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Public Perception of Higher Education in Indonesia's Digital Era: Exploring the "College is a Scam" Narrative on Social Media

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Abstract. The narrative "college is a scam" circulating on social media reflects a shift in public perception of higher education in Indonesia's digital era. This study aims to analyse public perception of higher education through the "college is a scam" narrative, identify the factors shaping this perception, and explain its implications for higher education learning. This study used a descriptive mixed-methods survey design through an online questionnaire involving 360 respondents. All respondents were TikTok users and had been exposed to content containing the "college is a scam" narrative. Quantitative data were analysed using percentages, while open-ended responses were interpreted thematically. The findings show that 69.4% of respondents perceived a mismatch between higher education and labour market needs, 66.7% viewed tuition fees as a significant burden, and 55.6% identified digital entrepreneurship as the main alternative career path. However, higher education has not completely lost its legitimacy because many respondents still recognise its social, intellectual, and symbolic value. The novelty of this study lies in positioning a viral social media narrative as an empirical entry point for understanding changing public trust in higher education. The study concludes that higher education institutions need to strengthen curriculum relevance, practical learning, transparent cost-value communication, and digital public engagement to remain credible in the digital era.

Keywords: higher education; public perception; social media discourse; employability; Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation in the past two decades has changed the landscape of higher education in various countries, including Indonesia. Recent studies show that digitalization reshapes institutional culture, teaching practices, and stakeholder expectations in higher education (Diaz-Garcia et al., 2022; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). Digitalization not only supports online and hybrid learning models but also how society perceives the functions and value of higher education (Bond et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2025). In this context, higher education is increasingly positioned as part of the digital economy ecosystem that demands flexibility, innovation, and skills-based competencies (Tee et al., 2024).

Globally, the expansion of access to higher education has increased student participation rates. However, this expansion has not always removed concerns about graduate employability, education-job mismatch, and the economic value of academic degrees (Amarathunga et al., 2024; Pérez Zúñiga et al., 2025). In Indonesia, education-employment mismatch among young workers has become a serious policy issue because many young workers are employed in positions that do not match their education level (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). This condition intensifies the debate regarding curriculum relevance, graduate competencies, and the ability of higher education to respond to labour market needs (Khoiruddin et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the cost of higher education has become an important supporting factor in shaping public perception. Students and families increasingly evaluate higher education through a cost-value logic, especially when tuition fees rise while graduate outcomes remain uncertain (Law & Le, 2023; Sanz, 2025). In developing contexts, socio-economic disparities can influence access to higher education and how families judge the return on educational investment (Mainga et al., 2022). This condition contributes to public criticism regarding the legitimacy of higher education as a pathway for social mobility.

The digital era also presents alternative pathways for learning and careers outside the formal system. Online courses, micro-credentials, short certifications, and project-based learning allow individuals to develop skills in more flexible ways (Bideau & Kearns, 2022; Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Kato et al., 2023). This transformation is reinforced by social media platforms that circulate personal stories, career advice, and critical narratives about education (Ameh & Emmanuel, 2025; Simungala et al., 2024). Social media, such as TikTok, has become a space where public perception of higher education can be formed, challenged, and amplified (Shah et al., 2024).

In the context of Indonesia, the viral narrative “college is a scam” on social media reflects tension between social expectations of higher education and the perceived reality of the job market. This narrative is often linked to the experiences of graduates who face difficulty obtaining jobs that match their academic qualifications. Recent evidence on education-employment mismatch in Indonesia supports the need to examine how young people evaluate the relevance of higher education (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025; Khoiruddin et al., 2024). Literature on

employability also shows that graduate success depends not only on formal degrees, but also on practical skills, digital competencies, social capital, and work-related experience (Amarathunga et al., 2024; Tee et al., 2024).

Previous research has highlighted the importance of integrating technology into learning to enhance the flexibility and effectiveness of higher education (Bond et al., 2021; Chugh et al., 2023). Studies on digital transformation also show that technology adoption must be linked to institutional readiness, stakeholder perceptions, and learning quality (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2025). However, most research has focused more on pedagogical and technological aspects, rather than on how viral social media narratives shape public perception of the value and credibility of higher education.

Moreover, the discourse on the future of higher education is often framed through macro policy, institutional transformation, or technology adoption. Fewer studies examine how public perception is formed through everyday digital discourse, especially on platforms such as TikTok. This issue is important because public trust influences educational participation, institutional reputation, and acceptance of policy reform (Law & Le, 2023; Shah et al., 2024). Therefore, this study focuses on public perception of higher education as the primary variable, while employability, education costs, alternative career paths, and social media exposure are treated as supporting dimensions.

Thus, there is a research gap in three main aspects. First, limited research uses viral social media narratives as an empirical entry point for examining public perception of higher education. Second, limited research connects this perception with perceived labour market relevance and cost-value considerations in the Indonesian context. Third, limited research explains how higher education can respond pedagogically to public criticism without reducing the issue to a mere digital transformation. Based on this gap, the present study analyses the “college is a scam” narrative as a signal of changing public trust in higher education. Based on the aforementioned description, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. **RQ1.** What supporting factors shape public perception of higher education in this narrative?
2. **RQ2.** How does the public perceive the value and relevance of higher education in Indonesia through the “college is a scam” narrative?
3. **RQ3.** What implications does this perception have for higher education learning in Indonesia’s digital era?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education in the Era of Digital Transformation

Digital transformation has changed the way knowledge is produced, disseminated, and learned in higher education. Universities are no longer the sole authoritative centres for access to knowledge, as digital technology, online learning platforms, and social media have opened broader, faster, and more flexible spaces for learning. In this context, higher education is required to adapt to changes in student characteristics, labour market demands, and the logic of the digital economy, which increasingly emphasises practical skills, innovation, and

adaptability. Recent studies confirm that digital transformation affects not only learning delivery but also organisational culture, stakeholder expectations, and institutional strategy (Chugh et al., 2023; Diaz-Garcia et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2025). In line with this, Rohid et al. (2025) argue that social media has developed into a space for participation, identity formation, narrative dissemination, and mobilisation in digital society (Rohid et al., 2025).

