



Reconstructing Higher Education Perceptions amid the Strengthening of Non-Academic Success Narratives among Indonesian Youth

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of social media has strengthened the dissemination of non-academic success narratives that position wealth, popularity, and entrepreneurial achievement as primary indicators of success. Although numerous studies have examined the relationship between education, social mobility, and youth aspirations, limited attention has been given to how these narratives shape perceptions of higher education among Indonesian youth. This study aims to analyze the shifting meaning of higher education among Indonesian youth and reconstruct its role within the framework of human development and social progress. This research employed a narrative literature review using a sociology of education perspective. A total of 45 academic sources, including journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and publications from national and international institutions, were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The findings indicate that the growing prominence of non-academic success narratives has shifted educational orientation from intellectual and character development toward short-term economic considerations. Higher education is increasingly evaluated through a cost-benefit perspective and compared with alternative pathways to success perceived as faster and more practical. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of educational sociology and digital culture perspectives to explain the changing social meaning of higher education in contemporary society. The findings emphasize the importance of reconstructing higher education as a means of developing competencies, critical thinking, and social responsibility in the digital era.

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan media sosial yang pesat telah memperkuat penyebaran narasi kesuksesan non-akademik yang menempatkan kekayaan, popularitas, dan pencapaian kewirausahaan sebagai indikator utama keberhasilan. Meskipun berbagai penelitian telah membahas hubungan pendidikan, mobilitas sosial, dan aspirasi generasi muda, kajian mengenai bagaimana narasi tersebut membentuk persepsi terhadap pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia masih terbatas.

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pergeseran makna pendidikan tinggi pada generasi muda Indonesia serta merekonstruksi perannya dalam kerangka pembangunan manusia dan kemajuan sosial. Penelitian menggunakan metode narrative literature review dengan perspektif sosiologi pendidikan. Sebanyak 45 sumber akademik yang terdiri atas artikel jurnal, buku ilmiah, laporan kebijakan, dan publikasi lembaga nasional maupun internasional dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis isi kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa menguatnya narasi kesuksesan non-akademik telah mendorong pergeseran orientasi pendidikan dari pengembangan intelektual dan karakter menuju pertimbangan ekonomi jangka pendek. Pendidikan tinggi semakin dinilai melalui perspektif biaya-manfaat dan dibandingkan dengan jalur kesuksesan alternatif yang dianggap lebih cepat dan praktis. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada integrasi perspektif sosiologi pendidikan dan budaya digital untuk menjelaskan perubahan makna sosial pendidikan tinggi dalam masyarakat kontemporer. Temuan penelitian menegaskan pentingnya rekonstruksi pendidikan tinggi sebagai sarana pengembangan kompetensi, daya kritis, dan tanggung jawab sosial di era digital.

INTRODUCTION

The changing social landscape in the digital age has significantly influenced the way younger generations perceive education, employment, and life success. Social media no longer functions merely as a communication tool but has evolved into a space where meanings, values, and social realities are continuously produced and reproduced. Through digital platforms, individuals are exposed to various representations of success that shape their aspirations and life choices. In recent years, social media has increasingly featured narratives portraying individuals who have achieved wealth, popularity, and social influence without pursuing formal higher education. Such narratives gradually construct a new belief that economic success can be attained through non-academic pathways that are perceived as faster, more flexible, and more financially rewarding than higher education.

The strengthening of the “success without college” narrative is evident in the growing visibility of influencers, content creators, digital celebrities, and young entrepreneurs who use their personal experiences as justification for choosing not to pursue higher education. Within digital spaces, success is frequently represented through material indicators such as income, asset ownership, luxurious lifestyles, and online popularity. Consequently, higher education is increasingly viewed not as a process of intellectual development and social empowerment but as an optional pathway whose value is assessed primarily through short-term economic returns. This trend reflects a transformation in educational culture driven by advances in communication technologies and the widespread use of social media (Anggraheni, 2021).

This phenomenon deserves serious attention because it emerges at a critical moment when Indonesia is experiencing a demographic bonus and striving to develop high-quality human resources toward the realization of Indonesia Emas 2045. The Indonesia Gen Z Report indicates that the younger generation constitutes the largest segment of Indonesia’s productive population and will play a decisive role in shaping the nation’s future development trajectory (Institute, 2024). However, amid increasing demands for human resource quality, there is a growing tendency among some young people to perceive higher education as no longer the primary avenue for social mobility and quality-of-life improvement.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, education is considered an investment that enhances productivity, skills, and individual welfare. Schultz and Becker emphasized that education plays a strategic role in developing the human capital required to respond to economic and social transformations. Educational investment generates not only

economic returns but also strengthens intellectual capacity, adaptability, and decision-making abilities (Burhanudin, 2021). Nevertheless, the human capital perspective has been criticized for reducing education to its economic functions. Education also serves as a process through which values, culture, social identities, and critical consciousness are formed. Pierre Bourdieu argued that education functions as a mechanism of social reproduction while simultaneously producing cultural capital that influences individuals' positions within social structures (Leon, 2025). Therefore, the meaning of education cannot be understood solely through its economic outcomes.

Beyond its role as human and cultural capital, education has long been recognized as a crucial instrument of social mobility. Through education, individuals gain access to broader opportunities for improving their social and economic status. However, the rapid circulation of non-academic success narratives through digital media has introduced alternative pathways for gaining recognition and status. The extensive visibility of successful influencers, entrepreneurs, and digital creators often creates the perception that higher education is no longer essential for achieving success. Such conditions have the potential to shift educational orientation from long-term human development toward short-term pragmatic and economic considerations.

