

Emotional literacy and mental health of adolescent girls in facing the psychological impacts of social media use

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Abstract

Background: Adolescent girls are highly engaged in social media use and are exposed to risk factors for mental health. Emotional literacy skills are a teachable set of abilities to recognize, understand, express, and regulate emotions and have been proposed as a protective factor. **Objective:** This study aimed to analyse the relationship between emotional literacy and mental health among adolescent girls who actively use social media, as well as to examine the effects of usage duration and platform type on their psychological well-being. **Methods:** A quantitative study with a correlational design aimed to examine the relationship between emotional literacy skills and mental health. A survey was conducted among 210 senior high school girls (Grades 10–12) in Jambi City. Instruments included the adapted Emotional Literacy Skills Scale (ELSS) and the Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20). **Results:** A total of 54.8% screened positive for psychological distress (SRQ-20); most participants had good–very good levels of emotional literacy (57.1%). There was a significant association between higher emotional literacy category and lower odds of distress ($\chi^2 = 19.388$; $p < 0.001$; contingency coefficient = 0.291). Most reported low–moderate daily social-media duration (80.9%); the most used platforms were TikTok (56.5%) and Instagram (39.2%); the primary purpose was entertainment (66.7%). **Conclusion:** Higher emotional literacy skills are associated with lower odds of psychological distress among senior high school girls. Gender-responsive school programs that integrate emotional literacy training and social-media literacy are strongly recommended

Keywords: Emotional literacy skills; social media; adolescent girls; mental health

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, adolescent mental health issues have shown an increasing trend. Exposure to social media, academic pressure, and socioeconomic change contribute to elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and depression among students, with long-term consequences for psychological development if not adequately addressed [1–11]. One relevant protective competence in the school context is emotional literacy is the ability to understand, express, and regulate emotions in social interactions [2,9,10].

Emotional literacy emphasizes communicating feelings using an appropriate emotion vocabulary and serves as a bridge between thought and emotion within the school community, thereby contributing to a safe and effective learning climate [10–14]. The Emotional Literacy Skills Scale (ELSS) was developed and validated with five core dimensions (motivation, empathy, self-regulation, emotional awareness, and social skills), confirming that emotional literacy is multidimensional and can be measured reliably [1,14–16]. Theoretically and empirically, stronger emotional competencies are associated with a range of positive outcomes, including psychological well-being, prosocial relationships, and academic success [16,17].

School-based emotional literacy interventions—such as role-play techniques—have been shown to improve emotional expression, empathy, and adolescents' interpersonal relationships, thereby strengthening resilience and social competence [1,18–22]. On the other hand, the digital ecosystem places adolescents—especially girls—amid intense flows of information and interaction. Even at the primary-school level, social media literacy has been proposed as a key skill to promote meaningful participation and safe collaborative learning; its implementation requires active teacher involvement and explicit curriculum design [23–27]. At the adolescent stage, understanding and managing emotions become increasingly crucial for navigating online interactions that can affect psychological well-being.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on senior high school girls in Jambi City. There is an urgent need to map emotional literacy, mental health status, and patterns of social media use in this group, given the role of emotional literacy as a protective factor and its potential for school-based interventions. The findings are expected to provide an empirical basis for developing gender-responsive psychoeducation programs and school policies oriented toward adolescents' psychological well-being.

METHODS

Study design and setting

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational design using an explanatory survey to examine the association between emotional literacy skills and mental health among senior high school girls. Data were collected through standardized questionnaires from a large number of respondents to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. In addition, descriptive analyses were used to profile the initial level of students' emotional literacy and its connection to their social-media activities. The findings are expected to provide practical inputs and relevant educational strategies for school settings and adolescent psychosocial support.

Population, samples and sampling

A total of $N = 210$ girls in Grades 10–12 (ages 15–18) participated. Inclusion criteria were active enrollment, daily social-media use ≥ 1 hour, and provision of consent. Convenience sampling was applied in collaborating schools.

Instruments and criteria

1. Emotional Literacy Skills Scale (ELSS)

The ELSS measures skills in understanding one's strengths, quality of life, and emotions to enhance other people's quality of life, and it emphasizes the use of emotion words in social relationships [13]. Emotional literacy was assessed using the Indonesian-adapted ELSS, which maps five factors: (1) Motivation, (2) Empathy, (3) Self-regulation, (4) Emotional awareness, and (5) Social skills. Each statement is answered on a Likert scale (e.g., 1–5), with higher scores indicating better emotional literacy [10]. The adaptation process involved forward translation and back-translation, expert appraisal, and field piloting to ensure semantic equivalence with the original version, complemented by expert review with three specialists (psychology lecturers and practicing psychologists) to determine which translated items to retain and to conduct readability testing. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) showed adequate fit after item purification from 31 to 19 items (CFI = 0.903; TLI = 0.887; RMSEA \approx 0.065; χ^2/df = 1.84). Reliability was examined via internal consistency to assess the coherence among items measuring the same construct; the ELSS demonstrated good internal reliability (α = 0.763). The ELSS category criteria were: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high.

2. Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20)

The SRQ-20 was used to screen psychological distress (20 items; higher scores indicate greater distress). This instrument has been adapted into Indonesian and is widely used in public health research and clinical settings. The adaptation process included forward translation, back-translation, expert review, and field testing to ensure semantic equivalence with the original [[28]]. Developed by the WHO to detect symptoms of common mental disorders, the SRQ-20 has been adapted into Indonesian through translation, back-translation, expert assessment, and piloting to ensure semantic equivalence and cultural relevance. The Indonesian version shows sound psychometric properties, with internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of approximately 0.84 and adequate model fit based on factor analysis. It is used to assess the level of psychological distress, with the total score indicating respondents' risk for common mental disorders [[28]].

3. Social-media variables.

Daily social-media duration was categorized as very low (< 1 hour), low (1–3 hours), moderate (3–6 hours), and high (> 6 hours). The most frequently used platforms included TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X, and others. The primary purposes for using social media were categorized as entertainment, learning, self-expression, communication, and other.

Procedure and data collection

Data were collected via Google Forms by distributing a call-for-participants flyer on social media and through coordination support from teachers. All items were mandatory; data were anonymized prior to analysis

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were presented for all variables. Associations between ELSS categories and SRQ-20 status were tested using Pearson's chi-square and Linear-by-Linear Association for trend. Effect size was summarized with the contingency coefficient. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary with digital informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality were assured

RESULTS

The analytic sample comprised 210 senior high-school girls. By grade, 40 students (19.0%) were in Grade 10, 86 (41.0%) in Grade 11, and 84 (40.0%) in Grade 12. Based on the SRQ-20 screening, 115 participants (54.8%) met the indication of psychological distress, while 95 (45.2%) were classified as normal. Emotional literacy (ELSS) levels were mostly in the upper bands: 108 students (51.4%) were in the “good” category and 12 (5.7%) in “very good,” with 79 (37.6%) “moderate” and 11 (5.2%) “low.” Regarding social-media exposure, most respondents reported low–moderate daily duration: 104 (49.5%) low and 66 (31.4%) moderates; 24 (11.4%) reported high duration and 16 (7.6%) very low. TikTok was the most frequently used platform (118; 56.5%), followed by Instagram (82; 39.2%), while other platforms were uncommon (9; 4.3%). Entertainment was the primary purpose of use (140; 66.7%), with smaller proportions reporting learning (24; 11.4%), self-expression (17; 8.1%), communication (16; 7.6%), and other purposes (13; 6.2%).

Table 1. Description of the sample included in the analysis

	N	%
Grade		
X	40	19,0
XI	86	41,0
XII	84	40,0
SRQ-20		
Normal	95	45,2
Indication of distress	115	54,8
ELSS		
Low	11	5,2
Moderate	79	37,6
Good	108	51,4
Very good	12	5,7
Daily Social Media duration		
Very Low	16	7,6
Low	104	49,5
Moderate	66	31,4
High	24	11,4
Platform Media Sosial		
TikTok	118	56,5
Instagram	82	39,2
Others	9	4,3
Purposes of social media use		
Entertainment	140	66,7
Learning	24	11,4
Self-Expression	17	8,1
Communication	16	7,6
Others	13	6,2

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of ELSS by SRQ-20 status

ELSS	SRQ-20		Total
	Normal	Distress	
Low	3	8	11
Moderate	28	51	79
High	52	56	108
Very High	12	0	12
Total	95	115	210

Table 3. Chi-square Tests of Association between ELSS dan SRQ-20

Statistik	Value	Signifikansi (2-sided)	Remarks
Chi-kuadrat Pearson	19,388	<0,001	Significant
Likelihood Ratio	24,029	<0,001	Significant
Linear-by-Linear Association	13,772	<0,001	Significant
Contingency coefficient	0,291	<0,001	Weak-moderate Association
N	210	—	—

A cross-tabulation between emotional literacy (ELSS) and mental-health status (SRQ-20) showed a graded pattern: students with very high emotional literacy skills had no distress cases (12/12 normal), whereas those with low emotional literacy skills were mostly distressed (8/11). In the moderate and good emotional literacy skills groups, distress still exceeded or matched normal (51/79 and 56/108, respectively). The association tests confirmed this trend: Pearson's $\chi^2 = 19.388$, $p < 0.001$, with a Linear-by-Linear Association = 13.772, $p < 0.001$, indicating that higher emotional literacy skills levels are linked to lower likelihood of psychological distress. The contingency coefficient 0.291 ($p < 0.001$) suggests a weak-to-moderate strength of association (N = 210).