These changes mark a shift in the role of higher education from being merely a degree-granting institution to becoming a learning ecosystem that must remain relevant to technological developments and digital society. Digital learning and platform-based learning environments can strengthen flexibility when they are supported by sound design, institutional readiness, and clear learning goals (Bond et al., 2021; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022; Surya et al., 2025). This perspective is in line with Rohid et al. (2026), who emphasise that Learning Management System management can support learning outcomes and character development in the digital era (Rohid et al., 2026).

2.2 The Relevance of Higher Education and the World of Work

One of the main issues in the literature on higher education is the relationship between formal education and the world of work. Historically, higher education has been viewed as a means of social and economic mobility. However, recent studies show that graduate employability depends on the alignment between academic learning, practical skills, professional identity, and labour market demand (Amarathunga et al., 2024; Otermans et al., 2024; Pérez Zúñiga et al., 2025). In Indonesia, the issue of education-job mismatch has become increasingly relevant because many educated workers experience a mismatch between their educational background and employment position (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025; Khoiruddin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, studies on employability emphasise that graduates' success is not only determined by degrees or academic competencies, but also by non-technical skills, digital skills, practical experience, social capital, and adaptability. Recent employer-based evidence also shows that digital skills are increasingly important for graduate employability (Tee et al., 2024). In this context, the narrative "college is a scam" can be interpreted as a form of social criticism regarding the mismatch between graduates' expectations and the reality of the job market, rather than a total rejection of higher education.

In the context of this research, the narrative "college is a scam" can be interpreted as a form of social criticism regarding the mismatch between graduates' expectations and the reality of the job market. When higher education is no longer perceived as a certain path to a decent job, the legitimacy of educational institutions begins to be questioned. This literature is important because it supports the findings of this study that negative perceptions of college are more rooted in issues of relevance and economic utility, rather than a total rejection of higher education.

2.3 Higher Education Costs and the Rationality of Educational Investment

In the perspective of educational investment, college is often understood as a long-term decision that involves financial and non-financial returns. However, this investment carries risks when the cost of education rises while economic outcomes remain uncertain. Recent policy reports show that the value of higher education is increasingly judged through completion, employability, and cost-value considerations (Kato et al., 2023). Trust in higher education also depends on whether institutions can show a reasonable link between learning processes, graduate outcomes, and the promises they communicate to society (Law & Le, 2023).

In developing contexts, the issue of education costs becomes increasingly complex because families often make education decisions under unequal socio-economic conditions. Perceptions of tuition fees are therefore not merely financial judgments. They also reflect expectations about social mobility, access to decent work, and the credibility of formal credentials (BPS, 2025; Mainga et al., 2022). Thus, the decision to attend college is no longer determined solely by academic aspirations, but also by a cost-benefit analysis in economic terms.

The narrative "college is a scam" in the digital space can be understood as an expression of the increasingly critical rationality of the younger generation in assessing the cost of education. When tuition fees are considered high, while job opportunities do not promise commensurate results, higher education can be perceived as an inefficient investment. This literature supports the assumption that the perception of higher education today is heavily influenced by pragmatic economic evaluations, especially in the context of labour market uncertainty and increasing competition.

2.4 Social Media, Viral Narratives, and the Formation of Public Perception

Social media has become an important arena in shaping public opinion towards various institutions, including higher education. Short video platforms allow emotional, concise, and experience-based narratives to circulate rapidly. These narratives can influence how users evaluate institutional credibility, including the credibility of universities (Ameh & Emmanuel, 2025; Shah et al., 2024). In this system, narratives that are provocative, relatable, and connected to everyday experiences tend to gain attention and shape collective interpretation.

TikTok, as one of the short video-based platforms, has power in producing and disseminating concise social narratives. The narrative "college is a scam" gains traction because it combines personal experience, economic frustration, and criticism of institutions. In this framework, social media is not just a means of communication, but also a space for constructing social meaning (Simungala et al., 2024). Perceptions of higher education are no longer shaped solely by direct experiences or academic discourse, but also by viral content that is consumed repeatedly.

Studies on social media and education have so far focused more on the use of technology for learning, rather than the influence of social media on the legitimacy of higher education. Therefore, research on viral narratives such as "college is a

scam" becomes important to understand how the digital space can influence public trust in educational institutions. This literature provides a theoretical basis that public perception of college in the digital era is greatly influenced by the circulation of narratives on social media platforms (Shah et al., 2024).

2.5 Alternative Learning and Career Paths in the Digital Era

The digital era presents increasingly diverse learning and career paths outside the formal higher education system. Skills can be acquired through online courses, short certifications, project-based training, direct work experience, or micro-credentials (Bideau & Kearns, 2022; Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Kato et al., 2023). In this context, learning no longer has to take place only in long institutional formats, as the labour market increasingly values demonstrable and applied competencies.

