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Mental Health Literacy and Psychological Readiness for Help-Seeking Among Adolescents

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Abstract

Mental health problems among adolescents have become an increasing public health concern, particularly in the context of widespread social media use. Mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors play a critical role in the early recognition and management of psychological difficulties. This study aimed to examine the influence of school and social factors, together with social media use, on mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors among Thai adolescents. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 128 secondary school students in Thailand (mean age = 16 years). Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire assessing demographic characteristics, daily social media use, mental health literacy, help-seeking readiness, stigma-related attitudes, and perceptions of the school mental health consultation environment. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and multiple linear regression analyses were performed. Overall, participants demonstrated moderate to high levels of mental health literacy (Mean = 3.99, SD = 0.83) and help-seeking readiness (Mean = 4.18, SD = 0.75), with generally positive attitudes toward stigma reduction. Although social media use was prevalent, daily duration of use was not significantly associated with mental health literacy. In contrast, a supportive school mental health consultation environment emerged as a statistically significant predictor of mental health literacy ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$), while social media use showed no predictive effect. These findings suggest that adolescents' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors are shaped more strongly by school-based contextual factors than by the amount of time spent on social media. Strengthening supportive school mental health environments may therefore be more effective than focusing solely on reducing social media use in promoting adolescent mental well-being.

Keywords: Mental health literacy; Help-seeking behavior; School environment; Social media use; Thai adolescents

1. Introduction

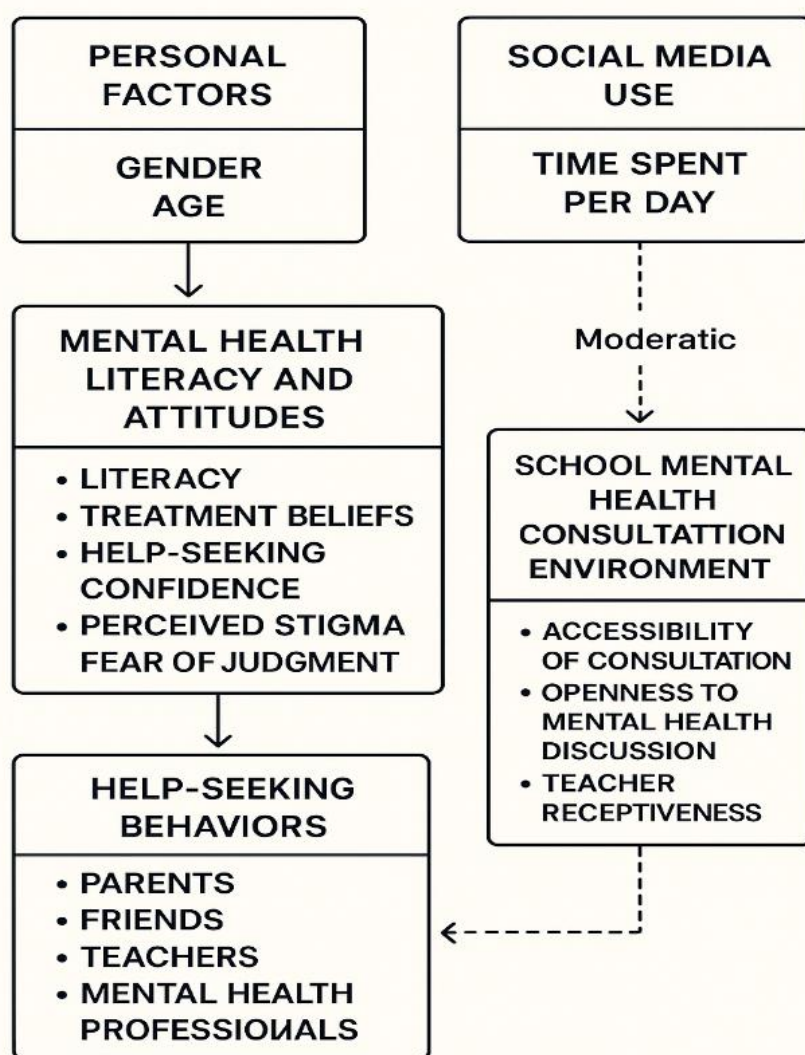
Adolescence is a critical period of emotional, psychological, and social development. During this stage, young people experience rapid changes in identity, relationships, and academic expectations, which can increase vulnerability to stress and mental health problems. Globally, mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression are among the leading causes of illness and disability in adolescents. In Thailand, concerns about adolescent mental health have grown in recent years, particularly in school settings where academic pressure and social expectations are high.

Mental health literacy refers to an individual's ability to recognize mental health problems, understand available support, and seek appropriate help. Higher levels of mental health literacy are associated with early identification of psychological distress, reduced stigma, and improved help-seeking behaviors. However, previous studies have shown that adolescents often have difficulty distinguishing between normal stress and more serious mental health conditions, such as depression. Limited knowledge and fear of social judgment may further prevent adolescents from seeking professional support, even when services are available.

