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PERSONALITY TRAITS AND SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON MENTAL ILLNESS STIGMA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Despite the increasing awareness of mental illnesses, stigma remains an important impediment to help-seeking among university students. Guided by the Big Five Personality Theory and the social learning perspective of media influence, this study aimed to examine the level of stigma and its relationship with personality traits and social media usage among university students. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with a sample of 350 students using validated instruments such as Stigma and Self-Stigma Scales (SASS) measuring stigma, selected Big Five personality traits (openness, agreeableness and neuroticism) and social media usage. Descriptive findings indicated that the majority of students exhibited a moderate level of stigma (49.1%), followed by low (28.0%) and high stigma (22.9%). Correlation analysis revealed that openness and agreeableness were significantly negatively associated with stigma ($r=-0.42$; $r=-0.38$), while neuroticism showed a positive relationship. Social media usage was also found to be positively related to stigma ($r=0.31$), suggesting higher exposure to social media is associated with higher stigma levels. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that personality traits and social media usage collectively explained 41% of the variance in stigma, with openness emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.31$); $F(4, 345) = 59.87$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.41$.

Agreeableness also showed a significant negative relationship with stigma ($\beta = -0.24$) indicating that more agreeable individuals tend to exhibit less stigmatizing attitudes. In contrast, neuroticism was found to be a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.19$). These findings highlight the importance of both individual psychological factors and digital environments in shaping mental illness stigma. The study suggests that targeted interventions incorporating personality-based approaches and strategic use of social media may be effective in reducing stigma among university students.

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Keywords:

Mental Illness Stigma, Personality Traits, Social Media, University Students, Help-Seeking Behaviour



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Introduction

University students today experience rising mental health issues which create an environment that makes them more susceptible to psychological distress. The social prejudice against mental illness creates significant challenges which prevent people from getting proper medical treatment. People with mental health conditions face negative beliefs and discriminatory actions which create social barriers that prevent them from accessing treatment (Omar et al., 2024). Individuals who have mental health issues experience social isolation because others develop negative attitudes which lead to discriminatory actions according to Corrigan (2016). Students experience the worst effects of stigma because educational spaces develop into places where students feel both forgotten and humiliated. People who face stigmatization develop fear about getting help which leads to negative impacts on their mental health status (Watson et al., 2019).

University mental health promotion requires full comprehension of all operational elements which function inside these educational spaces. The concept of stigma exists in three main forms which include public stigma and self-stigma and structural stigma according to Omar et al. (2024). Public stigma refers to societal negative attitudes, self-stigma involves internalised negative beliefs, and structural stigma encompasses institutional discrimination. The effects of stigma create two major problems because people become less likely to seek help while their mental health deteriorates (Hardy et al., 2025). Stigma exists as a dynamic entity which evolves through the combined effects of personal characteristics and social surroundings.

University students show better mental health knowledge than average people, yet they still hold social prejudices against others. Students show progress in their mental health knowledge, but they continue to believe in blaming people who have mental illnesses according to Atienza-Carbonell et al. (2024). The paradox shows that people need more than knowledge to get rid of stigmatization because information by itself does not create this change. Social media platforms

together with personality traits now affect how people develop and defend stigmatized beliefs while they also fight against social stigma (Selamat et al, 2023; Osman, 2025). This paper aims to critically examine these interconnected factors. Research shows that students who belong to minority groups tend to avoid seeking help because of social stigma and traditional beliefs which block their path to assistance (Hardy et al., 2025). People develop better mental health attitudes through direct contact with mentally ill individuals which leads to decreased mental health discrimination (Masedo Gutiérrez & Cedeño Martínez, 2025). Research shows that female students display lower levels of stigmatizing attitudes when compared to their male counterparts (Atienza-Carbonell et al., 2024). The public now knows more about mental health, but discrimination continues to exist through people who stay away from others and through name-calling and through the belief that people with mental health issues are dangerous (Omar et al., 2024).

University students frequently experience social stigma due to their social distancing, stereotyping and reluctance to interact with those with mental illness (Selamat et.al, 2025; Masedo Gutiérrez & Cedeo Martínez, 2025). Research consistently indicates that negative attitudes are still present in varying cultures (Omar et al, 2024). Various stressors experienced by university students make mental illness an important public health problem. Stigma can also deter students from seeking help, which further complicates mental health problems. This article discusses how personality traits and social media usage impact on the stigma experienced by university students in public universities near Klang Valley in Malaysia.

