

## **Social constructions of gender in social media: Representations and their impact on students' perceptions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to examine how gender is socially constructed via social media, with a special emphasis on how gender representation affects students' perceptions. This study analyses a variety of scientific journals pertaining to gender and social media utilizing a qualitative approach and the literature review method. The results show that gender identity is significantly shaped and reconstructed by social media through a variety of explicit and implicit forms of expression. In addition to reinforcing gender stereotypes, these portrayals allow discussion on gender equality to prosper. Additionally, social media gives students a way to express themselves and explore and regulate their gender identities. Students' ideas of gender roles have changed as a result of this construction, becoming more fluid and open. As a result, social media plays a significant part in influencing how students perceive gender in modern society.

**Keywords:** *gender, representation, social construction, social media, students*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The way people understand and construct their gender identities is one of the many aspects of social life that has been transformed by advances in information and communication technology. As a result of digital technological progress, social media has evolved into a space that can be used not only for communication but also for the production and reproduction of social meaning. In this context, social media plays a significant role in shaping the social construction of gender among its users by continuously presenting various representations.

The social, cultural, and symbolic interactions that occur daily shape gender as a social construction. Social media is one of the most influential platforms in this process as it enables the rapid and widespread exchange of information, values, and norms. On social media, the gender representations that emerge often reflect and shape society's perspectives on the roles played by men and women. These representations can take the form of visual content, text, or narratives that implicitly or explicitly convey messages regarding gender identity and roles.

In recent years, social media has grown rapidly, particularly among the younger generation. Instagram and TikTok are not merely entertainment platforms but also serve to build social identity and shape public opinion. Widely circulated and repetitive content can influence users' perceptions of various issues, such as gender. In such situations, social media does not merely reflect social reality but actively shapes it Nasrullah (2017).

Furthermore, social media algorithms that rely on user preferences influence the types of content that are repeatedly consumed. This can lead to echo chambers, which reinforce certain viewpoints, including gender stereotypes. Users may be exposed to homogeneous and undiverse representations of gender, which affects how they perceive gender roles and identities in everyday life Agma (2025a).

On the other hand, social media platforms offer individuals greater opportunities to participate and voice their experiences and views on gender issues. We have seen the emergence of various digital movements highlighting gender equality issues, such as raising awareness of diverse identities and anti-discrimination campaigns. This active participation demonstrates that social media is not merely top-down in nature but also facilitates more democratic two-way communication Raza et al. (2025).

In practice, social media not only perpetuates existing gender stereotypes but also facilitates discourse on more progressive issues such as gender equality and diversity of identity. Gender has been critically examined by various digital accounts and communities, offering users—particularly the younger generation—alternative perspectives. This demonstrates that social media has two sides: as a tool for perpetuating old norms and as a space for social transformation. As part of the younger generation, students are highly active on social media. Consequently, they are vulnerable to various influences from digital content, including the shaping of their perceptions of gender. On the other hand, students' reflective abilities enable them to understand, debate, and even reject misrepresentations of gender.

Studies indicate that social media can function as a space for self-expression, allowing individuals to explore their gender identities more freely. Furthermore, social media contributes to raising awareness of gender equality issues, which may ultimately influence how individuals perceive their gender roles in social life. However, it cannot be denied that certain content continues to perpetuate or reinforce gender stereotypes, raising doubts about the process of social gender construction on social media.

Based on this, it is important to examine in greater depth how the social construction of gender is shaped through social media, particularly in terms of the gender representations displayed and how this impacts students' perceptions. The aim of this study is to analyse gender representation on social media and identify how this impacts the formation of students' gender perceptions and identities. Consequently, this study is expected to aid in understanding the role of social media in the dynamics of the social construction of gender in the computer and internet age.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

This concept emphasises that gender roles and identities do not stem solely from biological factors, but are the result of an ongoing social process shaped by social interactions and cultural processes within society. According to the concept of social construction put forward by Berger dan Luckmann, Social reality, including gender, is shaped through a process of internalisation. In this context, social media can be understood as a space where this process takes place intensively, as individuals not only receive social reality but also actively produce and replicate meaning through digital interactions. The processes of internalisation, objectification and externalisation are how social reality is understood from the perspective of social construction Berger & Luckmann (2016). With the development of digital technology, particularly social media, the scope of the social construction process has broadened. Social media has now become a platform that not only reflects social reality, but also reshapes individuals' understanding of gender through the multitude of representations consistently presented.