Several previous studies have explored factors influencing young people's decisions to pursue higher education. Research conducted by Anggraheni (2021) highlighted the influence of digital media on educational aspirations and career preferences among youth. Burhanudin (2021) emphasized the contribution of education to human capital formation and socioeconomic advancement. Studies by Putri and Rahman (2022) demonstrated that family socioeconomic conditions remain a significant determinant of higher education participation. Sari et al. (2023) found that parental support and academic motivation strongly affect students' intentions to continue their studies. Nugroho (2023) further revealed that perceptions regarding graduate employability influence educational decision-making among young people. At the international level, Brown and Souto-Otero (2020) examined how digital culture reshapes educational expectations and career trajectories. Brooks (2021) argued that social media contributes to the construction of alternative ideals of success that are not necessarily linked to formal educational attainment. Abidin (2021) demonstrated that influencer culture increasingly shapes young people's aspirations and lifestyle orientations. Marginson (2022) highlighted the growing competition between higher education and alternative forms of skill acquisition in the digital economy, while Furlong and Cartmel (2022) observed that contemporary youth increasingly pursue individualized pathways to success outside traditional educational routes.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into educational participation, social mobility, youth aspirations, and digital culture, most focus on economic, institutional, familial, or motivational determinants of educational choices. Existing research tends to examine educational decisions and digital influences separately, with limited attention given to how non-academic success narratives circulating through social media actively reconstruct the social meaning of higher education. Furthermore, previous studies predominantly evaluate higher education from the perspectives of access, employability, and economic returns, leaving the sociocultural transformation of educational meaning relatively underexplored. This indicates a significant research gap concerning the relationship between digital success narratives and changing perceptions of higher education among Indonesia's younger generation.

This study addresses that gap by examining how the strengthening of non-academic success narratives influences the construction of meaning surrounding higher education among Indonesian youth. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of Human Capital

Theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to analyze higher education within the context of digital society. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on determinants of educational participation or labor-market outcomes, this study conceptualizes higher education as a contested social institution whose legitimacy is increasingly challenged by alternative narratives of success disseminated through social media. By combining perspectives from educational sociology and digital culture studies, this research offers a new conceptual framework for understanding how contemporary youth negotiate the value of higher education amid rapidly changing social realities.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to analyze the factors contributing to the changing meaning of higher education among Indonesian youth, examine the influence of non-academic success narratives on perceptions of higher education, and reconstruct the role of higher education in supporting sustainable human development and social progress. Specifically, this research investigates how social media-driven narratives of non-academic success reshape educational values and aspirations among young people and explores how higher education can maintain its relevance within an increasingly digital and market-oriented society. Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to the development of educational sociology scholarship while enriching contemporary discussions regarding the future role of higher education in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to analyze the changing meaning of higher education amid the strengthening of non-academic success narratives among Indonesian youth. The SLR method was selected because it provides a systematic, transparent, and replicable procedure for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing literature relevant to a particular research topic (Snyder, 2019). Through this approach, the study seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of how digital culture and non-academic success narratives influence perceptions of higher education and its role in contemporary society.

The study was guided by perspectives from the sociology of education, educational philosophy, and critical discourse analysis. The sociology of education perspective was employed to explain the relationship between social change and educational perceptions. Educational philosophy was used to examine the fundamental purposes and values of higher education in human development. Meanwhile, critical discourse analysis helped interpret how narratives of non-academic success are constructed, reproduced, and disseminated through digital media, influencing young people's educational aspirations and values.

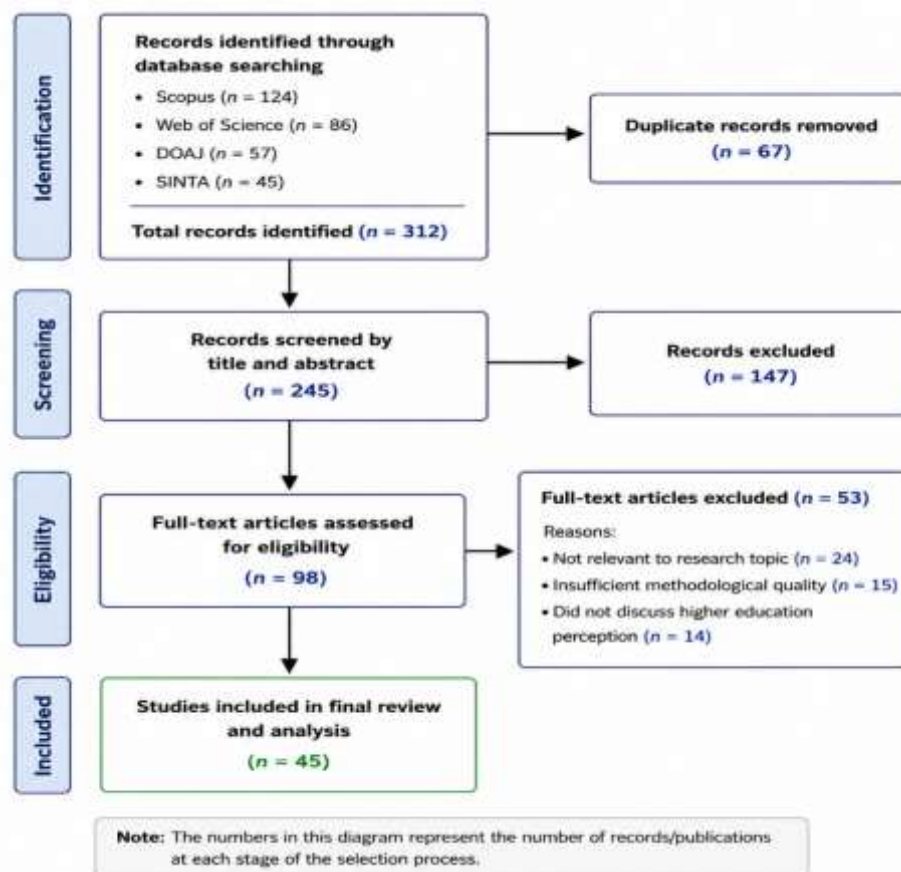


Figure 1. Illustrates the literature selection process adopted in this study

Figure 1 illustrates the literature selection process adopted in this study. The initial search identified 312 publications from Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, and SINTA databases. After removing 67 duplicate records, 245 publications remained for title and abstract screening. Following the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 98 articles were assessed for full-text eligibility. Finally, 45 sources met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final review and analysis.

