

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND INSECURE AMONG STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*This research aims to explore the impact of social media use on the sense of insecurity experienced by students in Medan City. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, which prioritizes in-depth interviews with 15 informants consisting of 7 main informants, 5 key informants, and 3 supporting informants. Then the data in the field is carried out by data collection techniques with observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis techniques with data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Data validity techniques with source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation. The results show that social media has a significant influence on students' mental health, especially in increasing feelings of insecurity related to social comparisons, body image, and often unrealistic standards of success. The majority of informants revealed that social media is a major source of harmful social comparisons, which in turn lowers confidence and increases anxiety. In addition, social media also affects the quality of students' social relationships, with interactions that are more superficial and less based on emotional honesty. This negative impact is further exacerbated by the stigma related to mental health issues, which makes students reluctant to talk about their insecurities. This study also found that support from campuses is needed to reduce the adverse impact of social media use on students' mental health. The resulting recommendations include the importance of providing counseling services, training on healthy social media use, and creating spaces for open discussions about mental health among students. These efforts are expected to help students manage the negative impact of social media and create a campus environment that is more supportive of their mental well-being.*

**Keywords:** Social Media; Insecurity; Social Comparison; Mental Health; Students; Campus Support; Qualitative Methods; Phenomenology.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dampak penggunaan media sosial terhadap rasa tidak aman (insecurity) yang dialami oleh mahasiswa di Kota Medan. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis, yang mengutamakan wawancara mendalam dengan 15 informan yang terdiri dari 7 informan utama, 5 informan kunci, dan 3 informan pendukung. Pengumpulan data di lapangan dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisis data dilakukan melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Validitas data dijamin melalui triangulasi sumber, triangulasi teknik, dan triangulasi waktu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa media sosial memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan terhadap kesehatan mental mahasiswa, khususnya dalam meningkatkan perasaan tidak aman yang berkaitan dengan perbandingan sosial, citra tubuh, dan standar kesuksesan yang sering kali tidak realistis. Mayoritas informan mengungkapkan bahwa media sosial menjadi sumber utama perbandingan sosial yang merugikan, yang pada akhirnya menurunkan rasa percaya diri dan meningkatkan kecemasan. Selain itu, media sosial juga memengaruhi kualitas hubungan sosial mahasiswa, dengan interaksi yang lebih dangkal dan kurang didasarkan pada kejujuran emosional. Dampak negatif ini semakin diperparah oleh stigma terkait isu kesehatan mental, yang membuat mahasiswa enggan membicarakan ketidakamanan mereka. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa dukungan dari pihak kampus dibutuhkan untuk mengurangi dampak buruk penggunaan media sosial terhadap kesehatan mental mahasiswa. Rekomendasi yang dihasilkan mencakup pentingnya penyediaan layanan konseling, pelatihan tentang penggunaan media sosial yang sehat, dan penciptaan ruang untuk

diskusi terbuka tentang kesehatan mental di kalangan mahasiswa. Upaya ini diharapkan dapat membantu mahasiswa mengelola dampak negatif media sosial dan menciptakan lingkungan kampus yang lebih mendukung kesejahteraan mental mereka.

**Kata Kunci:** *Media Sosial; Ketidakamanan; Perbandingan Sosial; Kesehatan Mental; Mahasiswa; Dukungan Kampus; Metode Kualitatif; Fenomenologi.*

## INTRODUCTION

Based on reports from We Are Social and Hootsuite, global social media usage continues to increase every year. In 2024, it is estimated that more than 4.7 billion people in the world will use social media (Riyanto, 2024). This trend can also be seen from the high number of downloads of social media applications on platforms such as the Play Store and the App Store. In March 2024, Instagram recorded 44 million downloads on the Play Store, followed by Facebook with 33 million, TikTok with 31 million, and WhatsApp with 28 million. On the App Store, Instagram dominates with 26.29 million downloads, Facebook 20.58 million, TikTok 16 million, and WhatsApp 28.42 million. In addition, Statista research (2024) shows that the average internet user spends more than 3 hours per day on social media, indicating an increasing dependence on the platform. This finding is in line with Susilawati's research (2023), which shows that WhatsApp (89%), Instagram (85%), Facebook (81%), and TikTok (63%) are the social media most frequently used by Indonesian people (Susilawati, 2023).

