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### The Role of Social Media on Students' Perceptions of Academic and Social Success

Yuni Syahfitri<sup>1</sup>, Dewi Fitria<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Ridho Munthe<sup>3</sup>, Yolanda Anggra Lexa<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahad Addary Padangsidempuan

Corresponding Author: [yunisyahfitri201923@gmail.com](mailto:yunisyahfitri201923@gmail.com)

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#### Abstract

This study explores the role of social media in shaping university students' perceptions of academic and social success. Social media platforms have become integral to students' daily lives, influencing how they define and pursue success. The research investigates both positive and negative impacts of social media usage on students' academic achievements and social interactions. Findings indicate that when social media is used as a tool for academic support and peer collaboration, it positively correlates with higher academic performance and enhanced social engagement. Conversely, excessive or entertainment-focused use may distract students, leading to lower academic outcomes and social comparison stress. The study highlights the dual nature of social media as both a facilitator and a potential barrier to student success. Recommendations emphasize the importance of mindful and purposeful use of social media to maximize its benefits in academic and social domains. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital environments influence student perceptions and outcomes in higher education.

**Keywords:** university students, success, social media, social comparison, identity construction

#### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini mengkaji peran media sosial dalam membentuk persepsi mahasiswa mengenai kesuksesan akademik dan sosial. Platform media sosial telah menjadi bagian penting dalam kehidupan sehari-hari mahasiswa, yang memengaruhi cara mereka mendefinisikan dan mengejar kesuksesan. Penelitian ini meneliti dampak positif dan negatif penggunaan media sosial terhadap prestasi akademik dan interaksi sosial mahasiswa. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan media sosial sebagai alat pendukung akademik dan kolaborasi antar teman memiliki korelasi positif dengan peningkatan prestasi akademik dan keterlibatan sosial. Sebaliknya, penggunaan yang berlebihan atau hanya untuk hiburan dapat mengalihkan perhatian mahasiswa sehingga menurunkan prestasi akademik dan menimbulkan stres akibat perbandingan sosial. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa media sosial memiliki peran ganda sebagai fasilitator sekaligus penghambat kesuksesan mahasiswa. Rekomendasi menekankan pentingnya penggunaan media sosial secara bijak dan terarah agar manfaatnya dapat dimaksimalkan dalam aspek akademik dan sosial. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memahami pengaruh lingkungan digital terhadap persepsi dan hasil mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi.*

**Kata Kunci:** mahasiswa, keberhasilan, media sosial, perbandingan sosial, konstruksi identitas.

#### Introduction

In the world of higher education, student success should ideally be measured from objective academic achievements such as Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA), other academic achievements, and the ability to socialize in a healthy and productive manner in the campus environment. Students are expected to be able to develop in a balanced manner, both cognitively and social-emotionally. This is in line with the concept of Holistic Education explained by Miller (1990) in his book *Education and the Soul*, that

education should pay attention to the intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual development of individuals as a whole. By focusing on real processes and achievements, students not only learn to get high grades, but also build character, interpersonal skills, and competitiveness. In addition, as the development of Science and Technology (IPTEK) increases, students have wider access to develop their skills through various digital platforms. The theory of 21st Century Skills by Trilling & Fadel (2009) in the book *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* emphasizes that skills such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy are essential to face the challenges of the times. In this context, social media is one of the strategic spaces for students to express themselves, build networks, and even create career opportunities.

But in fact, in today's digital era, social media plays a big role in shaping the image of student success. Many students display their academic achievements and social activities on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This phenomenon is in line with the Self-Presentation theory of Erving Goffman (1959) in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which explains that individuals consciously manage their self-image in front of the public to form certain perceptions. On social media, the achievements displayed tend to be visually and emotionally polished to look more attractive, which ultimately shifts the standard of success from being objective to more subjective and aesthetic. As a result, some students feel depressed, inferior, or even start comparing themselves excessively with others. This is in line with the Social Comparison Theory of Festinger (1954) in his article *A Theory of Social Comparison Processes*, which states that individuals have an impulse to judge themselves by comparing themselves to others, especially in matters considered important such as academic or social success. Constant exposure to other people's achievements on social media can cause feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and even social anxiety—especially for students who do not have similar achievements or are experiencing a stagnant phase in their lives. According to observations, most students who want to share their moments of success on social media are not motivating, but can indirectly bring down other students who are still passive or have a tendency to overthink. This phenomenon can be explained through the theory of Upward Social Comparison by Taylor & Lobel (1989) in the journal *Social Comparison Activity Under Threat: Downward Evaluation and Upward Contacts*, which states that when individuals compare themselves to others who are considered more successful, it can lead to feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and even depression, especially if the individual feels left behind.