Literature searches were conducted in several academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and SINTA, complemented by reports from UNESCO, OECD, Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of Indonesia, and other reputable institutions. The search process covered publications published between 2015 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments related to digital culture and higher education.

The search was performed using combinations of the following keywords: “*higher education perception*,” “*higher education*,” “*non-academic success*,” “*success without college*,” “*digital culture*,” “*social media influence*,” “*youth aspirations*,” “*human capital*,” “*social mobility*,” “*educational sociology*,” and “*Indonesian youth*.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results and ensure relevance to the research objectives.

The initial search identified 312 publications across all databases. After removing duplicate records ($n = 67$), a total of 245 publications remained for title and abstract screening. Following the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 98 publications were selected for full-text assessment. Subsequently, 45 sources consisting of peer-reviewed

journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and institutional publications met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final analysis.

The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) publications discussing higher education, educational perceptions, social mobility, digital culture, or non-academic success narratives; (2) publications published between 2015 and 2025; (3) peer-reviewed articles, academic books, policy reports, and institutional publications; and (4) publications available in full text and written in English or Indonesian. Exclusion criteria included duplicate publications, non-scholarly sources, opinion articles lacking empirical or conceptual rigor, and studies not directly related to the research topic.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction stage, information relevant to the changing meaning of higher education and the emergence of non-academic success narratives was identified and categorized. The selected data were then organized into thematic categories to facilitate interpretation and synthesis. The final stage involved identifying patterns, conceptual relationships, and emerging trends across the literature.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence from journal articles, academic books, government reports, and international institutional publications. In addition, each source was critically evaluated based on publication quality, indexing status, author expertise, methodological rigor, and relevance to the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Synthesis of Previous Studies

The analysis of 45 selected publications revealed four dominant themes related to the changing meaning of higher education among Indonesian youth: (1) the influence of social media and digital culture on educational aspirations, (2) the emergence of non-academic success narratives, (3) the increasing economic orientation toward higher education, and (4) the implications of these developments for human capital and social mobility.

Of the 45 studies analyzed, 18 studies emphasized the influence of social media in shaping young people's perceptions of success and career aspirations. Twelve studies highlighted the growing popularity of influencers, content creators, and digital entrepreneurs as alternative role models for success. Ten studies focused on the increasing tendency of students to evaluate higher education through a cost-benefit perspective, while five studies emphasized the continuing importance of higher education for long-term social mobility, critical thinking development, and civic engagement.

The findings suggest that digital media has become a significant factor influencing how younger generations interpret educational value. Although higher education continues to be recognized as an important mechanism for human capital development, many studies indicate that alternative success narratives promoted through digital platforms increasingly challenge its traditional legitimacy.

Table 1. Summary of Literature Synthesis by Research Theme (n = 45)

Research Theme (Focus of Study)	Number of Articles	Main Findings	Relevance to Current Study
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Digital Media and Youth Aspirations	5	Digital media and social media content influence educational, career, and lifestyle aspirations among young people.	Supports the influence of digital narratives on educational orientation.
Influencer Culture and Creator Economy	6	Influencers and digital creators shape perceptions of success and provide alternative role models outside traditional professions.	Explains the legitimacy of non-academic success pathways.
Higher Education and Social Mobility	8	Higher education remains an important mechanism for social mobility and economic advancement.	Provides a contrasting perspective to alternative success narratives.
Higher Education in the Digital Economy	5	Universities increasingly compete with alternative learning pathways and digital skill acquisition models.	Supports changing perceptions of the role of higher education.
Youth Aspirations and Success Ideals	7	Success is increasingly defined through diverse indicators beyond academic achievement.	Supports the emergence of non-academic success narratives.
Education and Labor Market Outcomes	5	Educational attainment continues to generate economic and employment advantages.	Demonstrates the continuing relevance of higher education.
Digital Transformation and Emerging Careers	4	Digitalization creates new occupations and entrepreneurial opportunities.	Supports the creator economy and digital career argument.
Youth Transitions and Individualization	3	Young people increasingly construct individualized pathways to adulthood and success.	Explains changing educational and career orientations.
Education Investment and Economic Rationality	2	Education is increasingly evaluated through return-on-investment considerations.	Supports the trend toward economic orientation in educational decision-making.
Knowledge Society and Human Capital Development	0	Knowledge-intensive economies continue to rely on higher education for innovation and competitiveness.	Supports the reconstruction of higher education's value.

Strengthening the Narrative of Non-Academic Success in the Younger Generation

The synthesis of 18 studies revealed that social media has become the dominant source of success references among young people. The results of literature review and observation of the development of the digital space show that social media has become a new arena in shaping the perception of the younger generation about life success. In contrast to previous decades when higher education was seen as the main path to gain social status and economic mobility, today various digital platforms present an alternative narrative that places non-academic success as the same form of success, even considered more promising. Through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and digital podcasts, young people are constantly exposed to content featuring individuals who have achieved wealth, popularity, and social influence without pursuing formal higher education (Deviv, 2024). This phenomenon shows that social media not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a space for the production of meaning that forms new standards of success in society (Castells, 2015).

The narrative of non-academic success is increasingly gaining social legitimacy through the popularity of public figures, content creators, influencers, and digital entrepreneurs who openly share their success experiences without a strong higher education background. In the various content circulating on social media, success is often represented through economic achievement, asset ownership, financial freedom, and large numbers of followers (Miarta et al., 2024). Not a few public figures have explicitly stated that formal education is not the only path to success, in fact, some of them consider work experience and the courage to take risks more important than an academic degree. The narrative then received widespread attention because it was delivered by individuals who were considered economically and socially successful. As a result, some of the younger generation began to question the relevance of higher education in achieving their life goals.

This phenomenon shows a shift in success indicators that are developing in society. If in the past success was often associated with the level of education, mastery of science, and intellectual contribution to society, now the measure of success is increasingly shifting towards achievements that are material and easy to observe visually. Luxury vehicle ownership, a home, a growing business, the number of social media followers, and the ability to earn income at a young age are symbols of success that are widely consumed by the younger generation. In this context, social media serves as a cultural reproduction mechanism that shapes a collective perception of what is considered valuable and worthy of achievement (Jenkins et al., 2018).

