

Article 3

Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme: What Works for Young Persons in Custody



**Dr. Yvonne K.S. LEE¹, Ms. Pauline P.L. CHAU²,
Mr. Jeremy C.H. MA³**

¹ Senior Clinical Psychologist, CSD

² Clinical Psychologist, CSD

³ Research Assistant, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

In today's digital era, smartphones, social media and digital entertainment have become an integral part of modern life. To support young persons in custody (PICs) in navigating the digital world more healthily and responsibly, the Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme was introduced in young offender institutions namely Pik Uk Correctional Institution, Sha Tsui Correctional Institution and Lai King Correctional Institution in 2023. This article explores the rationale behind launching this initiative in young offender institutions, provides an overview of the programme's objectives, demonstrates its effectiveness and discusses its future direction in fostering digital resilience among young PICs.

What is Digital Well-Being?

Digital well-being is about maintaining a healthy relationship with technology — using digital devices and platforms in a way that enhances life rather than distracts from it. It involves managing screen time, staying mindful of online interactions, maintaining a balance between the virtual and physical world and ensuring that tech-



nology supports mental, emotional and social health rather than causing stress or distraction.

Why is Digital Well-Being Important for the Youth?

Maintaining digital well-being is particularly vital for young individuals because their brains – especially the pre-frontal cortex that governs social skills, decision-making and emotion regulation - are still developing. A review by The University of Edinburgh for the Scottish Sentencing Council documented that human brain typically reaches full development between ages 25 and 30 (O’Rourke et. al., 2020). This ongoing maturation makes them more vulnerable to the following effects of excessive or unhealthy digital engagement.

Mental Health: Adolescents are at higher risk of anxiety, depression and stress due to social media pressure, online comparison and cyber-bullying. A local study found that excessive social media use (more than 3 hours each day) was associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress among Hong Kong adolescent youth during the Covid-19 pandemic (Yu & Du, 2022). Balanced digital use helps them navigate online spaces in a way that protects their self-esteem and mental health.

Social Development: Adolescence is a critical time for learning communication and relationship-building skills. Overreliance on digital interaction can reduce face-to-face communication and hinder the ability to form deep, meaningful connections in the real world, leading to social isolation in the end (Yang et al., 2024).

Academic Performance: Excessive screen time can lead to distraction, procrastination and sleep deprivation, resulting in adverse impact on school performance. Balancing technology use ensures they stay focused and engaged in learning.

How is the Digital Well-Being of Young PICs in Hong Kong?

The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS; Andreassen et al., 2016), a widely recognised 6-item tool for assessing social media addiction, was administered to 52 young PICs participating in the Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme. All of them reported daily social media use prior to their admission to correctional institutions. On the BSMAS, 26.9% of these young PICs scored 19 or above, indicating problematic social media use,

with no significant difference observed between the male and female PICs.

What is Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme?

The Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme is designed to help young PICs develop balanced digital media usage while leveraging digital technology in their daily lives. The programme is conducted in small groups of three to six participants, providing an environment conducive to interactive discussions and in-session exercises to ensure meaningful learning.

Through four structured sessions, participants learned to engage in mindful social media use, foster healthy social relationships both online and offline, cultivate critical thinking skills for assessing online information, as well as make a concrete plan for their future balanced social media use. The programme aims to minimise risks associated with internet addiction, social impairment and misleading online information, thereby equipping young PICs with essential digital literacy and self-regulation strategies.



Running Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme for young female PICs.

How Effective is the Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme?

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme, the young PICs were given pre-tests on their knowledge of social media and self-efficacy in resisting excessive use during the first session. In the last session, they were asked to complete post-tests to measure the progress.



Knowledge Test The pre- and post-knowledge tests each comprise 8 items designed to evaluate the participants' knowledge of social media, including the negative impacts of imbalanced use, influence on social relationships and receiving misleading information.

Self-Efficacy Test Another pre- and post-self-efficacy tests each consist of 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, designed to assess the self-efficacy in limiting their time spent on social media, maintaining balanced online and offline relationships, filtering faulty online information, as well as setting concrete and feasible goals for future balanced use of social media.