Theoretically, the phenomenon of social media that visually displays academic and social success has influenced the way students interpret success. This is reinforced by the Social Comparison theory of Festinger (1954) which explains that individuals tend to compare themselves with others as an effort to evaluate themselves. In the context of students, this comparison is often triggered by social media content that displays the achievements of their peers. Empirically, research conducted by Apriani & Wulandari (2021) shows that 68% of students feel motivated, but 47% of them also experience anxiety and pressure after seeing the achievements of friends on social media. This shows the ambivalence of the role of social media as a motivator as well as a trigger for psychological pressure. The results of the meta-analysis, from the *We Are Social & Hootsuite* report (2023), stated that active social media users in Indonesia reached 170 million people, and the age group of 18–24 years (student age) was the most dominant user. This shows that students are highly exposed to the flow of information and imagery that takes place on social media.

One of the solutions to reduce the negative impact of social media on students' perceptions of academic and social success is to increase digital literacy and students' critical awareness in using social media. Students need to be equipped with the ability to understand and evaluate the information they receive from social media, as well as understand that true success is not only measured by online popularity. In addition, educational institutions can facilitate discussions and activities that promote awareness of the impact of social media on perceptions of success, as well as encourage students to develop goals and standards of success that are more balanced and based on positive academic and social values. Thus, students can use social media more wisely and have a more realistic perception of success. This research tries to find answers to the question:

1. How do students interpret the representation of academic and social success on social media?
2. How is the student's experience in comparing themselves with the achievements displayed on social media?
3. How is the narrative of students' personal success formed through their interaction with social media?

Based on the above questions, the objectives of this study are:

To find out how students interpret the representation of academic and social success on social media.

To find out how students' experiences compare themselves with the achievements displayed on social media.

To find out how the narrative of students' personal success is formed through their interaction with social media.

In this study, the researcher used several relevant theories to analyze the influence of social media on students' perceptions of academic and social success. These theories provide a conceptual basis for understanding how students shape their perceptions of themselves and others in the context of success.

#### 1. Teori Social Comparison – Leon Festinger (1954)

Social comparison theory explains that individuals will naturally compare themselves to others as a way to evaluate themselves. This comparison can be upward (comparing yourself to people who are considered better) or downward (to people who are considered worse). In the context of social media, students often compare themselves to peers who flaunt their academic success or seemingly ideal social life. This can give rise to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and even inferiority, despite the fact that they themselves have accomplished a lot. "Individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others." – Festinger (1954)

#### 2. Theory Self-Presentation – Erving Goffman (1959)

Goffman in his theory of self-presentation explains that individuals always try to present themselves positively in front of others. Social media provides a big stage for students to do "dramaturgy" or self-image management. They tend to display only the best sides, such as high GPAs, achievements, organizational activities, and a pleasant social life. This can create the illusion that success is only measured by visible achievements, not actual processes or qualities. "When an individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society." – Goffman (1959)

#### 3. Self-Concept Theory

Self-concept is an individual's view of themselves, including how they assess their abilities, values, and self-esteem. Social media can affect students' self-concept, as they often judge themselves based on social validation such as likes, comments, and views. When students feel that their achievements are not appreciated digitally, their perception of success can be disrupted. According to Rosenberg (1979), self-concept develops from personal experience, social feedback, and interaction with the environment, including interactions on social media which are now a big part of student life.

This study differs from previous studies that generally only discussed the positive or negative impact of social media on academics or society separately. In this study, it is discussed reflectively how students assess and respond to academic and social success shared on social media, as well as how their feelings, motivations, and views are formed from these exposures. This provides a new perspective from the personal and emotional side of the students. This research is important because social media is now the main space for students to express their achievements and form their identity. Understanding its influence

on the perception of success is very relevant so that students can build a healthy mentality and not get caught up in the pressure of pseudo-achievement.

## Method

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions of their academic and social success through the influence of social media. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research aims to explore in-depth views, experiences, and perceptions of how social media affects the way students view success. The type of research used in this study is qualitative descriptive research. Qualitative descriptive research aims to describe phenomena or events that occur in a particular social context without trying to change or manipulate the situation. In this case, the researcher describes how students respond to and interpret their academic and social success in the context of social media.