The results of the analysis also show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success does not always have a negative impact. On the one hand, this phenomenon is able to encourage the growth of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit among the younger generation. Various new professions born from the digital economy prove that technological developments have opened up job opportunities that were previously unavailable in the conventional economic system. However, on the other hand, narratives that overemphasize economic success without displaying the long process behind it have the potential to form a disproportionate perception of the value of education. Some of the younger generation are beginning to view higher education as an expensive investment and do not always provide results that are comparable to the costs incurred. This condition risks reducing appreciation for the academic process, literacy culture, and intellectual capacity development which has been the main goal of higher education.

Based on the results of a synthesis of various sources, there are three main trends that show the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success in the young generation of Indonesia. First, social media is increasingly dominant as a source of reference in

determining the standard of success in life. Second, non-academic public figures have gained a strong position as a model of success that is often emulated by the younger generation. Third, there is a shift in the orientation of success from intellectual achievements to economic achievements that are fast, practical, and easy to visualize. These three trends show that the change in the meaning of higher education cannot be separated from the social transformation that is taking place in the contemporary digital ecosystem.

The Shift in the Meaning of Higher Education

Among the 45 studies analyzed, 12 studies consistently reported that influencers and digital entrepreneurs increasingly function as role models that challenge traditional educational pathways. The results of the literature analysis show that there has been a significant change in the way the younger generation interprets higher education. In the previous period, higher education was seen as the main instrument to develop intellectual capacity, expand scientific horizons, form character, and increase opportunities for social mobility. Education is not only interpreted as a means of obtaining a job, but also as a process of forming human beings who have the ability to think critically, moral integrity, and social responsibility.

Along with the development of digital technology and changes in the structure of the economy, the orientation towards higher education has shifted. Some of the younger generation are starting to look at higher education through a more pragmatic and results-oriented perspective. The value of education is often measured by the ability to generate a job, the level of income after graduation, and the opportunity to earn financial benefits in a relatively short period of time. In this context, higher education is no longer understood solely as a need for self-development, but rather as an investment that must provide clear and measurable returns (Marginson, 2018).

This shift can be seen from the increasing tendency of people to compare the cost of education with economic opportunities that can be obtained through non-academic channels. The emergence of various new professions in the digital economy, such as content creators, influencers, marketing affiliates, and digital platform-based business actors, gives an idea that economic success can be achieved without having to go through a long formal education process. This condition encourages some young generations to assess higher education based on the logic of economic efficiency, namely the extent to which education is able to generate profits that are proportional to the costs and time spent (Bank, 2020).

Other findings show that changes in the meaning of higher education are also influenced by increasing public expectations of the direct relationship between education and work. While college graduates still face challenges in obtaining jobs that match their qualifications, there is a perception that higher education does not always guarantee economic success. This perception is then reinforced by various narratives on social media that feature successful individuals without a higher education background. As a result, some young generations have begun to question the relevance of formal education as the main path to success in life.

Table 2. Shifting the Meaning of Higher Education in Indonesia's Young Generation

Traditional Perspectives	Contemporary Perspectives
Scientific development	Economic investment
Character formation	Means of getting a job
Long-term social mobility	Short-term financial benefits
Intellectual capacity development	Cost and time efficiency
Improved quality of life	Return on investment education

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that higher education has undergone a transformation of meaning from a human development instrument to an economic instrument that is oriented towards fast and measurable results. Although economic orientation is an inseparable part of the function of education in modern society, the dominance of this perspective has the potential to reduce the understanding of the function of education as a means of intellectual development, character building, and the strengthening of civilization. Therefore, the change in the meaning of higher education that occurs in the younger generation needs to be understood as a consequence of the social, economic, and cultural transformation that takes place in the contemporary digital society.

Factors Causing Changes in Perception of Higher Education

The synthesis of 18 studies revealed that social media has become the dominant source of success references among young people. The results of the literature analysis show that the change in the perception of the younger generation towards higher education does not occur suddenly, but is influenced by various interrelated factors, namely economic, technological, and cultural factors. These three factors form a new perspective on the relevance of higher education in the social and economic life of contemporary society.

From an economic aspect, the high cost of higher education is one of the main considerations that influence the decision of the younger generation to continue their studies. Although the government has provided various educational assistance programs, some people still view higher education as an investment that requires large costs with results that may not necessarily be felt in a short time. This perception is even stronger when people are faced with the reality of university graduates who are still having difficulty getting jobs that are in accordance with their field of expertise. In this context, higher education is often evaluated based on its economic value, i.e. the extent to which education is able to provide financial benefits after graduation. This condition shows a tendency to increase pragmatic orientation in looking at education, where the success of education is measured more through economic achievements than intellectual and social capacity development (Bank, 2020; OECD, 2024).

In addition to economic factors, the development of digital technology is also an important factor that affects changes in perception of higher education. The development of social media has opened up wide access to a wide range of information about career paths and forms of success that can be achieved without a formal education. Various digital platforms routinely feature public figures, content creators, influencers, and digital business actors who have managed to earn large income and social recognition without having to complete higher education. The continuous exposure causes some young generations to begin to see that economic success can be achieved through alternative paths outside of formal education. In addition, the development of the creator economy (*Creator Economy*) also presents a variety of new professions that do not necessarily require certain academic qualifications. This phenomenon expands the career options of the younger generation and indirectly reduces the perception that higher education is the only path to social mobility and economic success (Castells, 2015; UNESCO, 2023).

Cultural factors also contribute to shaping these changes in perception. The results of the study show that the digital society tends to thrive in a culture that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and results that can be obtained in a relatively short time. The instant culture that thrives through social media reinforces the tendency to prioritize the end result over a lengthy process. In the context of education, the learning process that takes years is often considered less attractive than the opportunity to earn a quick income through various digital economy

activities. This condition then gave birth to a pragmatic mindset that placed education as a means of obtaining economic benefits alone. As a result, educational values related to character development, the formation of critical thinking skills, and the improvement of intellectual qualities tend to be marginalized in the perception of some of the younger generation (Jenkins et al., 2018).