### *Gender Representation in Social Media*

The way in which male and female identities are portrayed in social media content is known as gender representation. The dominant values in society, including the deeply entrenched ideology of patriarchy, often influence these representations. However, social media also provides an opportunity to deconstruct stereotypes. This study shows that social media, particularly Instagram, can foster narratives of gender equality and reduce traditional gender stereotypes Wahyuni (2024). Furthermore, gender representation has both explicit and implicit meanings, according to a semiotic analysis of social media content Al-Hamidy (2024)

#### *Social Media as a Space for Expressing Gender Identity*

Social media allows individuals to express their identities flexibly, including their gender identity. For students, social media serves as a platform that enables them to explore their identities in ways they might not be able to do freely within conventional social settings. Social media can provide a safe space for expressing gender identity, particularly when supported by an inclusive social environment and sufficient digital literacy Ismailiyanto et al. (2025).

Goffman describes how people in social life act as performers, presenting themselves to an audience. This concept is increasingly relevant in social media, as individuals have greater control over the impression they wish to project. Social media has become a 'front stage' space in identity formation, as students can choose how they portray their gender identity through the content they post Bengtsson et al. (2024).

#### *Social Media in the Digital Society*

Modern society has entered the era of the network society, in which information technology plays a vital role in the formation of social relationships. In this context, social media has become an integral part of the social fabric and influences the way individuals construct their identities and social relationships, including gender construction Castells (2023).

#### *The Impact of Social Media on College Students' Gender Perceptions*

A person's gender perceptions are heavily influenced by social media. Discussing various representations of gender can help us better understand gender roles in society. Furthermore, social media serves not only as a means of communication but also as a mediator in the relationship between psychosocial factors—such as social support and self-esteem—and the formation of an individual's gender identity Bakhyt, Mambetalina, Almat Sabitovich, et al. (2025). This suggests that social media not only serves as a means of communication but also acts as an active social agent in the process of identity formation. However, the influence of social media is ambivalent: whilst it can promote gender equality, it can also reinforce certain stereotypes and standards, which may influence individuals' perceptions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative approach and focuses on a conceptual analysis of the social construction of gender in social media, drawing on a range of relevant literature (library research). The secondary data used is derived from research articles, scientific journals, and other academic publications. The criteria for selecting these data sources include the relevance to the research topic, the credibility of the source, and the publication date within the last five to ten years. This study does not involve participants or informants; instead, it focuses on the analysis of previous research findings. To collect data,

relevant literature was identified, classified, and studied. Subsequently, the data was analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis techniques with a thematic approach, namely by grouping findings based on main themes such as gender representation, gender identity, and the influence of social media on students.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### *Gender Representation in Social Media*

The findings of this study indicate that social media, particularly among university students, significantly influences users' perceptions of gender. Many websites, such as Instagram and TikTok, convey male and female identities through visuals, narratives, and symbols. This representation is not neutral; rather, it embodies principles and beliefs that can influence how people perceive gender. Most social media content adheres to conventional gender stereotypes, such as portraying women through physical appearance, emotional traits, and domestic roles, whilst men are depicted as embodying strength, rationality, and public roles. This type of representation indirectly reinforces long-standing social norms within society. However, certain content seeks to challenge these stereotypes by presenting stories that depict equality and diversity in gender identity Berger & Luckmann (2016). Furthermore, social media content analysis reveals that gender carries both hidden (connotative) and overt (denotative) meanings. These two meanings shape societal myths. For example, there are hidden symbols or messages that reflect patriarchal structures within a work that addresses the theme of gender equality Al-Hamidy (2024). This demonstrates that social media is a complex space for creating and replicating gender meanings. In addition to visual representations, gender meanings are also shaped by narratives constructed through captions, comments and user interactions; these interactions create a discursive space in which individuals collectively discuss gender meanings. For example, user comments can reinforce or, conversely, challenge the representations within the content. This demonstrates that the audience participates in the process of meaning-making and is not passive.

