



Investigating Thai EFL Students’ Metaphorical Perception on Social Media

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APA Citation:

Kanokpermpoon, M. (2025). Investigating Thai EFL students’ metaphorical perception on social media. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 18(1), 158-189. <https://doi.org/10.70730/ZBJX8571>

Received
04/08/2024

Received in
revised form
17/09/2024

Accepted
15/10/2024

ABSTRACT

Social media is widely used in many different sectors worldwide. In language education, it can impact students’ language learning, and students may have diverse opinions about its use. This study aimed to explore how Thai university students conceptualise social media and their perceptions of it. An elicitation task, “social media is like ... because ...”, was used in an online questionnaire to gather responses from 145 students enrolled in an English course on language and social media at a university in Thailand. The results revealed six categories of social media: “personal space,” “society,” “information,” “communication,” “addiction,” and “necessity,” based on the participants’ local contexts, such as “7-11,” “Thai market,” “Oreo frappe.” The perceptions of social media included positive aspects related to personal storytelling, social connectivity, and information access; negative aspects concerning addiction, inauthentic behaviour, and FOMO (fear of missing out); and mixed perspectives on both its potential for personal expression and connection alongside risks to mental health and unrealistic self-presentation. These findings suggest practical applications for using social media in language education and highlight aspects of social media perceptions that could be incorporated into the English classroom.

	Keywords: social media, perceptions, metaphorical perceptions, metaphorical categories, university students
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Introduction

In today's world of communication, social media has played a significant role in connecting people from different cultures and regions. People from all walks of life also use social media for various purposes, such as, entertainment, education, and self-expression (Gulatee et al., 2021; Lehmann, 2024; Tan, 2022). However, it can also be argued that social media has its drawbacks, such as depression, diet problems, psychological problems (e.g., addiction, anxiety), and behavioural problems (Bozzola et al., 2022). It is, therefore, important to understand how people perceive social media, as it may have both positive and negative impacts on their everyday lives.

In terms of education, social media can enhance students' language learning and foster their motivation, creativity, and critical thinking, according to Nasution (2022). However, Nguyen (2023) argued that, even though social media was an effective learning platform, it was mostly used for non-academic purposes. Based on these findings, it can be argued that social media has both advantages and disadvantages for students' learning. Understanding their perception towards the use of social media could yield a clearer picture of how to integrate social media in their learning.

One way to explore students' perceptions of social media is the use of metaphors, which map one conceptual domain with another domain. Based on Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are considered everyday language, and it could reveal people's attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and experiences towards a concept or phenomenon. Previous studies have used metaphors to explore how teachers, students, and parents perceive social media in various educational settings (e.g., Kaban, 2021; Sağar & Özçelik, 2023). For instance, Kaban (2021) found that teachers and parents in Turkey perceived social media as 'addiction' most frequently, among various themes. In contrast, Sağar and Özçelik (2023) discovered that Turkish students held both positive and negative perspectives towards social media. From these examples, and other EFL contexts (e.g., Russia in Kondratyeva & Novoklinova, 2020), the inconsistency of perceptions among different groups of people highlights the need for research on social media perception. Such research can inform users and EFL professionals in designing appropriate language learning lessons and usage guidelines for social media use.

In Thailand, where English is considered a language for communication, social media is also widely used. However, how Thai

university students perceive the use of social media is still in need of investigation. As EFL learners use social media every day, it is interesting to understand how students' use of social media can help EFL instructors plan and design English language learning in the university setting. In the university context, including social media in teaching and learning English is still under researched, especially when a course of language and social media needs to be designed for them. As a result, it is important to explore how Thai university students use metaphors to understand their own use of social media and their perceptions of social media in everyday life. In this way, the findings of this research could be used to design EFL learning in line with students' metaphorical categories.

This study, therefore, aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Thai university students conceptualise social media?
2. What are Thai university students' perceptions towards social media?

Literature Review

Social Media

In the mid-2000s, social media was created alongside the development of digital technology. It is conceived of encompassing the roles of 'social' and 'media' from two different perspectives (Page et al., 2014). According to Lehmann (2024), social media refers to a form of online communication where users from different communities share their individual information to others from the same or different online community. However, Gnach et al. (2023) argue that social media is a virtual platform where online communication takes place alongside the use of technology. These two different conceptions lead to two different ways of inquiry, i.e., social communication in media and media for social interactions.