This alternative learning model is becoming increasingly attractive to the younger generation because it offers efficiency in time, cost, and direct relevance to job needs. Micro-credentials, non-formal certifications, and digital training have become new forms of competency legitimisation (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Kato et al., 2023). On the other hand, the digital economy also opens opportunities for digital entrepreneurs, content creators, freelancers, and platform-based professions (Wibisono, 2023). The success of digital figures who earn income without relying on academic degrees reinforces the perception that success does not always have to be achieved through college.

In this perspective, higher education faces a new competitive challenge. If higher education institutions cannot demonstrate their unique advantages compared to non-formal pathways, their appeal will continue to be questioned. Therefore, the integration of micro-certifications, real project experiences, digital entrepreneurship, and collaboration with industry becomes important for higher education to remain relevant. This literature helps explain why some young people are more attracted to alternative careers that are more flexible and pragmatic compared to formal academic paths.

2.6 The Future of Higher Education: Flexibility, Trust, and Relevance

The discourse on the future of higher education emphasises the need for institutional transformation to remain relevant in digital society. Recent studies show that technology integration in higher education must be linked to learning quality, stakeholder perception, institutional strategy, and the development of relevant competencies (Bond et al., 2021; Chugh et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025). Therefore, future curricula need to combine academic depth, practical competence, digital literacy, and flexible learning pathways.

Aside from the pedagogical aspect, the future of higher education also relies on public trust (Law & Le, 2023). This trust is built through consistency between institutional promises and the real experiences of students and graduates. When higher education institutions can demonstrate curriculum relevance, labour market links, transparent financing, and graduate achievements, their social legitimacy becomes stronger. Conversely, if there is a gap between expectations

and reality, delegitimising narratives such as “college is a scam” can spread more easily.

Thus, the literature shows that the future of higher education cannot rely solely on the old degree-based model (Ata & Gür, 2025). Higher education institutions need to move towards a more flexible, modular, competency-based, and communicative model in the digital space. In this framework, viral narratives on social media should be viewed not merely as threats, but as signals of criticism that push institutions to strengthen relevance, transparency, and public trust.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

This study positions public perception of higher education as the primary analytical variable. Public perception refers to respondents’ evaluation of the value, relevance, and credibility of higher education as reflected through their interpretation of the “college is a scam” narrative. Three supporting dimensions guide the analysis: perceived relevance to the labour market, perceived cost-value of higher education, and perceived attractiveness of alternative career pathways in the digital economy (Amarathunga et al., 2024; Kato et al., 2023; Law & Le, 2023).

The framework assumes that social media exposure does not automatically create negative perceptions. It amplifies experiences and evaluations that already exist in relation to employability, tuition costs, and alternative learning routes (Ameh & Emmanuel, 2025; Shah et al., 2024). Therefore, the “college is a scam” narrative is treated as a discursive indicator of changing public trust, not as a direct measure of institutional failure.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a descriptive mixed-methods survey design with a quantitative-dominant structure. The quantitative component described patterns of public perception through frequency and percentage, while the qualitative component supported interpretation through open-ended responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This design was selected because the study aimed to describe how respondents interpreted the “college is a scam” narrative, not to test causal relationships. The primary variable was public perception of higher education, while employability relevance, education cost, alternative career paths, and social media exposure were used as supporting dimensions.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

The study used an online questionnaire because the phenomenon being examined developed on social media and involved respondents who were active in the digital ecosystem. Although the questionnaire was the main data collection instrument, it contained both closed-ended and open-ended components. This allowed data triangulation at the level of data type, as the quantitative response pattern was compared with the qualitative explanations given by respondents (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Online surveys are also appropriate for studies involving digital platform users because they can reach

participants who are familiar with online communication practices (Flanagan, 2020).

3.3 Research Respondents

The respondents in this study numbered 360 people and were selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were having a TikTok account, having seen content or videos with the narrative “college is a scam,” and having direct experience with higher education as an active student, graduate, or individual who had previously been involved in higher education. All respondents (100%) met these criteria. These characteristics are important because the study focuses on perceptions of a digital narrative and requires respondents to have direct exposure to the phenomenon being studied.

Most respondents were active students (58.3%), while 41.7% were graduates or non-students with experience in higher education. Active students refer to respondents who were formally enrolled at the time of the survey. Graduates and non-students refer to respondents who had completed or previously experienced higher education. This composition reflects the diversity of social positions towards higher education, both as actors still within the system and as individuals who had transitioned from campus to the workforce.

3.4 Research Instrument

The research instrument consisted of an online questionnaire developed from the conceptual indicators of public perception of higher education. The closed-ended section contained six core items covering TikTok exposure, perceived relevance of higher education to the labour market, perceived tuition burden, willingness to choose college again, and views on alternative career pathways. The open-ended section asked respondents to explain the reasons, experiences, and interpretations behind their answers regarding the “college is a scam” narrative.

The combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions allowed the study to collect descriptive quantitative data while enriching interpretation through respondents’ explanations. Content validity was strengthened by aligning each item with the conceptual framework and the research questions. Because several indicators were categorical and single-item measures, reliability was not treated as one overall scale score. Instead, consistency was checked by comparing closed-ended response patterns with open-ended explanations. Future studies that develop this instrument into a multi-item Likert scale should report Cronbach’s alpha or other reliability coefficients (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Dorsah, 2026).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through the distribution of digital questionnaire links. Participation was voluntary and anonymous to protect respondents’ identities and reduce social desirability bias. The questionnaire first screened respondents based on TikTok ownership, exposure to the “college is a scam” narrative, and higher education experience. Respondents who met the criteria then completed the perception items and open-ended questions. The questionnaire did not measure the duration of TikTok use, which is acknowledged as one of the limitations of this study.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analysed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques.

3.1.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency tables and percentages. Descriptive statistics were used to show the distribution of respondents' answers without making population-level causal claims (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Hair et al., 2019). The results are presented through tables, percentages, and interpretative narratives that connect the findings with public perception of higher education in the digital era.

3.1.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process included reading the open-ended responses, identifying keywords, grouping similar answers into themes, and interpreting the meaning of each theme in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The thematic analysis was used to explain the reasons behind the quantitative patterns, especially regarding labour market relevance, education costs, and alternative career pathways.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

The characteristics of the respondents are a crucial foundation for understanding the construction of perceptions towards higher education in the platform era. The results in this section describe the participants' profiles and confirm that all respondents were within the same digital ecosystem as TikTok users who had been exposed to content with the narrative "college is a scam". This condition allows the analysis to focus on interpretation of the narrative, not on whether respondents had access to the narrative.

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics and Content Exposure

No	Variable	Category	Frequency (n=360)	Percentage (%)
1	Have a TikTok account	Yes	360	100
		No	0	0
2	Had seen the video "college is a scam"	Yes	360	100
		No	0	0
3	Education status	Active student	210	58,3
		Graduate	150	41,7

All respondents (100%) have TikTok accounts and have seen videos with the narrative "college is a scam." This even level of exposure indicates that the narrative has achieved full penetration within the research participant group. These conditions indicate two important things. First, TikTok functions as an effective discursive space for disseminating opinions about social institutions, including higher education. Second, the homogeneity of exposure allows the analysis to focus on variations in interpretation, rather than differences in access to information.

Most respondents were active students (58.3%), while 41.7% were graduates or non-students with experience in higher education. This composition reflects the diversity of social positions towards the higher education system, both as actors still within the system and as individuals who have graduated and entered the workforce. This diversity is important because perceptions of the legitimacy of higher education are often influenced by transitional experiences from campus to the job market.

4.2 Perception of the Relevance of Higher Education and the World of Work

Perceptions regarding the relevance of higher education to the job market are a central dimension in understanding the emergence of the narrative "college is a scam." This subsection analyses how respondents interpret the relationship between academic experience and the realities of the job market. The analysis focuses on the distribution of quantitative responses as well as thematic interpretation of open-ended responses that depict participants' experiences and reflections.

Table 2: Perception of Higher Education Relevance to the Workforce

No	Statement	Answer Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	There is a disparity between graduates and the workforce	Yes	250	69,4
		No	60	16,7
		Not Sure	50	13,9

As many as 69.4% of respondents stated that there is a disparity between university graduates and the needs of the job market. This proportion indicates that the majority of participants perceive a gap between the competencies acquired in college and the professional demands in the field. That perception is not merely a general opinion but is based on direct experience as well as observations of their social environment. Open responses reveal several main patterns. The curriculum is deemed too theoretical and lacks practical experience relevant to industry needs. Internship or fieldwork experiences are considered not yet optimally integrated into the learning process. Graduates also face high job competition, including with individuals who possess non-formal technical skills acquired through online courses or direct work experience.

These findings indicate that the legitimacy of higher education as a pathway to employment is being renegotiated. Higher education is no longer automatically perceived as a guarantee of vertical social mobility. Economic uncertainty and increasingly flexible labour market dynamics contribute to the perception that academic degrees do not always correlate with stable job opportunities. As many as 16.7% of respondents stated that they do not see any disparity. This group emphasises that success in the workplace depends on an individual's ability to develop soft skills, build networks, and seize opportunities. This view indicates that some respondents still see higher education as a foundation that needs to be complemented by personal initiative.

As many as 13.9% of respondents expressed uncertainty. This ambivalent attitude reflects the complexity of the experiences of the younger generation who are at the crossroads between optimism towards education and the reality of labour market uncertainty. That uncertainty reinforces the resonance of digital narratives that are simplistic yet emotional.

4.3 Perception of Economic Value and Educational Costs

The economic dimension of education is one of the most dominant factors in shaping a critical narrative towards higher education. This subsection analyses how respondents interpret tuition fees, the risks of educational investment, and their reflections on the decision to continue their studies. The analysis was conducted by combining frequency distribution and in-depth interpretation of the respondents' answer tendencies.

Table 3: Perspectives on the Cost and Economic Value of College

No	Statement	Answer Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	College tuition is a significant burden	Yes	240	66,7
		No	120	33,3
2	If given the chance to go back in time, would you still choose college?	Yes	180	50
		No	110	30,6
		Unsure	70	19,4

As many as 66.7% of respondents stated that tuition fees are a significant burden. This proportion indicates that the majority of participants view higher education as a significant financial investment. The cost of education is not only understood as a single tuition payment, but also includes living expenses, transportation, learning materials, and opportunity cost during the course of study. Open responses show that the burden of costs is often associated with the uncertainty of economic outcomes after graduation. Respondents highlighted the phenomenon of graduates working in the informal sector or obtaining jobs with wages that do not match the cost of education incurred. This condition shapes the perception that higher education carries investment risks, especially in a competitive and dynamic job market.