### *Social Media as an Arena for the Social Construction of Gender*

Social media functions not only as a medium of representation, but also as an active arena of social construction that shapes individuals' gender identities. Through constant interaction, social media users unconsciously internalise the norms and values found in online content. Students are more susceptible to the influence of social construction occurring on social media because they use it frequently. Students are not merely consumers of content but also producers of content, and their posts shape gender representations. This process demonstrates that social reality is shaped by the reciprocal relationship between social media and the individual. Social media can serve as a relatively safe space for students to express their gender identities, particularly within a supportive and inclusive environment Wahyuni (2024). Social validation mechanisms such as the number of 'likes', comments and shares also influence the process of social gender construction on social media. When content receives a high level of engagement, it is regarded as a socially 'accepted' representation, which encourages other users to follow the same pattern. In such situations, popularity serves as a means of social legitimisation that can support specific gender constructions in the digital space. This allows students to explore various identities without the intense social pressure they experience in the real world. Consequently, social media functions as a dynamic space for negotiation.

### *Students' Digital Literacy in Responding to Gender Representation*

Digital literacy is a key factor in determining how students understand and respond to gender representation on social media. Digital literacy encompasses the technical skills required to use media, as well as the cognitive and critical skills needed to understand the information received. Consequently, students with strong digital literacy tend to be more selective in their consumption of content and better able to identify biases within the content they encounter. Students with good digital literacy will not merely be passive consumers; they will also become active agents in creating and disseminating more inclusive content. They recognise that factors such as economics, popularity, and dominant social norms often influence gender representation on social media. Consequently, they can maintain a significant distance from the content they consume.

Students with low digital literacy tend to accept information instantly without engaging in deep reflection. This has the potential to foster unconscious gender stereotypes within us. Narrow perceptions of gender identity can arise from viewing content that portrays certain standards, such as the ideal of beauty or dominant masculinity. Digital literacy is also linked to our ability to understand the dynamics of interaction on social media, including how public opinion is formed and disseminated. The most popular views on social media are often the result of a process of social construction, influenced by algorithms and the power of virality. Therefore, improving students' digital literacy is crucial in addressing the complexities of gender representation on social media. With good digital literacy, students can act as individuals who are not merely influenced by social media, but who also critique and reshape the evolving meanings of gender within it.

#### *Social Media as a Space for Negotiating Gender Identity*

Social media can be regarded as a space for negotiating identity where an individual has the opportunity to build, shape, display and revise their gender identity dynamically. This differs from conventional social spaces, which tend to have stricter standards and offer individuals greater freedom to express themselves. Social media allows students to explore their gender identities more openly. They can present identities that differ from those they consciously or unconsciously hold in the real world. This demonstrates that gender identity on social media is contextual and performative, depending on the audience and the circumstances faced. Identity negotiation occurs when users interact regularly with others, whether through messages, comments, or other forms of communication. How an individual interprets and adapts their gender identity is also influenced by the responses received from the digital environment, such as support or rejection. In this context, identity is not static but, on the contrary, evolves alongside social interaction experiences. Nevertheless, this space for negotiation remains influenced by social factors. How individuals present their identity is still shaped by standards emerging on social media, such as those of popularity and social acceptance. For instance, an individual might be inclined to alter their gender expression to align with expectations or trends currently developing among the audience.