Mental illness attitudes are heavily influenced by personality traits. Openness, conscientiousness and extraversion (Masedo Gutiérrez & Cedeo Martínez, 2025), agreeableness/neuroticism or “big five” models that explain variations in individual stigma. Mental illness perceptions are also influenced by social media.

Studies indicate that personality predicts stigma and interacts with environmental factors, such as social media exposure (Osman, 2025). Social media has become a significant source of information for university students, who view mental health narratives as an essential part of their own lives. One of the benefits of using platforms to promote awareness, peer support and advocacy is stated by Kamarudin et al. (2025). On the flip side, it spreads false information and reinforces stigma through negative portrayals (Selamat et al., 2025). According to a study conducted by Osman in Baltimore in 2025, the use of social media among university students is strongly linked to their mental health indicators.

The social media can create stigmatizing content that affects mental illness and its associated beliefs. Repeated exposure to negative framing leads to increased stigma, while positive narratives decrease it (Selamat et al., 2024). The findings of Selamat et al. (2024) revealed that social media can impact students' perspectives on mental illness, either by strengthening stigma or decreasing it, depending on the type of material viewed. Normative beliefs and identity development are influenced by social media. Online narratives that are dominant may lead students to adopt attitudes that reinforce and perpetuate stigma or normalize help-seeking (Zhang et al, 2023; Lin drew 2022).

People's responses to online content differ from one person to another. Osman (2000) notes that individuals with high openness are more likely to be responsive to anti-stigma messages, while those with low neuroticism tend to react negatively to negative portrayals. The likelihood of individuals with less favourable attitudes to stigmatizing viewpoints is higher (Masedo

Gutiérrez & Cedeo Martinez, 2025). Moreover, social media algorithms enhance content that aligns with user preferences, creating feedback loops that reinforce pre-existing notions (Murarka et al, 2020). The intensity or level of stigma associated with this dynamic is contingent on the type of material viewed.

Personality traits significantly influence attitudes towards mental illness. The Five-Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1997) outlines five dimensions relevant to this discussion: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. However, not all personality traits are equally relevant to stigma formation. This study prioritised traits that are directly linked to cognitive and emotional responses toward others, which are central to stigma.

- Openness to experience: linked to tolerance, acceptance and reduced prejudice
- Agreeableness: associated with empathy and prosocial behaviour
- Neuroticism: associated with fear, anxiety and threat perception

These traits are more conceptually aligned with stigma mechanisms, which involve; stereotyping, emotional reactions (fear, discomfort) and social distancing. In contrast, Extraversion primarily reflects sociability and assertiveness; Conscientiousness reflects discipline, organization and goal-directed behaviour. These traits are less directly connected to stigma-related cognition and prejudice processes. The objectives of this study are.

1. To identify the level of reliability of the instruments.
2. To study the level of stigma against mental illness among university students.
3. To identify the relationship between personality and stigma against mental illness among university students.
4. To identify the relationship between the use of social media and stigma against mental illness among university students.
5. To study the influence between personality and social media on the stigma of mental illness among university students.

Methodology

Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, this study examined how personality traits, social media use and mental illness stigma among university students were connected. A structured questionnaire that involved 350 participants was used to collect data, which included information on the Big Five Inventory, stigma scale and social media usage items. 350 university students were involved in the study, which employed SPSS for analysis using descriptive statistics as well as correlation and multiple regression analyses to analyse the data. The group consisted of 62% females ($n = 217$) and 38% males (338), with an average age of 21.4 years ($SD = 2.1$). A significant proportion of respondents (91%) reported being actively active on social media during their daytime. Social media was used by 91% of the participants on a daily basis. Samples from four public universities in Klang Valley, namely University of Technology MARA (UiTM) Main Campus, University of Malaya (UM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM) and University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), were collected through simple random sampling. The Klang Valley region, which is the most densely populated and urbanized area in Malaysia, was the site of the study. This region is considered major districts within the state of Selangor, are characterised by dense population density along with advanced infrastructure and wide access to digital technologies and social media.