Pre- and post-tests comparison revealed significant improvements in social media knowledge and self-efficacy in resisting excessive use among young PICs participating in the programme. For the Knowledge Test, post-test scores showed a significant increase in the mean score of 1.58 (SD = 2.63, $p < .001$), while for the Self-Efficacy Test, the mean score rose significantly by 5.73 (SD = 5.59, $p < .001$) upon completion of the programme.

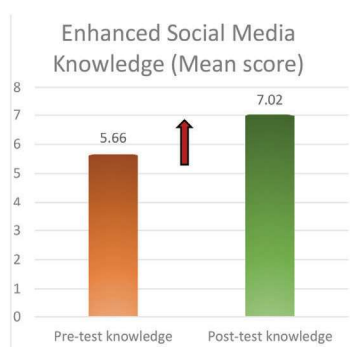


Figure 1. Comparison of mean scores in the Knowledge Test before and after the programme

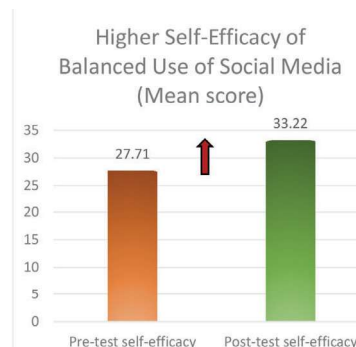


Figure 2. Comparison of mean scores in the Self-Efficacy Test before and after the programme

Gender-based analysis suggested a gender difference. Male PICs showed improvement in their understanding of social media and self-efficacy in resisting excessive use after participating in the programme, whereas female PICs gained higher self-efficacy of balanced use of social media, though the social media knowledge levels remained unchanged.



Male PICs demonstrated significantly higher scores in both knowledge (Mean = 2.17, SD = 2.18, $p < .001$) and self-efficacy (Mean = 7.83, SD = 1.47, $p < .001$).

Female PICs showed significant improvement only in self-efficacy (Mean = 3.85, SD = 4.24, $p < .001$), with no statistically significant difference in knowledge.



What is the Future Development of Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme?

Preliminary findings support the continued and enhanced implementation of the Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme which has proven effective in enhancing young PICs' knowledge of social media use and their self-efficacy in maintaining balanced usage. These improvements are believed to make a significant contribution to youth mental health. As participants reported exposure to potential offence-related content, including victim-related information, online fraud and illegal gambling opportunities, it is recommended to enrich the programme to heighten young PICs' awareness of the risks associated with crime-related content on social media. This approach aligns with a crime prevention perspective, aiming to reduce vulnerabilities and promote responsible digital engagement.

Insights

1. Safeguarding Digital Well-being for Young PICs

Digital well-being is essential for young PICs as their developing brains make them more vulnerable to the adverse effects of excessive or unhealthy digital use.

2. Effective Digital Well-Being Psycho-Education Programme

The programme has proven effective in enhancing young PICs' knowledge of social media and their subjective self-efficacy in maintaining balanced use of social media.

3. Including Crime-related Content to Enhance Digital Awareness

Future programme enhancements can focus on educating young PICs about the risks associated with crime-related content on social media, aiming to reduce their vulnerabilities and promote responsible digital engagement.





References

Andreassen, Cecilie Schou, J. Billieux, M. D. Griffiths, D. J. Kuss, Zsolt Demetrovics, E. Mazzoni, and Stale Pallesen. 2016. *Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)*. [Database Record]. Washington, DC, USA: APA PsycTests.

O'Rourke, S., Whalley, H., Janes, S., MacSweeney, N., Skrenes, A., Crowson, S., MacLean, L., & Schwannauer, M. (2020). *The development of cognitive and emotional maturity in adolescents and its relevance in judicial contexts*. Scottish Sentencing Council.

Yang, Y., Girouard-Hallam, L. N., Radevski, M., & Domoff, S. E. (2024). Psychology in the digital age [Editorial]. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 10(2), 95–99.

Yu, X., & Du, J. (2022). Social networking use, mental health, and quality of life of Hong Kong adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10.