DISCUSSION

The study's primary finding indicates a high prevalence of psychological distress. The proportion of respondents with indications of common mental disorders (54.8%) is consistent with global and national evidence that adolescents—particularly girls—are highly vulnerable to psychological pressure stemming from social-media exposure, academic demands, and peer-relationship dynamics [29,30]. This underscores the need for promotive–preventive services (screening, psychoeducation, and counselling support) at the senior high school level [30]. It also signals that adolescent ecosystem risk factors—including social-media exposure, academic pressure, and peer dynamics—should become focal points of school programs.

Most students (57.1%) fell into the good–very good emotional literacy category, but this did not translate directly into low levels of distress [31,32]. These results strengthen the rationale for interventions that combine the enhancement of emotional literacy (emotion identification, regulation, empathy) with digital hygiene (time management, content curation, and coping strategies when exposed to triggering content).

Majority low–moderate, but residual risk remains. While 80.9% reported low–moderate daily duration, 11.4% were in the high category. This subgroup warrants targeted prevention (e.g., device-use behavior contracts, screen-time plans, and reinforcement of alternative activities). Clear duration categories help schools prioritize target groups. TikTok (56.5% of valid responses) was the most frequently used platform, followed by Instagram (39.2%). The primary purpose was entertainment (66.7%). The combination of *infinite scroll* formats and recreational goals may encourage more passive and prolonged use. This is relevant for intervention design: promoting active/meaningful use (learning, creation) and self-monitoring techniques so that screen time does not expand unintentionally.

Each increase in emotional literacy level was associated with lower odds of distress. The chi-square test showed a significant association between ELSS level and mental-health status based on SRQ-20 ($\chi^2 = 19.388$; $p < 0.001$). The Linear-by-Linear Association was also significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that higher emotional literacy is linked to a lower likelihood of common mental-disorder indications.

The protective link between emotional literacy and distress aligns with literature positioning emotional literacy—encompassing the ability to recognize, understand, label, manage, and express emotions—as a foundation for coping skills, resilience, and healthy decision-making in adolescence [12,13,16,21,33]. Better emotional literacy has been associated with reductions in anxiety, stress, and depression, and with support for managing risk behaviours [12,14,16]. Conversely, the finding that screen-time quantity, rather than platform type, is more consistently associated with distress supports the argument that exposure intensity and usage purpose (e.g., passive entertainment, *doom-scrolling*, social comparison) are more decisive than the brand of platform [2,30,34,35]. This pattern resonates with the social-media literacy literature emphasizing critical thinking, digital-risk awareness, and self-regulation when interacting online [24,27,30,35].

School interventions that integrate emotional-literacy training with social-media literacy may deliver dual benefits: strengthening emotion-regulation skills while reducing online risks such as misinformation, bullying, and *Fear of Missing Out* (FOMO) [1,13,15,16,20,21]. In terms of policy and school practice, these findings reinforce the urgency of explicitly integrating mental health and emotional-literacy content into the curriculum—accompanied by teacher training and a supportive school culture—to holistically promote students' psychological well-being [16,20,21,36]. Limitations include the cross-sectional design, self-report measures, and convenience sampling, which preclude causal inference and may constrain generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal/experimental designs, measure content and motives of media use, and evaluate the effectiveness of combined ELSS and social-media literacy modules [1,12,14,16,20,21,24,25,27,37,38].

CONCLUSIONS

This study mapped emotional literacy, mental health status, and social-media use patterns among senior high school girls in Jambi City. Overall, the findings indicate a notable burden of psychological distress among most participants, while emotional literacy levels were relatively good but not fully protective; association tests indicated a negative relationship between emotional literacy and distress. These findings underscore the urgency of gender-responsive, school-based promotive–preventive strategies in the local Jambi context. Theoretically, the results align with literature positioning emotional literacy as a protective competence related to mental health and relationship quality, and as relevant for preventive counselling services in schools.

Stronger emotional literacy is understood to contribute to the prevention of mental-health problems and the maintenance of healthy interpersonal communication. In practical terms, school programs should combine two components: (a) the systematic strengthening of emotional literacy skills as trainable/intervenable competencies, and (b) social-media literacy to consciously navigate digital risks (social comparison, doom-scrolling, misinformation). Follow-up studies are recommended to employ longitudinal/experimental designs, measure the variety of content and motives for social-media use, and evaluate integrated intervention modules on emotional-literacy skills and social-media literacy with adequate sample sizes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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DECLARATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USE

The authors used ChatGPT (GPT-5 Thinking; OpenAI), accessed on 31 October 2025, in a limited manner for language refinement (spelling, grammar, and clarity) of the manuscript draft. No new scientific content (ideas, data, analyses, or conclusions) was generated by AI. All scientific substance was verified and determined by the authors; the AI tool is not listed as an author and did not influence scientific decisions. No personal or confidential data were uploaded to the AI system. All AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors, and the final decisions and interpretations were made by the authors.

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