Table 3. Factors Causing Changes in Perception of Higher Education

Factors	Key Indicators	Impact on Perception of Education
Economy	Tuition fees, educated unemployment	Education is judged on the basis of economic benefits
Technology	Social media, creator economy	An alternative path to non-academic success emerges
Culture	Instant culture, pragmatism of the younger generation	Education is seen as a short-term investment

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that changes in perception of higher education are a consequence of social transformation that involves the interaction between economic factors, the development of digital technology, and changes in people's culture. These three factors together form a new perspective on the meaning of higher education among the young generation of Indonesia.

Impact on National Education

Among the 45 studies analyzed, 12 studies consistently reported that influencers and digital entrepreneurs increasingly function as role models that challenge traditional educational pathways. The results of the literature analysis show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success among the younger generation has a multidimensional impact on the development of national education. This impact is not entirely negative, because in some aspects this phenomenon actually encourages the birth of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit that is increasingly developing in the midst of a digital society. However, on the other hand, this phenomenon also presents new challenges for the world of education, especially related to the declining appreciation of the academic process and the weakening of the orientation of scientific development.

One of the positive impacts that can be identified is the emergence of new creativity among the younger generation. The development of digital technology has opened up a wider space for the younger generation to develop a wide range of skills that previously did not receive much attention in the formal education system. Ability to create digital content, build a personal brand (*Personal Branding*), developing technology-based businesses, and utilizing digital platforms as a means of productivity is becoming a form of creativity that is increasingly developing (Deming, 2024a). This condition shows that digital transformation not only results in changes in work patterns, but also creates new opportunities for the younger generation to express their abilities and potentials more flexibly.

In addition, the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success has also encouraged the growth of entrepreneurial spirit among the younger generation. Various literature shows that the development of the digital economy has created more open and accessible business opportunities than in previous periods. The presence of e-commerce platforms, social media, and the creator economy allows individuals to build businesses with relatively limited capital. This phenomenon has a positive impact on increasing entrepreneurial interest and the ability of the younger generation to create economic

opportunities independently. In certain contexts, these conditions can contribute to strengthening the creative economy and increasing community productivity (OECD, 2024).

However, the results of the study also show that there are a number of negative impacts that need serious attention. One of the most prominent impacts is the decline of academic culture among some of the younger generation. Constant exposure to the narrative of instant success causes a long and gradual learning process to often be perceived as less attractive than the economic achievements that can be obtained in a short period of time. As a result, academic activities such as reading, researching, discussing scientifically, and developing intellectual capacity have the potential to experience a decrease in appreciation in the lives of the younger generation.

Another impact that arises is a decrease in interest in continuing studies to a higher level of education. As life success is increasingly represented through economic achievement and popularity on social media, higher education is no longer seen as the only promising path to social mobility. Some of the younger generation are starting to consider other alternatives that are considered to be faster to generate economic benefits. If this trend continues in the long term, it can affect the level of higher education participation and hinder efforts to improve the quality of human resources which is one of the main national development agendas (Bank, 2020).

Furthermore, the weakening of scientific tradition is also a consequence that needs to be observed. Scientific tradition is an important foundation for the progress of a nation because it plays a role in generating innovation, technological development, and solving various social problems through scientific approaches. When society increasingly places economic success as the only indicator of life achievement, the appreciation of science has the potential to decrease. In the long run, these conditions can affect the nation's ability to build a knowledge-based society (*Knowledge-based society*) which is the main demand in the era of globalization and the digital economy (Schleicher, 2019).

Table 4. The Impact of Non-Academic Success Narratives on National Education

Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Increasing creativity of the younger generation	Decline of academic culture
The growth of the entrepreneurial spirit	Reduced interest in pursuing higher education
The emergence of new professions and job opportunities	The weakening of the scientific tradition
Strengthening the creative economy	Declining appreciation of the learning process
Adaptation to technological developments	The shift in educational orientation to purely economic

Based on the results of the synthesis of various sources, it can be concluded that the narrative of non-academic success is a phenomenon that presents opportunities as well as challenges for national education. On the one hand, this phenomenon encourages the birth of creativity and entrepreneurship that are relevant to the needs of the digital society. However, on the other hand, if it is not balanced with the strengthening of academic culture and educational literacy, this phenomenon has the potential to reduce appreciation for science and weaken the role of higher education as a means of sustainable human resource development (Commission, 2023).

Discussion

Perspectives of Human Capital Theory

The research findings show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success has influenced the way the younger generation views higher education. The shift in educational orientation from intellectual capacity development to short-term economic orientation suggests a change in the way society assesses the benefits of education. The phenomenon can be analyzed through the perspective of *Human Capital Theory* which places education as a form of strategic investment to improve productivity, competence, and quality of human resources (Marginson, 2018).

In perspective *Human Capital Theory*, education not only generates economic benefits in the form of increased income, but also provides broader social benefits, such as improving critical thinking skills, strengthening the capacity to adapt to change, increasing social participation, and developing the skills needed to face the dynamics of the modern job market. Therefore, the value of education cannot be measured solely on the basis of economic gains obtained in the short term (Deming, 2024b). Education is a long-term investment that generates various forms of human capital (*Human Capital*) that contribute to the welfare of individuals and the development of society as a whole (OECD, 2024).

The results of this study show that some of the younger generation are starting to assess higher education based on the logic of economic efficiency. Education is seen as an investment that must provide *return on investment* quickly and measurably. If the cost of education is considered too high or college graduates face difficulties in getting a suitable job, then the value of education tends to be questioned (Marginson, 2019). This perspective shows a tendency to reduce the meaning of education to just an economic instrument. In fact, various studies show that the benefits of higher education cannot always be measured through income in the short term because some of the benefits are cumulative and only visible in the long term, both at the individual and community levels (Bank, 2020).

