

## Mediating Role of Attitude Between Social Media Exposure, Social Distance and Mental Illness Stigmatization: A Model Fit Perspective

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### Abstract

Stigma toward individuals with mental illness remains a significant societal challenge, often exacerbated by factors related to interpersonal distance and media representation. This study investigates the interplay between social distance, social media exposure and attitudes in shaping mental illness stigma. A total of 380 public university students around the Klang Valley, Malaysia were involved in this study through simple random sampling. The questionnaires used are Stigma and Self-Stigma Scales (SASS), Community Attitude Towards Mental Illness (CAMI) scale and Effects of Social Media Use on Perception on Mental Illness (ESMUPMI) and Social Distance on People with Mental Illness (SDPMI). A structural equation modeling approach was employed to test the proposed framework, with attitude posited as a mediator between social media and stigma. The analysis confirms the strong validity and reliability of the instruments, with results demonstrating no collinearity issues, sufficient convergent and discriminant validity and no common method bias, ensuring model robustness. The model demonstrated a good fit, explaining 42.8% of the variance in stigma ( $R^2 = 0.428$ ). Results revealed that social media significantly influences stigma indirectly through attitudes ( $p < 0.05$ ), highlighting the critical mediating role of student perception. Social distance was also found to have a direct association with stigma levels. These findings underscore the importance of targeting student attitudes in media-based interventions to effectively reduce stigma and promote mental health awareness. Implications for policy, advocacy and future research are discussed.

### Keywords

Mental health, attitude, stigma, social distance, smart PLS.