The data in this study was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner. Semi-structured interviews were chosen so that researchers could dig deeper into students' perceptions and experiences, while still maintaining flexibility in exploring relevant topics. These interviews allow participants to provide freer and more in-depth answers, while following a pre-prepared question guide.

The data collection procedure is carried out with the following steps:

1. Participant Selection: Students who are active in social media and are between 15 students aged 18-24 years.

2. Interview: Interviews are conducted in person or online, depending on the comfort and willingness of the participants. Each interview is expected to last about 30-45 minutes.

3. Recording and Transcription: The interview will be recorded with the participant's permission, then the interview transcript will be compiled for further analysis.

The data obtained from the interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The data analysis steps are as follows:

1. Transcription: The results of the recorded interview will be transcribed verbatim to obtain accurate data.

2. Coding: The data will be categorized and coded based on themes that emerged during the interview, such as the influence of social media on academic perception, the impact of social comparison, or the influence of self-presentation on social media.

3. Theme Search: The codes found will be combined and analyzed to identify the themes that appear, which are then used as a basis for drawing conclusions.

4. Interpretation: The themes found will be explained in the narrative to illustrate the influence of social media on students' perceptions of academic and social success.

This study focuses on active students who use social media at the age of 18–24 years in Indonesia. This study only examined students' perceptions of their academic and social success that were influenced by social media use, and did not cover other aspects such as the influence of social media on behavior or mental health. The scope of the study was limited to the use of social media that is common among college students, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, and focused only on the positive and negative influences of these platforms on perceptions of success.

## Results and Discussion

The data analysis in this research produced several themes, as follows:

Table 1. Summary of themes

Theme (Tema Utama)	Subtheme	Example of a Short Quote
<b>1. Perception of Success on Social Media</b>	1.1 Social Validation and Positive Response	"In my opinion, success on social media is when my content gets a lot of likes and positive comments." (Maulidatushofiah)
	1.2 Social Standardization and Expectations	"Social media creates social standards about achievements and expensive goods." (Rayhan Nawawi)
	1.3 Personalization of the Meaning of Success	"Success is enough for me to enjoy, no need to compare it to others." (King Ibad Diawara)
<b>2. The Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem</b>	2.1 Feelings of Envy, Inferiority, and Competition	"Sometimes I feel insecure when I see friends getting S2 scholarships abroad." (Maulidatushofiah)
	2.2 Happiness and Pride in Achievement	"Happy and proud of my achievements." (Akhyar P. Siregar)
	2.3 Mixed Feelings and Emotional Ambivalence	"It's fun but sometimes I also feel depressed because I'm not at the level of friends." (Nurlia Handayani)
<b>3. Social Media Influence Management Strategies</b>	3.1 Restrictions and Control of Social Media Use	"I limit my time playing social media so that I don't get too affected." (Maulidatushofiah)
	3.2 Focus on Personal Goals and Progress	"I focus on personal goals, not other people's achievements." (Nurlia Handayani)
	3.3 Introspection and Self-Acceptance	"To be honest, success will come if we are honest with ourselves." (King Ibad Diawara)
<b>4. Motivation and Inspiration from Social Media</b>	4.1 Motivation from Friends and Inspirational Content	"I'm motivated to see that my friends can get scholarships and cool internships." (Maulidatushofiah)
	4.2 Positive Experiences and New Relationships	"I got the race info from Instagram and ended up winning." (Maulidatushofiah)
	4.3 Unique Motivation (Music and Creativity)	"Listening to good music makes me motivated." (King Ibad Diawara)
<b>5. Perception and Attitude to Social Competition</b>	5.1 Healthy Competition	"Competition is a boost to morale and productivity." (Akhyar P. Siregar)
	5.2 Pressure-Inducing Competition	"Sometimes I feel depressed because I feel left behind by friends." (Maulidatushofiah)

The results of the study show that students have diverse perceptions of success on social media, ranging from the need for social validation, the pressure of social standards, to personal meanings of success. Social media not only triggers a sense of pride and motivation, but also causes feelings of inferiority, envy, and psychological distress due to intense social comparisons. Some students try to manage this influence through limiting use, focusing on personal goals, and introspection and self-acceptance. On the other hand, social media also provides inspiration through positive content, new relationships, and unique experiences such as motivation from music or creative content. The competition that emerged was also seen as ambivalent: as a motivation booster as well as a source of pressure for those who felt left behind. These findings reflect the complexity of students' emotions and adaptive strategies in dealing with the

dynamics of success in the digital era. These findings are then further analyzed into three main focuses to understand more deeply how social media influences student perceptions, expectations, and experiences in the context of academic and social success.