From the point of view *Human Capital Theory*, the narrative of instant success that develops through social media often ignores the aspect of human capacity building that is the main goal of education. The success displayed in various digital platforms generally focuses on economic achievement, popularity, and lifestyle, while lengthy processes involving competency development, character building, and intellectual enhancement rarely receive the same attention. As a result, there is a perception that higher education is no longer an important need in achieving success in life. In fact, sustainable economic success in the knowledge-based economy era still requires critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, digital literacy, and lifelong learning capacity, which are mostly developed through formal education.

The findings of this study also show a paradox in the digital society. On the one hand, technological developments open up new opportunities that allow individuals to gain success without long formal education pathways. However, on the other hand, the complexity of the modern world of work actually demands an increasingly high level of competence. Digital transformation, automation, and the development of artificial intelligence require human resources who not only have technical skills, but also strong analytical abilities, creativity, and adaptability. In this context, higher education still has a strategic role as a means of developing human capital that is relevant to future needs.

Based on perspective *Human Capital Theory*, the phenomenon of strengthening the narrative of non-academic success should not be understood as evidence of the declining relevance of higher education, but rather as a challenge for educational institutions to reconstruct the way education is understood and delivered to society (Auerbach, 2025). Higher education needs to show that the value of education lies not only in the opportunity

to obtain a job, but also in its ability to form individuals who are adaptive, innovative, and able to contribute to social development in a sustainable manner. Therefore, the reconstruction of the meaning of higher education needs to be directed at strengthening the balance between economic values, social values, and human values so that education remains relevant in facing the changes in contemporary digital society (Becker, 1993).

In addition, further research needs to empirically examine how the intensity of exposure to non-academic success narratives on social media affects the educational aspirations of the younger generation in various social groups and regions in Indonesia. This kind of study is important to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital transformation, changes in educational culture, and human resource development in the era of knowledge-based economy.

Pierre Bourdieu's Perspective: Social Reproduction and Cultural Capital

The findings of the study show that the change in the perception of the younger generation towards higher education cannot be explained solely through the economic approach as stated in the *Human Capital Theory*. The shift in the meaning of higher education is also related to changes in the social, cultural, and value structure that develops in a digital society. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's thought provides a broader perspective for understanding how education functions as an arena for the formation and reproduction of cultural capital (*Cultural Capital*) which determines the position of the individual in social life.

According to Bourdieu, education serves not only as a means of knowledge transfer, but also as a social reproduction mechanism that allows individuals to acquire the cultural capital needed to participate effectively in the life of society (Bourdieu, 1986). The cultural capital includes critical thinking skills, communication competence, academic literacy, reflective thinking, and various intellectual dispositions that cannot always be measured through economic indicators. In this perspective, higher education has an important role in shaping habitus, which is a set of values, ways of thinking, and patterns of action that influence individual behavior in various social spaces.

The results of the study show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success on social media has encouraged a change in orientation in viewing the value of education. Success is increasingly represented through material indicators such as wealth, popularity, and social influence, while the dimension of cultural capital tends to receive less attention. As a result, some young generations have begun to view higher education only as a means of obtaining jobs and income, not as a process of building intellectual capacity and social identity. This phenomenon shows a tendency to reduce the meaning of education from an instrument of cultural capital development to a mere economic instrument.

In Bourdieu's frame of thought, this condition can be understood as a change in the mechanism of social legitimacy. In the past, higher education was one of the main sources of legitimacy of social status because it was considered to be able to produce knowledge, competence, and academic prestige. However, the development of digital media has brought a new form of legitimacy that allows individuals to gain social recognition through digital popularity and visibility. Number of followers, audience engagement rate (*Commitment*), and the ability to generate income through digital platforms is often a status symbol that is considered more tangible than academic achievement. Thus, social media acts as a new social arena that produces a form of symbolic capital (*Symbolic capital*) that differ from the formal education system (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

The findings of the study also show that although higher education is no longer the only path of social mobility, the existence of cultural capital still has strategic value in dealing with the complexity of modern society. Individuals who have high literacy skills, analytical

skills, and critical thinking capacity tend to be better able to adapt to rapid social and technological changes (Reay, 2017). In this context, higher education serves as a space for the accumulation of cultural capital that not only contributes to economic success, but also to the quality of social participation and decision-making in community life.

Furthermore, Bourdieu's perspective helps explain that the success displayed on social media often only shows the end result without fully displaying the various forms of capital that support the success. Many figures who are considered successful without higher education actually still have access to certain economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital that allows them to achieve this position. Therefore, the narrative of non-academic success that develops in the digital space has the potential to result in a less comprehensive perception of the process of forming success in real life (Thomson, 2018).

Based on the perspective of social reproduction and cultural capital, the results of this study show that higher education still has strong relevance in contemporary society. Education not only generates economic benefits, but also plays a role in shaping intellectual capacity, social identity, and reflective abilities that are important foundations for the development of knowledge-based societies. Therefore, the reconstruction of the meaning of higher education needs to be directed at strengthening the function of education as a space for cultural capital development that is able to strengthen individual quality while supporting sustainable social progress.

These findings also open up further research opportunities to examine the relationship between digital culture, cultural capital, and the educational aspirations of Indonesia's young generation. Empirical research involving various social groups and economic backgrounds will provide a deeper understanding of how digital transformation affects the process of social reproduction and the formation of educational value in contemporary society.

Social Mobility Perspectives: Pitirim Sorokin and James Coleman

The findings of the study show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success has raised fundamental questions about the relevance of higher education as a means of social mobility in the digital era. In a variety of social media content, success is often represented through the stories of individuals who gained wealth, popularity, and social influence without pursuing formal higher education. This narrative indirectly forms the perception that social mobility can be achieved through various alternative paths that are faster than education. To understand this phenomenon more comprehensively, it is necessary to analyze through the perspective of social mobility put forward by Pitirim Sorokin and James Coleman.

According to (Sorokin, 1959), social mobility is the movement of individuals or groups from one social position to another in the structure of society. This mobility can take place vertically through an increase in social status or horizontally through a shift in roles without significant changes in status. In this framework, education is seen as one of the social institutions that has an important function in opening up opportunities for social mobility for individuals from various economic and social backgrounds. Through education, a person acquires knowledge, skills, and social legitimacy that allow for an improvement in position in the structure of society.