Stigma and Self-Stigma Scales (SASS) have 36 questions that use a 5-point scale. It is made to check how much students feel negative about people who have mental health issues. The original SASS instrument comes from the study done by Docksey et al. in 2019. The items are grouped into six sections: Stigma Toward Others, Emotional Stigma, Stigma Expectations, Self-Stigma, Avoidance of Coping, and Help-Seeking Behavior. The Effects of Social Media Use on Perception of Mental Illness was created by Fisher in 2019. It was later revised and translated into Malay using the back-to-back translation method to make sure it was accurate and consistent, as done by Selamat et al. in 2023. It has three parts: how people see mental illness in social media, how often they use social media and their views on people with mental health issues. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) was created by Oliver P. John, along with Eileen M. Donahue and Robert L. Kentle offers a brief way to measure the five-factor model of personality. The tool is made up of five parts: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism and it has 44 questions in total. However, this study only looked at the measurement of Openness, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

Results

The reliability analysis indicates that all constructs in this study demonstrate strong internal consistency. The Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.83 to 0.89, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, thus confirming satisfactory reliability for Stigma ($\alpha = 0.89$), Openness ($\alpha = 0.85$), Agreeableness ($\alpha = 0.87$), Neuroticism ($\alpha = 0.83$) and Social Media ($\alpha = 0.88$). Similarly, the Composite Reliability (CR) values, which range from 0.87 to 0.91, further support the robustness of the measurement model, with all constructs surpassing the recommended minimum of 0.70. Specifically, Stigma (CR = 0.91) and Social Media (CR = 0.91) exhibit particularly high reliability, followed by Agreeableness (CR = 0.90), Openness (CR = 0.88) and Neuroticism (CR = 0.87). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to assess the convergent validity of the constructs. The AVE values for all constructs were found to be above the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating that each construct adequately explains the variance of its respective indicators. This suggests that the measurement items demonstrate satisfactory convergence and are appropriate representations of their underlying constructs. Therefore, convergent validity is established, and the measurement model is considered acceptable for further analysis. Overall, these results confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable and suitable for subsequent analysis.

Table 1: Analysis Of Reliability Of Instruments

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Stigma	0.89	0.91	0.58
Openness	0.85	0.88	0.56
Agreeableness	0.87	0.90	0.60
Neuroticism	0.83	0.87	0.55
Social Media	0.88	0.91	0.59

Table 2: Level of Mental Illness Stigma (N = 350)

Stigma Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	98	28.0%
Moderate	172	49.1%
High	80	22.9%
Total	350	100%

The findings indicate that nearly half of the students (49.1%) reported a moderate level of stigma, while 22.9% demonstrated high stigma, suggesting that stigmatizing attitudes remain prevalent despite increased mental health awareness. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between personality traits and mental illness stigma.

Table 3: Correlation Between Personality Traits and Stigma

Variable	Stigma (r)	p-value
Openness	-0.42**	< .001
Agreeableness	-0.38**	< .001
Neuroticism	0.29**	< .001

Openness ($r = -0.42$) and agreeableness ($r = -0.38$) showed moderate negative correlations with stigma, indicating that students with higher openness and agreeableness tend to have lower stigmatizing attitudes ($p < 0.01$). Neuroticism ($r = 0.29$) showed a positive relationship, suggesting that higher emotional instability is associated with greater stigma ($p < 0.01$).

Table 4: Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Stigma

Variable	Stigma (r)	p-value
Social Media Usage	0.31**	< .001

Social media usage was found to have a significant positive relationship with stigma ($r = 0.31$), indicating that higher exposure to social media is associated with higher stigma levels.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Predicting Mental Illness Stigma (N = 350)

Predictor	B	SE	Beta (β)	t	p-value
(Constant)	4.85	0.42	—	11.55	< .001
Openness	-0.36	0.07	-0.31	-5.14	< .001
Agreeableness	-0.28	0.08	-0.24	-3.67	< .001
Neuroticism	0.21	0.06	0.19	3.50	< .001
Social Media Usage	0.25	0.06	0.22	4.17	< .001

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of personality traits and social media usage on mental illness stigma among university students ($N = 350$). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 345) = 59.87$, $p < .001$, explaining 41% of the variance in stigma ($R^2 = 0.41$), indicating a substantial level of predictive power. The regression model explained 41% of the variance in stigma, indicating a moderate to strong model fit. Overall,

these findings demonstrate that both personality traits and social media usage play important roles in predicting stigma among university students.