The rapid expansion of social media has introduced new challenges to adolescent mental well-being. Social media platforms can provide emotional support and mental health information, but excessive use has also been linked to increased stress, social comparison, and emotional difficulties. While many studies have focused on the negative psychological effects of social media, fewer have examined whether the amount of social media use directly influences adolescents' mental health literacy and willingness to seek help. Evidence on this relationship remains mixed, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts.

Schools play a central role in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward mental health. A supportive school environment, characterized by open communication, accessible resources, and understanding teachers, may encourage positive mental health attitudes and help-seeking behaviors. In Thailand, school-based mental health promotion is increasingly recognized as an important strategy; however, empirical evidence on how school and social factors interact with social media use to influence mental health literacy remains limited. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the influence of school and social factors and social media use on mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors among Thai adolescents.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing Mental Health Literacy and Help-Seeking Behaviors among Thai Adolescents



2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. The participants were 128 Thai secondary school students with a mean age of 16 years. Students were recruited using convenience sampling from a secondary school in Thailand. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously. Students who provided incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire developed based on previous studies on adolescent mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections:

1. Demographic information, including gender and age
2. Social media use, measured as average daily hours spent on social media
3. Mental health literacy, assessing students' ability to distinguish normal stress from depression and knowledge of where to seek mental health support
4. Help-seeking behaviors and attitudes, including stigma-related attitudes and perceptions of school support for mental health

Responses to mental health-related items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated higher levels of mental health literacy, more positive attitudes toward help-seeking, and lower stigma.

2.3. Variable Definition

- Mental Health Literacy was calculated as the mean score of two items assessing the ability to distinguish normal stress from depression and knowledge of where to seek help.
- Help-Seeking Readiness was calculated using items related to willingness to seek help and perceived encouragement from the school environment.
- Stigma Reduction Attitude was assessed using an item measuring beliefs about the role of school education in reducing mental health stigma.
- Social Media Use was measured as self-reported average daily usage in hours.
- School Environment Support was measured using an item assessing whether the school environment encourages open discussion and help-seeking for mental health issues.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS-equivalent procedures). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant characteristics and mental health variables. A chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between categories of social media use and levels of mental health literacy.

An independent t-test was planned to compare gender differences in stigma and help-seeking behaviors; however, inferential gender analysis was limited due to an imbalanced gender distribution. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify predictors of mental health literacy, including social media use,

gender, and perceived school environment support. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was ensured, and no identifying information was collected. The study posed minimal risk to participants and focused on general attitudes and perceptions related to mental health.

3. Results

3.1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 128 adolescents participated in this study. The majority of participants were 16 years old, and most were female. Daily social media use ranged from 3 to more than 7 hours per day, with the largest proportion of students reporting 5–7 hours of social media use per day, indicating high digital engagement among the study population.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	Category	n (%)
Age	16 years	Majority
Gender	Female	Predominant
	Male	Minority
Daily Social Media Use	≤ 3 hours	30 (23.4%)
	3–5 hours	52 (40.6%)
	5–7 hours	46 (35.9%)

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Mental Health Variables

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of mental health domains. Overall, participants demonstrated a moderate to high level of mental health literacy (Mean = 3.99, SD = 0.83). Help-seeking readiness was relatively high (Mean = 4.18, SD = 0.75), suggesting generally positive attitudes toward seeking mental health support. Attitudes toward stigma reduction were also positive (Mean = 4.06, SD = 1.12), indicating that most participants believed school education could help reduce mental health stigma.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Mental Health Domains

Domain	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Mental Health Literacy	3.99	0.83	Moderate–High
Help-Seeking Readiness	4.18	0.75	High
Stigma Reduction Attitude	4.06	1.12	Positive

3.3. Association Between Social Media Use and Mental Health Literacy

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between daily social media use and mental health literacy level. Mental health literacy was categorized into high and lower levels, while social media use was grouped into daily usage categories. The results showed no significant association between social media use and mental health literacy ($\chi^2 = 0.76$, $p = 0.69$). High levels of mental health literacy were observed across all social media usage groups.

Table 3. Social Media Use and Mental Health Literacy Level

Social Media Use (hrs/day)	High Literacy	Lower Literacy	Total
≤ 3 hours	20	10	30
3–5 hours	31	21	52
5–7 hours	31	15	46

3.4. Gender Differences in Stigma and Help-Seeking Behaviors

An independent t-test was initially planned to compare gender differences in stigma and help-seeking behaviors. However, due to a highly imbalanced gender distribution, inferential statistical comparison was limited. Descriptive trends suggested that female participants reported slightly higher scores in help-seeking readiness and stigma-reduction attitudes than male participants. These findings should be interpreted with caution.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Mental Health Literacy

Predictor	B	β	p-value
Social media hours/day	−0.02	−0.04	0.687
Supportive school environment	0.27	0.28	0.002
Gender	—	—	—

3.5. Predictors of Mental Health Literacy

Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify predictors of mental health literacy (Table 4). The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F(3,124) = 3.41$, $p < 0.01$), explaining 7.6% of the variance in mental health literacy.