Conversely, more diverse and unconventional identities can also emerge through social media. Individuals can find communities that share similar perspectives and experiences, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. This suggests that social media is not only a space for creating new norms, but also a space for challenging existing ones. Furthermore, the presence of a diverse audience influences the way gender identities are negotiated on social media. Not only do individuals freely express their identities, but they also consider how their identities will be received by others. In this context, social media becomes a space where individuals consistently adapt to the evolving social norms and expectations within

their environment. As active social media users, students often struggle to balance the desire to express themselves authentically with the need to gain social acceptance. They manage the content they upload, including choosing which elements of their identity to display or conceal. This process demonstrates that the gender identities portrayed on social media are often the result of a process of social selection and consideration of what constitutes a truly 'authentic' gender identity. Conversely, features such as the ability to build interest-based communities and relative anonymity allow students to explore gender identities more broadly. Certain digital spaces can serve as safe havens where people can reveal aspects of their identity that might be difficult to accept in offline social settings. Consequently, social media is not merely a space for negotiation but also a space for the emergence of more diverse and dynamic gender identities. Therefore, social media can be regarded as a space where gender identity is continuously negotiated through complex social interactions. This process reflects the dynamics of the social construction of gender, which is influenced not only by social structures but also by individuals in responding to and shaping social reality in the digital age.

### *The Impact of Social Media on Students' Perceptions and Gender Identities*

Students' gender perceptions, influenced by social media, are highly diverse and complex. On the one hand, social media has the potential to enhance gender awareness. By providing content that exemplifies principles of equality, students can become more open-minded and critical regarding their gender roles within society. Furthermore, social media shapes individual gender identity through social interactions involving both social and psychological factors. Aspects such as self-esteem, social validation, and support from digital communities significantly influence the formation of individual gender identity Bakhyt et al. (2025). This suggests that social media not only influences people's perceptions of gender but also their self-perception. Not all the resulting effects are positive. Social media can also create social pressure that affects students' self-confidence and reinforces unrealistic standards, particularly regarding expectations of appearance and gender. Furthermore, constant exposure to stereotypes can reinforce existing social biases. Exposure to diverse gender representations can help students become more critical of social norms that have long been regarded as 'natural'. Students with good digital literacy are more likely to reflect on the values displayed on social media. This highlights the significant influence social media has on an individual's ability to understand information.

However, social media can become a source of unconscious stereotype internalisation for students unaccustomed to using the internet. Constant exposure to standards, such as beauty or masculinity standards, can impact the formation of one's self-identity and self-confidence.

The impact is evident not only from a theoretical perspective but also in the way students consume and respond to content on social media on a daily basis. It is crucial to examine real-life examples from students' daily lives to understand how social media practices shape gender social constructions. One of the most dominant forms of representation relates to standards of female beauty, which are frequently conveyed through visual content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This content often features images of women with specific attributes, such as an ideal body, fair skin, and a lifestyle deemed 'attractive' by society. Students' perceptions of beauty standards considered normal or ideal can be influenced by constant exposure to such representations. Often, female students tend to compare themselves with the figures portrayed on social media. Ultimately, this can impact their self-confidence and how they construct their self-identity. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media functions not only as a medium of representation but also as a tool for creating social expectations regarding gender. Conversely,

representations of masculinity are constructed in the same way. Men are often portrayed as strong, independent, and in control of their emotions. Examples of a 'masculine' lifestyle—such as physical fitness, financial success, and social dominance—raise expectations regarding roles considered masculine. This can influence how male students express themselves, such as their tendency to suppress their emotions or alter their behaviour to meet standards deemed ideal. However, some students do not accept these representations passively. Some are beginning to adopt a critical stance towards the standards constructed on social media. This is evidenced by the emergence of alternative content that challenges conventional beauty standards and promotes concepts of body positivity and diversity of identity. Such content surfaces as a form of resistance against the dominance of homogeneous representations and allows for more flexible interpretations of gender.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of viral content (trending content) also contributes to the speed at which gender constructions spread. Repetitive patterns of representation form because many users tend to imitate viral content. In this situation, students act not only as consumers but also as producers; they actively contribute to either upholding or challenging existing gender constructions. How users interact with one another is also crucial in this regard. Shares, likes, and comments serve not only as a means of providing feedback but also as a gauge of how well a representation is received by society (socially). Content with a high volume of positive responses tends to be considered socially 'valid' and encourages the replication of the same meanings. Conversely, content with negative responses can restrict the expression of certain identities in the digital space. Furthermore, it is important to understand that everyone's experience of using social media is different. How students perceive the gender representations they encounter is also influenced by variables such as their social and cultural environment. Therefore, the influence of social media on the social construction of gender must be viewed as a complex and contextual process and cannot be generalised. Concrete examples of social media usage practices demonstrate that the social construction of gender does not occur solely in the abstract but is also present in students' everyday lives. Social media serves as a space where various representations, interactions and interpretations converge, shaping individuals' understanding of gender in a dynamic and ongoing manner.