As many as 33.3% of respondents stated that they do not see tuition fees as a significant burden. This group tends to view education as a long-term investment that is not solely measured by direct financial gains. This perspective positions higher education as a social and intellectual asset that provides non-economic benefits, such as the expansion of knowledge, professional networks, and social legitimacy. The question regarding the choice to continue studying if given the chance to turn back time reveals an ambivalent dynamic. As many as 50% of respondents stated they would still choose to attend college, although some of them acknowledged the burden of costs and the uncertainty of job outcomes. These findings indicate that the symbolic and social value of higher education still holds strong appeal. Academic degrees are still perceived as a form of formal credential that boosts confidence and access to certain job opportunities.

As many as 30.6% of respondents stated that they would not choose to go back to college, while 19.4% were unsure. This group generally considers alternative economic paths that are deemed more flexible and quicker in generating income, such as digital entrepreneurship or non-formal technical skill-based jobs. The decision reflects a shift in the younger generation's orientation towards time efficiency and economic outcomes in the context of the digital economy.

4.4 Alternative Career Paths and Digital Transformation

Changes in the economic structure due to digitalisation have expanded the spectrum of career choices for the younger generation beyond the path of formal higher education. This subsection analyses how respondents envision alternative social and economic mobility outside of attending university. The focus of the analysis is directed towards the tendency of non-formal career choices and their implications for the perception of the legitimacy of higher education.

Table 4: Views on Career Path Alternatives

No	Alternative Mentioned	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Entrepreneurship/digital entrepreneur	200	55,6
2	Directly working without college	90	25
3	Non-formal courses/certifications	70	19,4

As many as 55.6% of respondents mentioned entrepreneurship or digital entrepreneurship as the primary alternative to attending college. This choice indicates that the digital economy has created a new imagination of success that does not always rely on formal academic credentials. Social media, e-commerce, the creative industry, and the content-based economy have become relatively open and accessible spaces for producing economic value without the prerequisite of a bachelor's degree. The open response shows that digital entrepreneurship is seen as more flexible, adaptive, and potentially capable of generating income more quickly. Respondents highlighted the success of public figures or content creators who earn significant income without a specific higher education background. The representation of such success, widely circulated on social media, shapes the perception that non-formal pathways can be a rational strategy in facing economic uncertainty.

As many as 25% of respondents chose the option to work directly without attending college. This group emphasises the importance of practical work experience compared to the academic process, which is considered lengthy. This orientation reflects a paradigm shift in learning, where direct field experience is seen as a form of contextual learning that is more relevant to industry needs. As many as 19.4% of respondents mentioned non-formal courses or certifications as an alternative. This choice indicates a shift in preference towards modular and specific skill-based learning models. Short certifications, online training, and micro-credential programs are perceived as more efficient because they focus on competencies that can be directly applied in the job market.

The distribution of these alternative options shows that digital transformation is not only changing the structure of jobs but also altering the logic of educational

investment. Formal higher education is now competing with various flexible learning models that offer time and cost efficiency. The narrative "kuliah itu scam" in this context can be understood as a response to the emergence of new options that are considered more pragmatic.

4.5 The Future of Higher Education in Indonesia

The empirical data obtained in this study indicate that the narrative "kuliah itu scam" cannot be reductively understood as a rejection of higher education. The distribution of respondents' answers shows a systemic critique of the relevance, cost, and economic outcomes of higher education. This critique simultaneously opens a space for reflection on how the future of higher education in Indonesia needs to be reimaged in the context of digital transformation.

As many as 69.4% of respondents perceive a disparity between graduates and the job market, while 66.7% consider tuition fees to be a significant burden. At the same time, 50% of respondents still stated that they would choose to go to college again if given the chance to turn back time. This combination of findings shows a rational ambivalence: higher education still holds symbolic and social legitimacy, but its economic legitimacy is being questioned. The future of higher education can no longer rely on the assumption that a degree automatically guarantees social mobility.

The dominant alternative career choice of digital entrepreneurship (55.6%) indicates that the younger generation envisions the future economy within the framework of flexibility, creativity, and direct access to markets through digital platforms. Higher education that does not integrate dimensions of entrepreneurship and digital literacy risks being increasingly perceived as institutions lagging behind the dynamics of the real economy. The transformation of the curriculum to be based on applied competencies, problem-solving, and cross-disciplinary collaboration has become an urgent necessity.

The future of higher education in Indonesia is leaning towards a more hybrid and modular model. Preference for non-formal courses and certifications (19.4%) indicates that micro-credential-based learning and specific skill certifications are appealing because they are considered efficient and responsive to industry needs. The integration of micro-credential systems, recognition of prior learning, and collaboration with digital learning platforms can be strategies to bridge this need.

The dimension of financing is also a key element in envisioning the future of higher education. The perception of costs as a significant burden indicates that non-adaptive financing models will continue to trigger narratives of delegitimation. Flexible financing schemes, transparency in career prospects, and strengthening the relationship between educational investment and job outcomes are factors that determine the sustainability of public trust in higher education institutions.

The full exposure of respondents to digital narratives on TikTok (100%) shows that the legitimacy of higher education is now also produced and negotiated in

the social media space. Higher education institutions no longer operate solely in the academic space, but also in the digital discursive space that rapidly and widely shapes public opinion. The future of higher education demands the ability of institutions to adapt communicatively, build data-driven public narratives, and demonstrate real relevance through graduate achievements.