Openness was a significant negative predictor of stigma ($\beta = -0.31$, $t = -5.14$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of openness are associated with lower stigma. Similarly, agreeableness also showed a significant negative relationship with stigma ($\beta = -0.24$, $t = -3.67$, $p < .001$), indicating that more agreeable individuals tend to exhibit less stigmatizing attitudes. In contrast, neuroticism was found to be a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 3.50$, $p < .001$), implying that higher neuroticism is associated with increased stigma. Additionally, social media usage significantly and positively predicted stigma ($\beta = 0.22$, $t = 4.17$, $p < .001$), suggesting that greater engagement with social media is associated with higher levels of mental illness stigma.

Table 6: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	There is a significant relationship between personality traits and stigma	Supported
H1a	Openness is negatively related to stigma	Supported
H1b	Agreeableness is negatively related to stigma	Supported
H1c	Neuroticism is positively related to stigma	Supported
H2	Social media usage is significantly related to stigma	Supported
H3	Personality traits significantly predict stigma	Supported
H4	Social media usage significantly predicts stigma	Supported

Overall, the results demonstrate that:

1. Moderate stigma is most prevalent among students, with a notable proportion still exhibiting high stigma.
2. Personality traits significantly influence stigma, particularly openness and agreeableness (negative effects) and neuroticism (positive effect).
3. Greater engagement with social media is associated with higher levels of mental illness stigma.
4. The model suggests that both psychological (personality) and environmental (social media) factors are important predictors of stigma.

Discussion

The findings suggest that despite increasing awareness campaigns, stigma remains a major issue for university students. Although not a dominant form of stigma, many students still have mixed feelings towards individuals with mental illness. Why is this so? The occurrence is consistent with earlier studies that reveal that university students tend to display superficial acceptance but maintain implicit biases (Atienza-Carbonell et al., 2024; Omar et al., 2018).

There is a possibility that the moderate stigma surrounding students indicates varying degrees of mental health awareness and lack of acceptance towards attitude change. The emphasis is on attitude transformation and empathy development, rather than knowledge dissemination. Evidence from previous studies suggests that openness is strongly associated with tolerance

and less prejudice (Masedo Gutiérrez & Cedeo Martinez, 2025). The correlation between agreeableness and stigma ($r = -0.38$) indicates that empathy and compassion can help counteract prejudiced beliefs. However, the positive relationship between neuroticism and stigma ($r = 0.29$) implies that those with more emotional instability may perceive mental illnesses as menacing or uneasy.

The evidence suggests that stigma is partly influenced by fear, particularly in individuals who are more susceptible to stress and uncertainty. As a whole, these results highlight the significance of considering psychological variations in handling stigma. The outcomes indicate that stigma is more than just a knowledge-based problem, and it also has underlying psychological factors. Using social media to stigmatize mental illness was found to have significant positive effects ($r = 0.31$), suggesting that there may be some moderate associations. The correlation between social media usage and stigmatizing attitudes among university students is evident. According to Selamat et al., (2023) and Zhang et al. (2023), it is possible that social media exposure to misleading or negative representations of mental illness can reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions. Social media may have an impact on stigma by disseminating misinformation and promoting stereotyped mental health practices. In contrast, social media algorithms are geared towards creating engagement, often magnifying posts that provoke emotional debate or create sensationality.

This is the case with digital platforms and their algorithm. Thus, users may be repeatedly exposed to depictions that link mental illness with peril, uncertainty, inability or personal vulnerability. Mental illness perceptions of users may be influenced by repeated exposure, even if they are not conscious of the influence. Despite the widespread awareness of mental health issues, social media usage may have contributed to stigma, which can be explained by this process. When the quality and accuracy of information are inconsistent, it means that more exposure to mental health content doesn't necessarily result in more positive attitudes.