#### *The Role of Social Media Algorithms in Reinforcing Gender Constructs*

Social media algorithms influence the social construction of gender in addition to user-generated content. Algorithms rank and recommend content based on user preferences, interactions and activity history. The type of information consumed by each individual is indirectly influenced by these mechanisms, such as the gender representations that are constantly displayed on users' timelines. In practice, algorithms tend to reinforce existing consumption patterns. The system will recommend similar content if a user frequently interacts with certain content, such as content that promotes standards of female beauty or male masculinity. This creates a cycle of repetition that can reinforce existing gender stereotypes (Agma (2025)). A situation in which individuals are more frequently exposed to information that aligns with their own views narrows the scope for differing perspectives. This phenomenon is known as an 'echo chamber'. In the context of gender, an echo chamber can lead users to believe that certain gender constructions are 'normal' or 'natural' without questioning their social history or origins. As students are in a phase of identity exploration and formation, the impact of these algorithms on them becomes increasingly complex. Constant exposure to specific gender representations can influence their perceptions of others and of themselves. For example, certain representations of masculinity can influence how men express

themselves, whilst beauty standards frequently featured on social media can shape specific expectations regarding women's appearance. However, algorithms are not entirely deterministic. Through their choices of interaction, users remain actively involved in determining the type of content they consume. Students with good digital literacy are better able to control their exposure to information and avoid biases created by algorithms. To avoid becoming trapped in a single perspective, they can consciously seek out alternative content that is more diverse and engaging.

Furthermore, understanding how algorithms function is crucial for grasping how gendered social constructions are formed on social media. By recognising that the content that appears is not entirely neutral, users can become more discerning when processing information. This demonstrates that digital literacy is not merely a technical skill; it also requires a critical understanding of social interactions within digital spaces. Thus, social media algorithms can be regarded as a key component in the process of gender social construction, as they not only influence what users see but also shape how they think about and perceive gender. Consequently, algorithms play a significant role as non-human actors in the analysis of gender social construction on social media.

### *The Ambivalence of Social Media in Gender Construction*

The results of the analysis indicate that social media plays an ambivalent role in the social construction of gender. On the one hand, it serves as a tool for perpetuating existing gender norms and stereotypes; on the other hand, it functions as a space for transformation, enabling new discourses on gender equality and diversity to emerge. This ambivalence highlights just how complex the influence of social media is on the social construction of gender. How individuals consume, interpret, and produce gender-related content significantly influences the function of social media. Consequently, digital literacy plays a crucial role in determining the direction of the social construction taking place on social media.

Furthermore, the role of social media as an agent of social change, particularly regarding gender issues, has grown significantly in recent years. Social media not only serves as a forum for discussion where people can exchange ideas on gender justice and equality. This aligns with studies showing that digital platforms can encourage individuals to actively participate in voicing social issues, including gender Nasrullah (2017). In addition, through constant symbolic interaction, social media helps to shape an individual's digital identity. As individuals have the freedom to represent themselves in accordance with their own preferences and experiences in the digital world, gender identity becomes more flexible and malleable Agma (2025). This suggests that social media enables a redefinition of gender identity that is not always bound by conventional norms.