Data from this research indicates that higher education in Indonesia is in a phase of legitimacy transition. Institutions are not completely rejected but are faced with demands for reforms that are more responsive to the digital economy. The vision for the future of higher education includes several key characteristics: a competency-based adaptive curriculum, integration of digital entrepreneurship, flexible and hybrid learning models, an inclusive financing system, and strengthened connectivity with industry.

The narrative "college is a scam" in this context serves as an indicator of the changing expectations of the younger generation. Higher education that can read this signal as constructive criticism has the opportunity to make substantive transformations. The future of higher education in Indonesia depends on its ability to reposition itself not merely as a degree-granting institution, but as a relevant, adaptive, and sustainable lifelong learning ecosystem within the digital economy landscape.

4.6 Towards a Trusted Higher Education Institution

Trust in higher education institutions is the foundation of social legitimacy that determines sustainability and public participation. The data from this research shows that although the narrative "kuliah itu scam" has reached all respondents (100%) and the majority perceive a disparity between education and the job market (69.4%) as well as a significant financial burden (66.7%), half of the respondents (50%) still stated they would choose to attend college again. These findings indicate that the emerging crisis is not an existential crisis, but rather a partial crisis of trust regarding the relevance and economic value of higher education.

Public trust in higher education institutions in the context of this research correlates with three main dimensions: academic relevance, economic rationality, and outcome transparency. The perception of disparity between graduates and the job market indicates a gap between institutional promises and the reality of job transitions. When graduates experience difficulties obtaining jobs that align with their field of study, the legitimacy of the education system is called into question. Reputable universities in the future need to provide concrete evidence of the connection between the curriculum, practical experience, and industry needs.

The economic dimension becomes a factor that cannot be ignored. As many as 66.7% of respondents consider tuition fees to be a significant burden. This perception shows that trust is not only built through academic reputation but also through equitable access and rational financing. Colleges and universities that want to rebuild public trust need to develop more adaptive financing models,

including cost transparency, flexible payment schemes, and open information regarding graduates' job prospects.

Preference for digital entrepreneurship (55.6%) as a career alternative shows that the younger generation values flexibility and applied competencies as important factors in determining their educational choices. A reputable university is not only one that has formal accreditation but also one that can equip students with real skills that can be adapted to various work contexts. The integration of digital literacy, entrepreneurship, project management, and problem-solving skills has become an important part of institutional transformation.

The respondents' full exposure to digital narratives on TikTok also shows that the reputation of higher education institutions is now being shaped in the digital public space. Trust is no longer built solely through institutional symbols, but rather through the experiences of alumni shared openly on social media. Institutions that are responsive to public criticism and capable of transparently communicating alumni achievement data have a greater opportunity to strengthen their social legitimacy.

The results of this study indicate that moving towards a trusted university requires data-driven strategic steps. First, strengthening the competency-based curriculum and industrial practices to address perceptions of inequality. Second, the reformulation of a financing model that is more inclusive and proportional to the promised economic benefits. Third, the development of a flexible learning ecosystem that accommodates micro-certifications and cross-sector collaboration. Fourth, evidence-based public communication management to build a credible narrative in the digital space.



Figure 1: Indicator of Trusted Higher Education Institutions

Trust is not built through rhetoric, but through the consistency between institutional promises and the real experiences of students and graduates. This research data indicates that the younger generation in Indonesia still sees value in higher education but demands more substantial transformation. Higher education institutions that can respond to these demands systematically have the opportunity not only to restore but also to strengthen public trust in the landscape of higher education in the digital era.

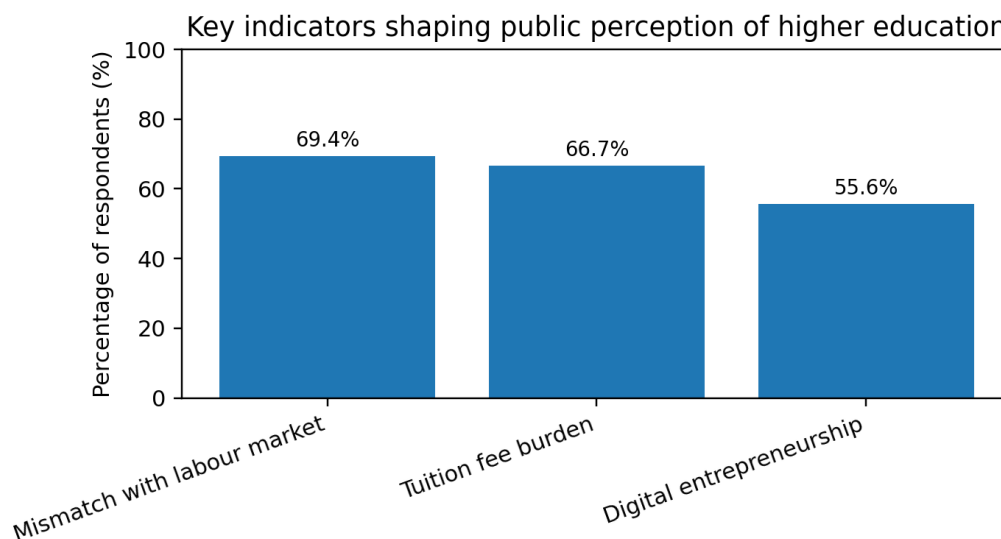


Figure 2: Key indicators shaping public perception of higher education

5. Discussion

The narrative “college is a scam” in this research should not be understood as an outright rejection of higher education, but as a form of public criticism towards its perceived value. The empirical data show three dominant concerns: 69.4% of respondents perceived a mismatch between higher education and labour market needs, 66.7% perceived tuition fees as a significant burden, and 55.6% saw digital entrepreneurship as the main alternative career path. These findings indicate that public perception is shaped mainly by relevance, cost-value, and the availability of alternative pathways.