However, despite the many benefits offered, the negative impact of social media on mental health cannot be ignored. One of them is the feeling of insecurity experienced by many students. As expressed by AH, a sharia insurance student, although social media provides her with entertainment, she feels pressured seeing photos of her friends who look perfect or vacation to exotic places. "Sometimes I feel less confident with my appearance after seeing friends who look really beautiful or have ideal bodies," said AH. This shows there is a feeling of dissatisfaction that arises from comparing oneself with others on social media. AP, a student of ushuluddin, also admitted to being anxious and stressed after seeing posts by others who seemed more advanced in their careers or social lives.

The impact of social media on beauty standards is also quite striking. DC, a law student, felt inadequate after seeing influencers or celebrities who displayed near-perfect physical appearances. "Social media promotes a lot of unrealistic beauty standards, and that can make me feel inadequate," she said. This phenomenon exacerbates self-dissatisfaction, especially related to physical appearance that does not match the standards on social media. These findings illustrate how social media affects students' perceptions of themselves and can lead to anxiety and stress.

While social media offers many benefits, its impact on feelings of insecurity is very real, especially among college students who are in the developmental and identity-searching phase. According to a study by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017), excessive social media use is associated with increased anxiety and depression, reflecting a negative impact on users' mental health. Often, the distinction between real life and the virtual world is unclear, which makes feelings of anxiety and depression easier to arise due to unhealthy social comparisons. This leads to feelings of loneliness, as students interact more virtually than building direct relationships with others.

*Insecure* becomes an important problem faced by many teenagers, including students, in dealing with social pressures and expectations around them. This feeling of insecurity is difficult to overcome and tends to continue to appear in a person's mind, affecting the way they see themselves and the world around them (Abidah & Maryam, 2024). Exposure to other people's lives that appear more perfect on social media often causes students to feel inferior and unable to meet the standards displayed. They often feel that their lives do not meet the expectations that exist in cyberspace, which further exacerbates the feelings of insecurity they feel. Social media has now become a competition to show self-perfection, where many people compete to show the best of themselves. Individuals who are often exposed to ideal images posted by others often feel dissatisfied with their own appearance and life. Images that show a seemingly perfect life often trigger feelings of worthlessness and insecurity. This phenomenon, according to Ramadhan (2017), can encourage individuals to try harder to fulfill the need for recognition and

achievement, even if it leads to an image that is not in accordance with reality (Ramadhan, 2017).

In addition, social media addiction can disrupt sleep quality, as students often stay awake longer to check notifications or view posts, which can lead to sleep disturbances and decreased mental health. Exposure to blue light from electronic device screens inhibits the production of the hormone melatonin, which is essential for quality sleep. This sleep disturbance ultimately affects physical and mental health, worsens feelings of insecurity, and increases anxiety. Yasin (2022) in his research also highlighted the negative impacts of the habit of delaying bedtime, which can lead to insomnia and decrease quality of life (Yasin, 2022).

Reducing time on social media can be one way to reduce exposure to social comparisons that often trigger feelings of insecurity. By reducing the time spent on social media, students can focus more on their own achievements and progress without being burdened by unrealistic standards or expectations that often appear on these platforms. This also provides an opportunity to interact more directly with others, which can strengthen social relationships and reduce feelings of loneliness. Syauqii (2022) stated that reducing the use of social media wisely can help minimize feelings of insecurity and maintain emotional well-being (Syauqii, 2022).

Mental health education and training are important to help students recognize feelings of insecurity and how to deal with them in a healthy way. Mentoring or mentoring programs on campus can provide a space for students to talk and get support, which can ultimately reduce feelings of insecurity and increase self-confidence. Technology-based approaches, such as mental health apps or safe online discussion platforms, can also help students access emotional support easily and privately. Syauqii (2022) emphasized the importance of managing social media use wisely to reduce negative impacts on mental health (Syauqii, 2022).

Social comparison, or often referred to as social comparison, is a theory that explains that individuals have a natural urge to compare themselves with others. This comparison is done as a way to evaluate self-development and strive to be better in various aspects of life. In a journal written by Fakhrii, it is explained that

the theory of social comparison was first put forward by Festinger in 1954. This theory developed based on thoughts about social communication and changes in opinion in social groups. In general, this theory focuses on the view that social influence and some competitive behaviors arise because of the need for individuals to evaluate themselves, and this evaluation is done by comparing themselves with others. The main principle of this social comparison theory was put forward by Festinger (1954) through hypotheses, conclusions, and theoretical derivations related to the individual's need to evaluate themselves, the sources of evaluation used, and the individual's choices in making comparisons. In addition, this theory also considers various factors that influence change, reduce the frequency of comparison, and the pressure to achieve unity in a social context. (Fakhrii, 2010).