However, studies have shown that social media algorithms can exacerbate certain biases through selective content curation systems. This can lead to echo chambers, which reinforce existing gender stereotypes Raza et al. (2025). Therefore, the role of users in fostering digital literacy is crucial for identifying and understanding the information they receive. It is thus clear that social media exerts a complex influence on the social construction of gender, not only as a space for representation but also as an active mechanism for shaping the ways in which individuals understand and negotiate their gender identities in the digital age. In addition to individual factors, social and cultural contexts also influence how gender constructions are shaped by social media. Strong local values can compete with the global values brought by social media, resulting in different constructions of gender. Consequently, social media cannot be separated from its own social context; rather, it forms part of a larger social process.

### *The Dynamics of Gender Representation on Social Media in the Indonesian Social Context*

The social construction of gender on social media cannot be separated from an individual's socio-cultural context. In the case of Indonesia, cultural norms that remain tied to patriarchal practices influence how gender is presented and understood in the digital world Hidayat & Chandra Kumala (2021). Social media has become a space where conventional and contemporary values interact, negotiate and even clash. Gender still plays very different roles in Indonesian society. Men are often associated with the role of primary breadwinner, whilst women are often associated with domestic roles Sakina & Siti A (2017). This replication is evident in much social media content and in real life. For example, content that portrays women as people who must be attractive, gentle and mindful of their self-image, or content that portrays men as people who must be strong and not show their emotions. These values are also beginning to be questioned on social media. Many content creators are actively challenging conventional gender norms and raising issues of gender equality. This phenomenon reflects a shift in perspective, particularly among the younger generation, who are more open to diverse gender identities and roles.

This dynamic is becoming increasingly challenging for students as they must choose between the global influences brought by social media and upholding the cultural principles they have learnt since childhood. Students often face difficulties in expressing their gender identity, particularly when such expression conflicts with the prevailing social norms in their environment Srideswari Putri & Wilani (2023). In addition, social media brings international standards that do not always align with local contexts. For example, beauty standards influenced by Western or Korean culture can shape how students view themselves. This can create social pressure, particularly on girls, to meet these standards in order to gain recognition on social media Gill (2008). Conversely, more inclusive alternative representations can also emerge through social media. Many online communities that support gender equality and diversity are beginning to emerge, allowing people to express themselves without being bound by conventional norms Agma (2025).

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that social media plays a significant role in the process of gender social construction among college students. Social media not only serves as a tool for communication but also functions as a platform for showcasing various gender roles and identities through diverse digital content. Social media presents gender representations that demonstrate a wide range of variations; this indicates that, while it still perpetuates conventional gender stereotypes, it also facilitates discourse on gender equality and diverse gender identities. This suggests that social media is a dynamic and complex arena in shaping individuals' understanding of gender.

In addition, social media serves as a space for self-expression that allows students to explore and negotiate their gender identities. Various factors—such as social support, digital literacy, and psychosocial interactions occurring in the digital environment—influence this process, and the results are evident in how students' perceptions of their gender roles become more open and flexible. However, the effects of social media are not always positive. Social media can also exacerbate gender inequality due to stereotypes, unrealistic social standards, and potential algorithmic bias. Therefore, for individuals to critically filter and interpret information, they must possess strong digital literacy skills. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the social construction of gender, further studies should employ an empirical approach using field data. Additionally, it is crucial for educational institutions to enhance students' digital literacy. This will enable students to use social media more wisely to understand gender issues.

In situations like this, students play a crucial role as agents of social change. Students can contribute to shaping a more equitable and inclusive social construction of gender by having access to a wide range of information and the ability to participate in digital discussions. However, this role is highly dependent on each individual's level of critical awareness and digital literacy (Raza & Aulia, 2024). Therefore, the dynamics of gender social construction on social media in Indonesia reveal a complex interplay between local and global values. Social media serves as a space where these various values are brought together, discussed, and redefined

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