The results of the study show that in the past, higher education was widely perceived as the main path to achieve social mobility. An academic degree not only provides better job opportunities, but also becomes a symbol of prestige and social recognition. However, the development of digital technology and the creative economy has created new channels of social mobility that allow individuals to gain an increase in social status without having to go

through a long formal education path. This phenomenon can be seen from the emergence of content creators, influencers, digital entrepreneurs, and various new professions that are able to generate high income and gain social recognition through digital platforms.

Nevertheless, Sorokin's perspective shows that success achieved through non-academic pathways does not necessarily negate the function of education as an instrument of social mobility. These alternative routes tend to be selective and not always accessible to all levels of society. In contrast, education remains a relatively more systematic and inclusive mechanism in providing opportunities for individuals to improve their quality of life. In other words, the emergence of new social mobility pathways did not remove the role of education, but expanded the options available in modern society.

This analysis is reinforced by James Coleman's thinking which emphasizes the importance of social capital (*Social Capital*) in the process of achieving individual success. (Coleman, 1988) explains that a person's success is determined not only by individual abilities or economic resources, but also by the quality of social relationships, networks, beliefs, and norms that develop in his or her social environment. In the context of education, schools and colleges not only serve as places to acquire knowledge, but also as spaces for the formation of social capital that can support social mobility in the future.

The results show that the narrative of non-academic success that develops on social media often highlights individual success without fully displaying the various forms of social capital that support these achievements. Many figures who are considered successful without higher education actually have access to social networks, family support, economic capital, or an environment conducive to their career development. Therefore, these successes cannot be generalized as a model that can be applied by the entire young generation. Coleman's perspective helps explain that education continues to have a strategic role in building social networks, expanding access to information, and increasing collaboration opportunities that are an important part of the social mobility process.

Furthermore, the findings of the study indicate that the main challenge facing higher education today is not the loss of the function of education as a means of social mobility, but the emergence of a new perception that views social mobility solely from a short-term economic perspective. In fact, sustainable social mobility is not only determined by the ability to earn income, but also by the capacity of individuals to maintain, develop, and utilize the resources they have productively. In this context, higher education remains an important role in shaping the competencies, character, and adaptability needed to face increasingly complex social and economic changes (Marginson, 2018).

Based on Sorokin and Coleman's perspective, the results of this study show that education is still an effective path of social mobility, although it is no longer the only path available. The development of digital technology has created a variety of alternatives to social mobility, but education still has the advantage of providing a combination of human capital (*Human Capital*), cultural capital (*Cultural Capital*), and social capital (*Social Capital*) which is difficult to replace by informal channels. Therefore, the reconstruction of the meaning of higher education needs to be directed at strengthening the function of education as an instrument of social mobility that is not only oriented towards increasing income, but also on the development of human quality as a whole.

Further research needs to empirically examine the relationship between social media use, educational aspirations, and the perception of social mobility in the young generation of Indonesia. The study is important to understand the extent to which non-academic success narratives influence the educational decisions and career choices of young generations in the context of an ever-evolving digital society.

Islamic Education Perspective

The research findings show that the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success has influenced the way some young people interpret higher education. Education is increasingly seen as an economic instrument that is judged based on the ability to generate jobs, income, and social status. From the perspective of Islamic Education, this perspective shows a reduction in the meaning of education which has the potential to shift the true purpose of education as a process of forming human beings who are knowledgeable, moral, and responsible for social life (Hashim & Langgulung, 2019). Education in Islam is not only oriented towards material success, but is also geared towards establishing a balance between intellectual intelligence, spiritual maturity, and moral glory (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 2020a; Nata, 2022).

The fundamental concepts that are the foundation of Islamic Education are *talab al-'ilm* or seek knowledge. The Islamic scientific tradition places the search for knowledge as an activity that has a very high status and is an obligation for every Muslim. The position of knowledge in Islam is not only related to improving the quality of worldly life, but also as a means of getting closer to Allah SWT. And building a civilization based on knowledge (Wan Daud, 2018).

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

"Allah will exalt the believers among you and those who have been given knowledge of some degree." (Q.S. Al-Mujādilah [58]: 11).

This verse shows that knowledge is one of the factors that determine the glory of man before Allah SWT. and in social life. Glory is not only measured by wealth, power, or popularity, but also by the quality of knowledge possessed and its usefulness to people's lives (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 2020b).

The affirmation of the importance of knowledge is also found in the words of Allah Swt.:

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

"Say, are those who know the same as those who do not?" (Q.S. Az-Zumar [39]: 9).

This view is reinforced by the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim." (H.R. Ibn Majah No. 224).

The hadith shows that the activity of studying has a very important position in Islam and cannot be separated from the life of a Muslim (Majah, 2009).

In the study of Islamic Education, the meaning of education cannot be separated from the concept of *Tazkiyah*, *Ta'lim*, and *Tarbiyah*. Concept *Tazkiyah* refers to the process of purification of the soul and character formation that is oriented towards improving the spiritual and moral qualities of humans. Education not only aims to develop intellectual intelligence, but also to form individuals who have integrity, honesty, responsibility, and ethical awareness (Nata, 2022). Meanwhile, *Ta'lim* It is related to the process of transfer and development of knowledge that allows humans to understand reality critically and responsibly (Al-Zarnuji, 2019). The *Tarbiyah* emphasizing the process of fostering all human potential gradually so that education is understood as a process of human development as a whole, both from intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects (S. Al-Attas, 2020).

Based on the perspective of Islamic Education, the narrative of non-academic success that develops on social media needs to be addressed critically. Islam does not reject wealth, entrepreneurship, or professional success. However, Islam also does not make wealth the only indicator of success in life. Success that is measured only by material achievement has the potential to give birth to a narrow understanding of the purpose of human life and the purpose of education itself (Wan Daud, 2018). In the history of Islamic civilization, a person's glory is more associated with the breadth of knowledge, piety, morals, and his contribution to the progress of society than simply material possessions (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 2020b).