### 1. Analysis of Student Perception of Academic and Social Success Standards Based on Social Media

Students' perception of academic and social success standards is greatly influenced by representations on social media that often display achievements and ideal lifestyles. This phenomenon corresponds to the Social Comparison Theory by Festinger (1954), which states that individuals naturally compare themselves with others in order to assess and improve themselves. Most participants said that the indicator of success on social media lies in the number of likes, positive comments, and followers. Maulidatushofiah said, "In my opinion, success on social media is when my content gets a lot of likes and positive comments."

However, the standards presented by social media can also lead to psychological distress and a lack of confidence, especially when students compare themselves to ideals that are often unrealistic. This is consistent with the results of research by Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckles (2014), who found that social comparisons on social media can increase envy and depression. Nurlia Handayani admitted, "Sometimes I feel like I don't care about myself, especially when I see friends who have received scholarships or great achievements."

### 2. The Influence of Social Media on Students' Expectations of Themselves

Social media shapes student expectations in an ambivalent way. Some feel motivated by the achievements of their friends on social media, but on the other hand, it triggers excessive pressure and anxiety. This is in accordance with Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory, which states that the mismatch between the ideal self and the real self can cause emotional discomfort. King Ibad Diawara said, "Success is enough for me to enjoy, no need to be compared to others," showing an effort of resistance to social pressure.

In addition, a study by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) emphasizes the importance of digital wellbeing and regulation of social media use to reduce its negative impact. Some participants did restrict the use of social media to maintain mental health, such as Nurlia Handayani who said, "I limit my time playing social media so that I am not too affected."

### 3. Positive and Negative Impacts of Social Media on Student Achievement

Social media is an important source of information, motivation, and social networks. Rayhan Nawawi said, "When my creativity videos were uploaded and received a lot of support, it became a big boost for me." This is in line with findings from Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield (2012) who show that social support on social media can increase motivation and confidence. However, negative impacts such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) described by Przybylski et al. (2013) are also felt, where students feel anxious because they are worried about missing out on experiences or opportunities experienced by others. Some college students admit to feeling their accomplishments are meaningless after seeing their friends' success on social media, which can also lead to stress and anxiety.

## Conclusion

This research aims to find out how social media affects students' perceptions of academic and social success. Students interpret the representation of academic and social success on social media based on the number of likes and support they get from social media. Most college students often compare themselves to the unrealistic image of ideals displayed on social media. Most students also say that indicators of success on social media lie in the number of likes, positive comments, and the number of followers. Through interactions carried out by students on social media.

These findings are in line with the Social Comparison Theory by Festinger (1954), which states that individuals tend to compare themselves to others as a way to judge themselves. Students often compare their academic and social achievements to those displayed on social media, which gives rise to new standards of success based on digital validation such as the number of likes and comments. When there is a mismatch between real achievement and ideal expectations formed by social media, emotional distress arises as described in Self-Discrepancy Theory by Higgins (1987). Some students experience stress, inferiority, and even a decrease in confidence. However, some are also able to respond to the influence of social media adaptively by limiting its use and focusing on self-development, which is in line with the concept of digital wellbeing by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020). Therefore, social media plays a dual role as a source of motivation as well as a psychological challenge in shaping the perception of student success in the digital era.

These results show the importance of strengthening digital literacy and emotional intelligence in the world of higher education. Students need to be equipped with the ability to understand, filter, and respond to information and achievements displayed on social media in a critical and healthy manner. Universities should not only emphasize the academic aspect, but also develop programs that support mental health, such as counseling, self-regulation training, and digital awareness campaigns. This aims to enable students to build a more authentic identity and definition of success, not solely relying on social validation in digital media. Thus, higher education plays an important role in shaping a generation that not only excels in achievement, but is also resilient in the face of social pressures in the digital age.

Thus, social media cannot be separated from the dynamics of current student lives, including in shaping perceptions of success, self-expectations, and emotional well-being. Colleges are required to be more responsive to these challenges by instilling the value of a balance between academic achievement and mental health. True success is not only measured by what is shown on screen, but by students' ability to grow authentically, reflectively, and empowered in the face of a stressful digital reality.

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