The findings also indicate that digital transformation has changed not only the mode of learning but also how young people evaluate the credibility of higher education. Universities are no longer assessed only through formal status or accreditation, but also through their ability to demonstrate practical learning, digital competence, and visible graduate outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that digital transformation in higher education involves institutional strategy, stakeholder perception, and learning relevance (Chugh et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

From the perspective of the relationship between higher education and the world of work, this study reinforces the literature that places employability at the centre of contemporary debates. Higher education is no longer assessed only by its ability to transfer academic knowledge, but also by its capacity to develop

practical skills, professional identity, digital competencies, and readiness for changing labour markets (Amarathunga et al., 2024; Otermans et al., 2024; Pérez Zúñiga et al., 2025). The finding that 69.4% of respondents perceived a gap between college graduates and labour market needs can be linked to the issue of education-job mismatch. In Indonesia, recent evidence shows that mismatch among young workers remains a policy concern and can affect wages, productivity, and confidence in formal education (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025; Khoiruddin et al., 2024). Thus, the “college is a scam” narrative resonates because it reflects a perceived gap between educational promises and employment outcomes.

The finding that 66.7% of respondents perceived tuition fees as a significant burden shows that public perception is also shaped by investment logic. Higher education is no longer seen only as intellectual formation, but also as an economic decision that must be justified through future outcomes. This interpretation aligns with recent policy discussions that emphasise the need to connect higher education value with affordability, completion, and employability (Law & Le, 2023; Sanz, 2025). Nevertheless, the results do not support the conclusion that higher education has lost all legitimacy. The finding that 50% of respondents would still choose to attend college indicates that higher education still holds social, intellectual, and symbolic value. This ambivalence is important because it shows that the criticism in digital space is not identical to rejection. It is better understood as a demand for universities to prove their benefits more concretely through relevant learning, stronger networks, and clearer graduate outcomes (Law & Le, 2023; Mainga et al., 2022).

The finding that 55.6% of respondents mentioned entrepreneurship or digital entrepreneurship as an alternative career path shows that higher education now faces new competitors in producing competency legitimacy. The digital economy provides space for entrepreneurs, creators, freelancers, and participants in short courses or certifications to gain income and professional recognition outside traditional academic mechanisms. This supports recent literature on micro-credentials and flexible learning pathways as emerging alternatives in higher education and lifelong learning (Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025; Kato et al., 2023).

Preference for non-formal learning also indicates that the digital generation increasingly values learning formats that are flexible, specific, and oriented towards applied skills. This supports the need to reimagine higher education as a system that is more open to micro-credentials, competency certifications, recognition of prior learning, and project-based experiences (Bideau & Kearns, 2022; Kato et al., 2023). Higher education institutions that fail to recognise these changes risk being perceived as distant from the needs of the younger generation. The role of TikTok and social media in this research shows that the legitimacy of higher education is also produced within the platform space. Public perception of campuses is shaped not only by direct learning experiences, but also by viral content, brief opinions, and symbolic representations that circulate widely. In this context, social media functions as a discursive arena that can strengthen or weaken institutional reputation (Shah et al., 2024; Simungala et al., 2024). The logic

of short video platforms also explains why narratives such as “college is a scam” resonate strongly with audiences. Concise, emotional, and experience-based content can spread quickly because it connects with everyday concerns about jobs, costs, and social mobility. Social media does not create criticism from nothing. It accelerates the circulation and reinforcement of criticism that already has a basis in real social experience (Ameh & Emmanuel, 2025; Simungala et al., 2024).

Conceptually, this research shows that the future of higher education needs to be understood as both a pedagogical issue and a matter of public trust. Higher education institutions are required not only to produce graduates, but also to demonstrate that learning processes, costs, and outcomes have a reasonable connection for students and society. At this point, learning flexibility, technology integration, public communication, and connectivity with real-world needs become important elements of institutional transformation (Bond et al., 2021; Chugh et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

Overall, this discussion affirms that the narrative “college is a scam” is better understood as a signal of public criticism demanding a re-evaluation of higher education. The narrative emerges from the intersection of labour market uncertainty, sensitivity to education costs, alternative career pathways, and the power of social media discourse. The theoretical contribution of this study is to show that public perception of higher education in the digital era can be examined through viral social media narratives, not only through formal institutional indicators.

5.1 Implications

This study carries important implications, as it shows that the main issue facing higher education today is not merely access, but also trust, relevance, and its connection to the realities of the digital economy. Based on the findings and the literature used, there are at least several stakeholders who are directly related to the results of this study.

5.1.1 Higher Education Institutions

The primary stakeholders are higher education institutions themselves, whether at the level of universities, faculties, or study programmes. The implication of this research for higher education institutions is the need to re-examine curriculum design, teaching approaches, and the mechanisms supporting graduates’ transition into the world of work. Universities need to move from predominantly theoretical models of learning towards approaches that are more applied, project-based, collaborative, and connected to professional contexts. In addition, higher education institutions need to develop more flexible learning ecosystems through the integration of micro-credentials, more substantive internships, recognition of non-formal learning, and the strengthening of career development services. These steps are essential so that universities not only maintain their academic relevance but also strengthen their social legitimacy in the eyes of younger generations.