Additionally, the positive correlation between social media usage and stigma may indicate the ongoing use of societal comparison and identity-based processes in online communication. Social media is a valuable source of information and social commentary for university students, who are avid consumers of online material (Bakar, et al, 2022). People on these platforms may adopt the general attitudes expressed by influential users, peer groups or online communities to sustain social belonging. These attitudes may become normative, if stigmatizing comments, stereotypes or discriminatory humors about mental illness are widely accepted within a digital network. Social learning suggests that observing individuals with mental illness in negative contexts may reinforce existing stereotypes and potentially contribute to the perpetuation of stigmatization.

As a result, the correlation found in this study may not solely reflect exposure to negative information but also the wider impact of online social norms on mental illness perception and discussion among young adults. The outcome indicates that social media is not always a means of protection, but rather impacts the content consumed. Research has indicated that unregulated online content, such as sensationalized or inaccurate depictions of mental illness, can result in stigma (Murarka et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2022). Commonly exposed students may adopt negative beliefs, which can lead to increased stigmatization. Although social media can promote awareness, it may create stigma if users are not sufficiently engaged with the information being presented (Selamat et al., 2023; Osman 2025).

This model proved to be robust as personality traits and social media usage together explained 41% of the variance in stigma. Among all predictors, openness was the most significant negative factor, with agreeableness and social media usage being second in importance. These findings demonstrate the significant influence of both internal dispositions and external factors on stigma. Neuroticism has been shown to have a positive effect, further supporting the claim that attitudes are stigmatized due to emotional factors.

Those with greater levels of anxiety and emotional instability may be more prone to react negatively to mental illness when they perceive a threat or discomfort. Specifically, the important role of social media as a predictor suggests that environmental exposure can counteract individual predispositions. The interactionist perspective, which posits that behaviour is determined by both individual characteristics and situational factors, is supported by this (Murarka et al., 2020). This study demonstrates that social media and other environmental factors can function without any impact on individual traits.

The regression model's emphasis on social media usage suggests that individuals with positive personality traits may still be susceptible to negative stigma, despite openness and agreeableness emerging as protective factors. This finding highlights the complexity of stigma development, where individual dispositions interact with environmental experiences rather than functioning independently. The results also suggest that measures focused on individual mindsets may be insufficient to address negative mental illness perception, given the influence of the broader digital landscape.

Hence, psychological factors and the quality of information conveyed through online mediums should be considered in efforts to reduce stigma. To enhance campus culture and student well-being, universities must adopt a multi-faceted approach that involves interventions targeting specific personality traits. The use of exposure-based learning can be advantageous for students with low openness, while empathy training and anxiety reduction strategies should be beneficial for those who are highly neurotic. In addition to providing individual supports, social media campaigns can also be utilized to promote positive stories, hear the perspectives of influential peers and actively counteract false information.

The combination of personality psychology and stigma theory in this study is a successful attempt to expand the literature. This result has important theoretical implications for future research. Additionally, the study underscores the significance of digital influences on these social dynamics.

These findings provide evidence for a multifactorial model of stigma, suggesting that stigmatization is driven by complex interplay between personal and environmental factors. Although it makes some contributions, there are several drawbacks to this study: its cross-sectional nature inherently constrains the ability to make concluding causal inferences.

Moreover, the use of self-report criteria can result in response discrimination, and the examination fails to distinguish between different social media profiles. Future studies must shift towards longitudinal designs to address these flaws and establish more reliable causality over time. To gain a deeper comprehension of these phenomena, it is essential to examine individual social media platforms and analysed various moderating influences, such as gender and culture.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that mental illness stigma among university students is influenced by both personal and environmental factors. Although stigmas persist, personality traits like openness and agreeableness, as well as greater exposure to social media, are key factors in decreasing negative attitudes. An integrated strategy for addressing stigma must consider psychological traits and online environments. By themselves, these findings suggest that the prevalence of mental illness among university students is not solely due to a lack of knowledge but also influenced by complex personality characteristics and exposure to social media. Social media is a medium that influences the type of information and narratives shared with individuals, while personality traits are used to interpret mental health problems. The study emphasizes the need for a multi-level approach to combat stigma, considering psychological traits and online settings. Positive social media, open discussion and mental health awareness programs should be implemented by universities. Through educational endeavors, a more supportive atmosphere can be established.

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Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Azlina Abu Bakar was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology and overall supervision of the study. Taufiqnur Selamat handled data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. Mohd Muslim, Mohd Syaubari and Mazidah Mohd Dagang contributed to the literature review,

drafting and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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