Thus, the results of this study show that higher education still has a strategic position in an Islamic perspective. Education not only functions as an instrument of social mobility and improvement of economic welfare, but also as a means *Tazkiyah*, *Ta'lim*, and *Tarbiyah* who form knowledgeable, moral, and capable human beings who are able to contribute to the progress of society. Therefore, the reconstruction of the meaning of higher education needs to be directed to a more comprehensive understanding, namely education as a process of formation *And then there is the Scarlet Witch* that is able to balance material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual success in contemporary life (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 2020b; Nata, 2021).

Reconstruction of the Meaning of Higher Education

The strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success has led to a fundamental change in the way the younger generation views higher education. Education, which was previously understood as a process of human development as a whole, now tends to be reduced to an economic instrument that is measured based on the ability to generate jobs and income in a short period of time. This condition shows the need to reconstruct the meaning of higher education so that it remains relevant to the dynamics of the digital society without losing its fundamental function as an institution for the formation of human beings and civilization. This reconstruction is important because higher education cannot be positioned only as a means of obtaining material gains, but must be understood as a multidimensional investment that contributes to the development of individuals and the progress of society in a sustainable manner.

In the perspective offered by this research, higher education needs to be reconstructed as a means of intellectual capacity development. In the midst of the rapid flow of information and the development of digital technology, the ability to think critically, analytically, creatively, and reflectively is becoming an increasingly needed competence. Higher education has a strategic role in shaping these abilities through a systematic and science-based learning process. Intellectual capacity not only helps individuals in facing the challenges of the world of work, but also allows them to understand various social problems more comprehensively and rationally. Therefore, higher education must be seen as a space for the development of reason and intellectual abilities that are the main foundation for the development of knowledge-based society (*Knowledge-based society*) (OECD, 2024).

Apart from being a means of intellectual development, higher education also needs to be interpreted as a process of character formation. The findings of the study show that success orientation that focuses too much on material aspects has the potential to shift attention to moral and ethical values. In this context, higher education has the responsibility to form individuals who are not only academically competent, but also have integrity, social responsibility, honesty, and concern for the surrounding environment. This perspective is in line with the concept *Tarbiyah* in Islamic Education which places education as a process of human development as a whole, including intellectual, moral, social, and spiritual aspects

(Nata, 2022). Thus, the success of education is not only measured by professional achievements, but also by the quality of character formed during the educational process.

The reconstruction of the meaning of higher education also needs to place education as an instrument of sustainable social mobility. Although the development of digital technology has created a variety of alternative pathways to success, the results show that education still has an important role to play in expanding access to social and economic opportunities. Higher education enables individuals to acquire human capital (*Human Capital*), cultural capital (*Cultural Capital*), and social capital (*Social Capital*) which is an important factor in improving the quality of life. In contrast to success achieved through instant and often temporary pathways, social mobility built through education tends to have stronger resilience because it is supported by ever-evolving competencies and capacities (Marginson, 2018).

In the era of digital transformation, higher education also needs to be reconstructed as a means of strengthening digital literacy. The results of the study show that social media is one of the main factors that affect the change in the perception of the younger generation towards education. This condition shows that the ability to use technology critically and responsibly is an increasingly urgent need. Digital literacy includes not only the ability to access information, but also the ability to evaluate the truth of information, understand the social impact of technology, and utilize digital media productively. Higher education has an important role in equipping the younger generation with these competencies so that they are able to become intelligent users of technology and are not easily influenced by misleading narratives.

Furthermore, higher education needs to be positioned as a space for future leadership formation. Indonesia's demographic bonus requires a generation that not only has technical skills, but also vision, decision-making skills, and strong social responsibility. Higher education is one of the institutions that has the capacity to form prospective leaders who are able to face the complexity of global challenges. In this context, education not only serves to prepare individuals to enter the job market, but also to prepare them to become agents of change who are able to contribute to the development of the nation and humanity at large.

Based on the results of the analysis, this study offers a reconstruction model of the meaning of higher education as presented in Table 4.

Table 5. Reconstruction Model of the Meaning of Higher Education

Reconstruction Dimensions	Main Orientation
Intellectual capacity development	Think critically, creatively, and analytically
Character formation	Integrity, responsibility, and ethics
Sustainable social mobility	Long-term improvement in quality of life
Strengthening digital literacy	Critical and productive use of technology
Shaping future leadership	Transformative and benefit-oriented leadership

The model shows that higher education needs to be understood as an institution that not only produces job-ready graduates, but also forms human beings who have intellectual capacity, strong character, adaptability to technological changes, and readiness to become future leaders. Thus, the reconstruction of the meaning of higher education offered in this study is expected to be able to be a conceptual alternative in answering the challenges that arise due to the strengthening of the narrative of non-academic success in the young generation of Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the strengthening of non-academic success narratives in the digital era has influenced how Indonesian youth perceive higher education. The widespread exposure to social media content highlighting successful individuals without formal higher education backgrounds has contributed to a shift in educational orientation from intellectual and character development toward short-term economic considerations. Higher education is increasingly evaluated through a cost-benefit perspective and compared with alternative pathways to success that are perceived as faster and more practical.

The findings further indicate that this shift is shaped by the interaction of economic factors, digital technological developments, and changing social values. High educational costs, concerns about graduate unemployment, the growth of the creator economy, and the rise of instant culture through social media reinforce the appeal of non-academic success narratives. While these narratives may encourage creativity and entrepreneurship, they also risk reducing appreciation for academic processes and the broader developmental functions of higher education. Therefore, this study reconstructs higher education as a multidimensional instrument for human development that fosters competencies, critical thinking, character formation, social responsibility, and sustainable social mobility.

The main novelty of this study lies in proposing non-academic success narratives as a significant factor shaping changing perceptions of higher education among Indonesian youth. By integrating perspectives from educational sociology and digital culture, this study offers a new framework for understanding educational transformation in contemporary society. Nevertheless, as a narrative literature review, the findings remain conceptual and interpretive. Future studies are encouraged to examine this phenomenon empirically through surveys, interviews, or mixed-method approaches involving diverse youth populations to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between social media exposure, educational aspirations, and perceptions of success.

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