5.1.2 Ministry of Higher Education

The next key stakeholder is the Ministry of Higher Education. The implication of this research for regulators is the need to encourage policies that are more

adaptive to digital transformation and changes in the labour market. Regulations need to provide greater room for competency-based curricula, modular learning, micro-credentials, recognition of prior learning, and cross-sector partnerships. In addition, regulators need to strengthen policies on funding so that they are fairer, more transparent, and more inclusive, so that higher education is not increasingly perceived as a high-risk investment. In this context, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for formulating policies that are more responsive to young people's perceptions of the value of higher education.

5.1.3 Industry and Employers

Industry, businesses, and employers are also key stakeholders in this issue. This study shows the need for stronger synchronisation between higher education institutions and the world of work. For this reason, industry should not merely act as a recipient of graduates, but also as an active partner in competency design, curriculum development, the provision of authentic learning experiences, and the validation of relevant skills. Closer collaboration between universities and industry will help narrow the gap between educational processes and real professional needs. Another implication is the need to improve the quality of internship programmes, industry projects, career mentoring, and certification based on the needs of employment sectors.

5.1.4 Students and Prospective Students

Students and prospective students are the groups most directly affected by this narrative. The implication of this research for them is the need to develop a more reflective perspective on higher education. University can no longer be positioned as an automatic guarantee of the future, but rather as one of several instruments for self-development, the effectiveness of which is strongly shaped by individual strategies in making use of learning experiences, building networks, and developing additional skills. This study encourages students to take a more active role in combining formal learning with practical experience, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and non-formal training in order to develop greater adaptability.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that the narrative that "College is a scam" has gained strong reach among respondents, as indicated by their full exposure to similar content on TikTok. This suggests that social media, particularly TikTok, has become an influential space in shaping young people's perceptions of higher education. This narrative does not merely reflect a rejection of university but rather points to the emergence of a critical attitude towards the relevance of higher education amid changes in the world of work and the digital economy.

The findings reveal that critical perceptions of higher education are primarily linked to two main issues: the mismatch between higher education and the needs of the labour market, and the financial burden associated with tuition fees. In this context, higher education is no longer seen as sufficient if it only offers formal legitimacy through a degree, but is also expected to demonstrate concrete, measurable benefits that are aligned with the demands of the times.

Nevertheless, this study also shows that higher education has not entirely lost its legitimacy. Some respondents still regard university as a worthwhile option because it continues to offer social, intellectual, and symbolic benefits. This confirms that the position of higher education is currently in a transitional state: on the one hand, it is still recognised as important, but on the other, it is increasingly required to prove its practical relevance and economic value. In addition, the emergence of digital entrepreneurship as the main alternative to university indicates a shift in young people's orientation towards career paths that are more flexible, faster, and skills-based. This finding underlines that higher education in Indonesia is facing new challenges from the growth of non-formal learning and working ecosystems, which are increasingly accepted as sources of competence and social mobility.

Overall, this study concludes that the narrative that "College is a scam" represents a form of public criticism of higher education in the digital era. The novelty of this study lies in using a viral social media narrative as an empirical entry point for understanding public perception of higher education in Indonesia. The pedagogical assumption arising from the findings is that trust in higher education can be strengthened when universities connect curriculum, practical experience, digital skills, and graduate outcomes more clearly. Therefore, universities need to strengthen competency-based curricula, work-integrated learning, micro-credential options, transparent cost-value communication, and active digital public engagement. These steps are important so that higher education remains relevant, credible, and socially trusted in the digital era.

7. Limitations and Recommendations of the Study

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the number of respondents was relatively small and selected through purposive sampling, meaning that the findings cannot yet be generalised to represent Indonesian society more broadly. Second, the data were based on respondents' subjective perceptions and did not include objective employment data, institutional data, or direct analysis of TikTok content. Third, the questionnaire did not measure the duration of TikTok use, so platform experience was operationalised only through ownership of a TikTok account and exposure to the "college is a scam" narrative. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Based on these limitations, future studies are recommended to involve a larger and more diverse group of respondents so that the findings have broader reach and stronger representativeness. Further research should also combine perception-based data with objective data, such as graduate employment statistics, income levels, and indicators of alignment between degree programmes and occupations. In addition, a mixed-methods approach may be used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between perceptions, educational experiences, and the realities of the labour market.

Further studies are also recommended to analyse social media content directly, particularly on TikTok, in order to understand how the narrative that "College is

a scam” is constructed, disseminated, and received by audiences. In this way, future research would not only explain perceptions of higher education but also map the role of digital platforms in shaping public opinion. Moreover, subsequent research could broaden its focus to examine strategies for the transformation of higher education, including the strengthening of competency-based curricula, the integration of digital entrepreneurship, more adaptive funding models, and the public communication of educational institutions within digital spaces.

8. Conflict of Interest

The authors affirm that the publication of this article was not influenced by any conflict of interest in any form. The research was conducted independently and objectively, without the involvement of any financial, personal, institutional, or commercial relationships that could potentially give rise to a conflict of interest. All stages of the research, from data collection to the analysis and interpretation of the findings, were carried out solely for academic and scientific purposes.

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