotional state.

*...Last night I posted about stress and I wrote "Stressed!! Feel like crying" and few minutes after I posted it, I got messages and replies on my posts from my Twitter friends. They gave some inspirational words and supported me to not feel down. So I think Twitter can make me receive support from my Twitter friends (Respondent 1, Personal Communication, 16 November 2019)*

*When I have problems, there will be some of my friends asked and checked on me. They gave some supports and encouraged me. (Respondent 3, Personal Communication, 18 November 2019)*

*Yes, sometimes when I post that I have been down emotionally, there will be people who comment to give some motivation to me. (Respondent 5, Personal Communication, 24 November 2019)*

### 6.4. Meaning

Respondents described that Twitter provided a meaningful aspect to their life mainly in helping them to connect with their broader community. Many respondents indicated that Twitter is meaningful especially as a platform to gain information and motivations. In other words, using Twitter does give some meaning in their life by providing them with a broader set of information such as religious information, motivational quotes and real life experiences and those are regarded as purposeful and give them deeper meaning in life.

*I regularly read about Islamic messages from ustaz (preachers), posts from successful people, stories about life and I think these are the things that I need the most in my life. Twitter can give me a lot of good things, to give meaning in my life and make my life purposeful... (Respondent 1, Personal Communication, 16 November 2019)*

*... I found Twitter provides a lot of positive vibes that I am looking for, such as motivational quotes, beautiful speech by Mufti, inspirational tweets from my idols and many more. I read them all every day. I feel incomplete if I don't read it even for a day (Respondent 3, Personal Communication, 18 November 2019)*

*Twitter sometimes can give meaning to my life as it helps me to be a better person. I learned a lot from Twitter since there are a lot of people who express their feeling and make Twitter as their diary. So I observed how they face their problems in real life and I know that I am not alone facing the problem in this world. (Respondent 7, Personal Communication, 27 November 2019)*

### 6.5. Accomplishment

Accomplishment was the least identified element of the PERMA model in this article. Most respondents did not indicate how using Twitter help them to accomplish something tangible. Rather, most respondents mention how they get inspirations through positive experiences or actions posts by those they follow. This finding is supported by a study by Lee et al. (2014) that social media has information value that heightens users' sense of the need to obtain knowledge, and resources shared by other users. The resulting utility through the network of weak ties could be employed to help users to gain knowledge,

innovative information, and interesting news and this in turn gives a sense of accomplishment among users.

*I think it is very helpful in helping me making progress towards accomplishing my own goals in life by seeking other job experiences on Twitter. There are a lot of people are sharing their experiences or tips on how to achieve goals in life. Twitter is where users will give and ask for opinion or suggestion and some will give suggestions based on their experiences. (Respondent 1, Personal Communication, 16 November 2019)*

*By using the twitter, it helps me to accomplishing my goals in my life. For example, I will get inspire if someone posts about his or her success story on twitter. (Respondent 6, Personal Communication, 24 November 2019)*

*I think Twitter helps me in making progress towards accomplishing my own goals in life when I found my interests and source of inspiration to get a better future and life from successful people and celebrities on Twitter. I get inspired by them to make progress toward accomplishing my goals. (Respondent 7, Personal Communication, 27 November 2019)*

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that the element of relationship is dominant in the usage of Twitter. Twitter do give respondents the emotional support, instrumental support and companionship. For that reason, respondents do engage in self-disclosure, in which an individual shares thoughts, emotional states and personal feelings (Derlega, 1984). The findings in line with the arguments that young people tend to disclose more on social media than in the real life environments to one's entire network of virtual friends. This is also incongruence with arguments by Boyd (2014) that young people are using social media to free themselves from the adult gaze in order to socialise and explore their identities.

This study found that on Twitter, young people are using it to maintain weak-tie based relationships where users create and maintain larger connection of relationships from which they could draw resources (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Based on these findings, information on Twitter serves as a social process, in which individuals can seek and broadcast requests for support or information (Ellison et al., 2011). The weak ties are important as it can increase access to manyresources including new information and different perspectives.

The PERMA framework used in this study viewed how individuals apply their virtues effectively to help themselves to adapt to different life situations and feel happy and satisfied with their life experiences (Chang et al., 2014). The findings found that in support of positive psychology, respondents do flourish under certain conditions when using Twitter. It helps them to create positive emotions, be happy about their current situation and optimistic about their future. It also helps respondents to cultivate positive traits such as persistence and motivations in helping young people to conceptualize good lives.

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