Perceived supportive school environment was a significant positive predictor of mental health literacy ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$). In contrast, daily social media use was not significantly associated with mental health literacy ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.687$). Gender was not included as a meaningful predictor due to limited variability in the sample.

Figure 2. Social Media Use \times School Mental Health Consultation Environment Interaction

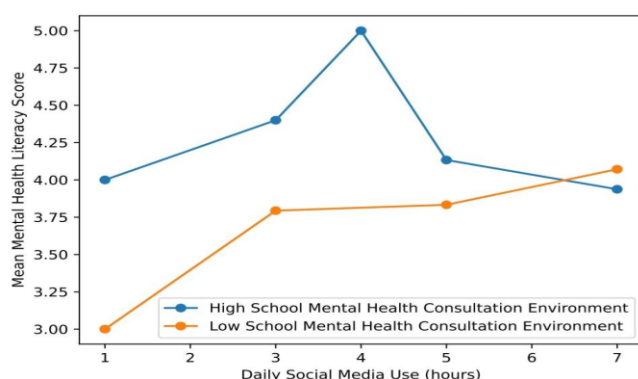


Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between daily social media use and the school mental health consultation environment in predicting mental health literacy. Adolescents in schools with a high consultation environment consistently demonstrated higher mental health literacy across all levels of social media use, whereas

those in low consultation environments showed lower literacy levels.

3.6. Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the results indicate that while Thai adolescents reported generally positive attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking, school environment support played a more important role in mental health literacy than the amount of social media use. These findings highlight the importance of school-based mental health promotion strategies.

4. Discussion

This study examined the influence of social media use and school-related factors on mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors among Thai adolescents. The findings indicate that overall mental health literacy among participants was moderate to high, with generally positive attitudes toward help-seeking and stigma reduction. Importantly, the results highlight that the school mental health consultation environment plays a more significant role in shaping mental health literacy than the amount of time adolescents spend on social media.

Contrary to common assumptions, daily social media use was not significantly associated with mental health literacy. Adolescents with both low and high levels of social media use Demonstrated similar levels of mental health knowledge and awareness. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that screen time alone may not adequately explain mental health outcomes, and that the quality of the surrounding social and educational environment may be more influential than usage duration itself. The absence of a strong linear relationship was also visually supported by the regression and residual plots.

In contrast, the school mental health consultation environment emerged as a key predictor of mental health literacy. Students who perceived their schools as open, approachable, and supportive of mental health discussions reported higher levels of mental health literacy. The interaction plot further demonstrated that a supportive consultation environment buffered adolescents across all levels of social media use, suggesting a moderating effect of school context. This finding emphasizes the importance of accessible consultation systems, understanding teachers, and an open climate that encourages students to seek help without fear of judgment.

Although female students showed slightly higher descriptive scores in help-seeking and stigma-related attitudes, gender-based inferential analysis was limited due to sample imbalance. This highlights the need for future studies with more balanced samples to further explore gender differences in adolescent mental health literacy. Additionally, the relatively modest explained variance in the regression model suggests that mental health literacy is influenced by multiple factors beyond those examined in this study, including family dynamics, peer relationships, and individual coping skills.

Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of schools as primary settings for adolescent mental health promotion. Rather than focusing solely on reducing social media use, interventions should prioritize strengthening school mental health consultation environments, improving access to guidance services, and fostering a culture of openness and support. Such approaches may be more effective in enhancing mental health literacy and encouraging early help-seeking among adolescents.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media use and the school mental health consultation environment on mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors among Thai adolescents. The findings indicate that while adolescents generally demonstrate moderate to high levels of mental health literacy and positive attitudes toward help-seeking, these outcomes are shaped more strongly by school-based contextual factors than by the amount of time spent on social media.

Importantly, social media use alone was not a significant predictor of mental health literacy. Instead, the school mental health consultation environment emerged as a key determinant, both as a direct predictor and as a moderating factor. Adolescents who perceived their schools as open, accessible, and supportive of mental health consultation consistently showed higher mental health literacy across all levels of social media use. This suggests that a strong consultation environment may buffer potential negative influences associated with high digital exposure.

These findings highlight the critical role of schools as primary settings for adolescent mental health promotion. Strengthening school-based mental health consultation systems, improving access to trusted guidance, and fostering a culture that encourages open discussion without stigma may be more effective strategies than focusing solely on reducing social media use. Such approaches can enhance adolescents' ability to recognize mental health problems and seek appropriate help at an early stage.

In conclusion, promoting a supportive school mental health consultation environment should be considered a central component of adolescent mental health policies and interventions in Thailand. Future efforts should prioritize integrated, school-based strategies that empower adolescents with knowledge, confidence, and accessible support systems to promote long-term mental well-being.

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