In the Swari journal, it is explained that social comparison can be done with two approaches, namely upward comparison and downward comparison. Upward comparison refers to comparing oneself with individuals who are considered to have more advantages than oneself, while downward comparison means comparing oneself with individuals who are not better than oneself. In the context of social media, upward comparison is often a type of comparison that is often done by women. This comparison is usually done as an effort to improve oneself, where information about individuals who are considered superior becomes a motivation for someone to improve their quality of life through this social comparison (Swari & Tobing, 2024).

The study of social comparison and its influence through social media is increasingly relevant given the dominance of digital media among college students today. Therefore, by understanding this relationship, we can develop strategies or interventions that support students in managing the influence of social media. This understanding also helps create a positive environment for students, where they can explore their potential without having to rely on feelings of dissatisfaction due to negative social comparison.

Overall, social comparison theory suggests that social media can be a major trigger for insecurity among college students. By understanding the factors that influence social comparison and its impact on mental well-being, this study aims to

provide insight into the relationship between social media and insecurity. With this knowledge, college students can learn to manage the influence of social media more wisely, reduce feelings of dissatisfaction, and build positive self-confidence in their academic lives.

To strengthen the basis of this research, several previous studies with similar themes will be reviewed. One of them is a study conducted by Fachri Syauqii, a student at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, who studied the influence of social media on the existence of insecurity. The results of his research show that in the context of social media, intense use can affect feelings of insecurity, especially among female adolescents (Syauqii, 2022). The research that conducted by Fachri Syauqii tends to have a too narrow focus, namely only on female adolescents. This can limit the generalization of the findings to other age groups or genders, because the impact of social media on feelings of insecurity can differ between men, women, or even different age groups. Given the differences in context, further research is needed to follow up on previous research. This study will discuss how social media affects feelings of insecurity in college students, by considering other important factors, such as academic achievement, career search, and the dynamics of social roles that are more dominant among college students.

In addition, research conducted by Agresta Armando Harnata and Berta Esti Ari Prasetya, students of Satya Wacana Christian University Salatiga, who studied the Description of Feelings of Insecurity Among Students Who Experience Social Media Addiction Tiktok. The results of their research show that each student experiences feelings of insecurity that vary according to their life experiences. They feel anxious about the appearance of others who are considered better. They also feel less confident in creating content that has the potential to generate money, feel uncomfortable doing it, and feel that the results are not equivalent to content creators who directly earn income (Harnata & Prasetya, 2023).

This study has a significant contribution in understanding the relationship between social media and feelings of insecurity among college students. However, this study has several shortcomings that need to be considered. First, the scope of the study which only focuses on college students who are TikTok users who are

addicted to social media means that the results of the study cannot be generalized to all college students who use other social media such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. This can limit the social media platforms that cause feelings of insecurity, because the impact of insecurity does not only arise from the TikTok application, but can also be Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram. By looking at the differences in context, further research is needed to follow up on previous research. This study will discuss how social media affects feelings of insecurity in college students, with a scope more broadly regarding applications that are frequently used by students such as TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach as explained by (Sugiyono, 2020), which emphasizes understanding objects in their natural context with researchers as the main instrument. This method aims to understand the phenomena experienced by the subject, such as behavior, views, motivations, and actions, through narrative descriptions (Nasution, 2023).

Referring to Suryono (2023), a qualitative approach is used to explore social influences that cannot be explained quantitatively. This study specifically uses a phenomenological approach, which is a type of qualitative research that seeks to understand an individual's subjective experience of a phenomenon in depth (Nasution, 2023)

The researcher focuses on the participants' direct experiences, without external interpretation, to reveal the essence of the phenomenon being studied. In this context, the study aims to understand how students interpret the use of social media and its impact on feelings of insecurity. Social media, which is part of students' daily lives, can also cause feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem. A phenomenological approach is used to explore the authentic meanings and experiences of students related to their interactions with social media, as well as its impact on their self-confidence and self-perception.

The data collection method in this study used observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were carried out by directly observing the daily

activities of the informants to record phenomena relevant to the research topic (Fiantika Rita, 2022). This method involves the systematic use of the five senses to obtain accurate data (Sahir, 2022).

Interviews are conducted in structured and unstructured ways. Structured interviews are used when the information needed has been determined, with a written question guide prepared in advance. Meanwhile, unstructured interviews are flexible and are used when researchers do not yet have a clear picture of the data, allowing for deeper exploration of the participant's experience (Nasution, 2023). Documentation techniques are also used to complete research data. Documentation includes the process of collecting and processing visual data such as images, videos, and recordings that serve as evidence of events or activities observed (Murdiyanto, 2020).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Social Media and Students***

In an interview conducted in the morning with several students in Sidorjo Village, Medan Tembung District, it was revealed that social media has become the main tool in supporting their learning process. One informant said, "... I am part of many WhatsApp and Telegram groups to discuss assignments, share materials, and motivate each other." This finding shows that social media not only functions as a means of technical communication, but also creates a social and collaborative learning ecosystem.

More than just an academic support, social media is also used by students as a medium for forming a digital identity. Several informants admitted that they felt compelled to share important moments such as academic achievements, organizational activities, and personal experiences. The need to show the best side of oneself on social media is recognized as part of a strategy to gain social validation from the surrounding environment.

This trend is in line with research compiled by Andriani and Sulistyorini (2022), which shows that 91.4% of students use social media to communicate with



various parties, including lecturers and peers. In fact, an internal survey of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) noted that around 80% of students actively use social media in an academic context, such as consulting lecture materials and obtaining other important information (Andriani & Sulistyorini, 2022).

This phenomenon can be understood more deeply through the perspective of the presentation of self theory proposed by Erving Goffman (1959). In this framework, social life is seen as a stage, where individuals play certain roles to organize the impression they want to display in front of the public. In the digital space, especially social media, students choose and compose self-narratives through uploading photos, videos, and statuses as part of their front stage, an arena to present the best version of themselves to the public.

In other words, social media has transformed from a mere communication tool into a performative space that shapes students' social identities. As Hidayanto (2024) argues, social media is now deeply integrated into students' lives, making it the primary channel for information seeking and daily interactions (Hidayanto, 2024).

However, the construction of an ideal image that is constantly displayed on social media also has psychological implications. Triananda (2021) revealed that many social media users only show the ideal side of their lives, which ultimately creates new, unrealistic social standards. As a result, when students feel that their lives are not comparable to the narratives they see on their digital timelines, feelings of insecurity arise that can affect self-confidence and overall mental health (Triananda, 2021).

### ***Intensity of Social Media Use by Students***

Based on the results of interviews conducted during the day, it was found that most students spend between 3 to 6 hours per day accessing social media, both actively and passively. One informant said, "...Every time I wake up and before I go to bed, I always open social media. It feels like a mandatory routine." This statement shows that the use of social media has become an inseparable part of students' daily activities, forming a consistent and repetitive pattern of engagement.

Not only used for entertainment or communication, social media is also a medium that emotionally binds its users. A student in an evening interview said, "...My friends post about attending international seminars, working part-time, or having businesses. I wonder, what have I been doing all this time?" This statement reflects the psychological impact that arises from the practice of social comparison on social media. Many students realize that digital timelines often display the achievements of others who appear superior, triggering feelings of stagnation, worthlessness, or even anxiety about personal achievements.

Some students have begun to respond reflectively to this dynamic. In another evening interview, one student said, "...Lately I've started unfollowing accounts that make me feel inadequate. I follow more motivational and educational accounts." This statement shows a critical awareness of the impact of uncontrolled social media consumption, as well as a conscious effort to manage digital experiences to be more emotionally healthy.

The phenomenon of student attachment to social media can be explained through the uses and gratifications theory proposed by Blumler and Katz (1974). This theory explains that individuals use media to fulfill psychological and social needs, including entertainment, escape from stress, information seeking, identity, and social affiliation. In the context of students, social media is not only a communication channel, but also a place to seek emotional comfort, self-validation, and social existence. When these needs are met consistently, a form of attachment is created that approaches addictive nature.

However, high intensity of use does not necessarily bring positive impacts. As illustrated in the interviews, social media is also a major source of detrimental social comparison. This form of comparison is often upward comparison comparing oneself with people who appear more successful, potentially lowering self-esteem and causing anxiety. As stated by one Informant, "...I often feel like my life is ordinary, especially after seeing other people's posts that seem more perfect."

Thus, although social media can provide entertainment and relaxation, its excessive use without self-control can disrupt the balance between real life and the

digital world. This condition, if not realized, risks causing more complex psychological problems, especially in terms of self-perception and emotional well-being of students.



**Figure 1. With Key Informants**

### ***The Impact of Social Media Use on Feelings of Insecurity***

Interviews conducted from morning to night showed that social media use has a significant impact on students' mental well-being, especially in the form of increased feelings of insecurity. Almost all key informants stated that they had experienced feelings of insecurity due to the content they consumed, especially those related to physical appearance, luxurious lifestyles, and academic and professional achievements. One informant said, "...Content about body image or influencers with ideal bodies often makes me feel insecure about my appearance."

Meanwhile, another informant also shared a similar experience regarding the influence of social media on self-perception. He stated, "...I feel that my body is not ideal and often feel jealous of their lives which seem more enjoyable." This shows that social media not only forms unrealistic expectations, but also reinforces social comparisons which ultimately have a negative impact on students' self-esteem.

The pressure is not limited to the physical aspect, but also touches on the realm of social achievement. In a morning interview, a student said, "...I *feel like I can't compete. On social media everyone looks perfect.*" Students feel trapped in the pressure to consistently project an ideal image, leading to feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to what they see on digital platforms.

They also acknowledged the difficulty of being themselves, especially in

face-to-face interactions, because they have become accustomed to building a digital persona that does not always reflect reality. As expressed by one student, "...Sometimes I feel like I have to be perfect to look cool in front of my friends." This phenomenon indicates that social media has created unrealistic social standards, which indirectly exacerbates the psychological pressure they experience.

In addition, the afternoon interviews showed that friendships formed through social media felt shallow and full of image. One student complained, "... Friends are more busy building a 'persona'. Sometimes I miss honest and spontaneous conversations." This reflects the degradation of the quality of interpersonal relationships influenced by the need to appear perfect in cyberspace.

In evening interviews, students also admitted to feeling anxious when having to engage in direct social interactions, because they felt unable to compete with the curated version of themselves on social media. As one informant said, "...I feel more confident on social media. But when I meet in person, I feel inferior." This shows the imbalance between digital identity and real identity, which can trigger social anxiety and reduce self-confidence in everyday life.

This situation is exacerbated by the strong stigma against talking about mental health. Many students choose to remain silent because they are afraid of being seen as weak or too dramatic, as one informant admitted, "...We are afraid of being seen as weak or dramatic if we say we are insecure." This stigma is a serious obstacle in the process of recovery or seeking support, so that the feelings of insecurity they experience tend to be suppressed and have the potential to develop into more serious psychological problems.

However, some students are beginning to realize the importance of managing their social media use in a healthy way. Some strategies include limiting usage time, deleting or unfollowing accounts that trigger negative feelings, and starting to follow accounts that provide motivation and education. One student said, "...I try to focus more on my own happiness and achievements." The informants also emphasized the importance of the role of educational institutions in providing counseling services, open discussion spaces, and digital literacy training so that students are able to deal with digital social pressures in a healthy and sustainable

manner.

This phenomenon of increasing feelings of insecurity can be explained through the social comparison theory proposed by Festinger (1954). This theory states that individuals naturally compare themselves to others in order to evaluate themselves, especially when objective standards are not available. In the context of social media, students are more likely to make upward comparisons with individuals who are considered more successful, attractive, or happy. This form of comparison often leads to feelings of envy, low self-esteem, and ultimately reinforces feelings of insecurity about oneself.

Syauqii (2022) emphasized that feeling insecure is normal as long as it does not last continuously and does not interfere with daily life functions. However, when this feeling recurs without healthy processing, it can develop into a more serious mental disorder. In line with that, Ridlo (2020) stated that mental health is a vital element in an individual's overall well-being. When social media causes significant psychological distress, then it must receive serious attention (Syauqii, 2022).

Abidah and Maryam (2024) also reminded that feelings of insecurity that are left to persist can worsen students' mental conditions. The lack of safe spaces to talk about mental health issues makes students more likely to keep these feelings to themselves. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach from higher education institutions is needed, not only in the form of counseling services, but also increasing awareness and critical understanding of the use of social media among students (Abidah & Maryam, 2024).



**Figure 2. With Key Informants**

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that social media is not only a means of communication, but also a space that shapes how students view themselves. In their daily lives, students are encouraged to show their best image in cyberspace, which slowly shifts the meaning of happiness and success into something that is very visual and measurable by other people's standards. High intensity of use opens up great opportunities for social comparisons that often trigger feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and withdrawal from real social relationships.

The standards of beauty and success displayed on social media, which are often far from reality, put a burden on students to meet existing social expectations. Actually, our lives are fine, until we finally see a post on social media that makes us doubt what we have. If we continue to use others as a benchmark, we will never feel enough.

In QS. At-Tin verse 4, Allah SWT says, "Indeed, We have created humans in the best form." This verse reminds us that Allah created us in a perfect form, so we should be grateful for everything He has given us. True happiness will come along with sincere gratitude for all His blessings.

Therefore, it is important for higher education institutions to be present as an educational and supportive space for students, especially in building awareness of digital literacy and mental health. An understanding of the boundaries between reality and representation on social media needs to be instilled, so that students can live more authentic, healthy, and grateful lives.

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