For research in social communities, Seargeant and Tagg (2014) advocate that online users change their role from audience members to user-generated content creators. They suggest individuals may posit or alter their identities when interacting with others within online communities. For example, in Thailand, Gulatee et al. (2021) found that Facebook is still being used by young adults due to its interpersonal communication capacities, ease of use, and convenience. They observed that Facebook users used the platform to enhance their social status and self-promotion. Kamthoncharoenrungs and Bhovichitra (2021) also found that information on Instagram, such as likes, comments, and followers, have an impact on Thai undergraduates' self-esteem in terms of social comparison and acceptance.

With regard to media for social interactions, Thianthai (2022) examined the use of hate speech and discovered varied experiences among individuals in Bangkok concerning different social media platforms. Facebook was perceived as a platform for sharing information quickly and widely, often resulting in the rapid dissemination of stories or messages. Twitter, on the other hand, was characterised as a platform where users can express opinions anonymously, making it easy to join groups and share dislikes without being identified. Instagram was associated with celebrity culture, appearance-focused content, and comparison, leading to criticism and jealousy. YouTube was noted for its role in critiquing content creators, with examples of hateful comments targeting individuals or behaviours frequently showcased in videos.

Additionally, Tan (2022) found that Generation Z in Thailand used TikTok more than other generations for watching live broadcasts, following artists and celebrities, and catching up with the news. Furthermore, Wisessathorn et al. (2022) identified three components through exploratory factor analysis (EFA): feeling at ease and not missing out, making it a habit, and a sense of being attracted to and connected with others, resulting in the creation of a Thai-Social Media Engagement Scale (T-SEMS).

From the two perspectives of social media studies, it could be summarised that the conceptual experiences of social media users can lead to the continuum of 'social' and 'media' paradigms. To understand a wide range of social media views between these two points, Reinhardt (2020) and Sağar and Özçelik (2023) suggest the use of metaphors to clarify varying conceptions of social media. This is because metaphors can reveal people's attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and experiences toward a concept or phenomenon, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The following section will discuss this issue.

Metaphor and Social Media

Metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), play crucial roles in human cognition through five key claims. Firstly, they enable individuals to convey concepts beyond mere language, serving as cognitive tools. Secondly, metaphors serve various purposes, including artistic and rhetorical aims, aiding in understanding abstract ideas. Thirdly, contrary to conventional belief, metaphors do not always rely on similarity between compared entities. Fourthly, no special talent is required for individuals to use metaphors in daily communication, highlighting their innate accessibility. Finally, Lakoff and Johnson argue against the assumption that living without metaphors is possible, emphasising their widespread presence in human thought and

expression. Taking these assumptions into consideration, it could be argued that metaphors are, in fact, everyday language, where we can associate two related concepts to understand an entity.

With reference to Evans (2019), in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we can understand and discuss one thing by comparing it to something else. This involves mapping ideas from one domain of meaning to another. The theory helps us understand complicated concepts, new subjects, or any other areas with unclear structures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, social media could be understood as a tool, i.e., SOCIAL MEDIA IS A TOOL, in which users use it as an instrument for social networking (Reinhardt, 2020).

However, since the conceptual understanding can vary in different contexts, so does social media (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). According to Reinhardt (2020), when exploring metaphors related to language teaching and learning, it might be necessary to extend beyond traditional computer-assisted language learning (CALL) frameworks, as SOCIAL MEDIA IS A TOOL, in the USA. The author proposes the adoption of alternative metaphors for L2 instructors and material designers, such as “windows”, “mirrors”, “doorways”, and “playgrounds” (p. 234), to better understand the dynamics of social media in language education. Regarding SOCIAL MEDIA AS WINDOWS, Reinhardt argues that L2 learners can observe authentic language uses and cultural customs without actively engaging in them until they feel prepared. In SOCIAL MEDIA AS MIRRORS, numerous social media platforms allow L2 users to carefully create and present an identity that represents a specific aspect, or an idealised version, of themselves, as exemplified by the personal profile page adorned with selfies or selectively chosen images. Another significant advantage of SOCIAL MEDIA AS DOORWAYS is that L2 learners can use them as gateways to engage in L2 cultural and intercultural activities. Finally, in SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLAYGROUNDS, Reinhardt contends that L2 users can engage in informal, independent, and playful activities through social media. This creates an environment where collaboration, competition, accomplishment, risk-taking, exploration, simulation, and experimentation can facilitate learning in technology-mediated settings such as games.

Furthermore, in South Africa, le Roux and Parry (2020) analysed aspects of social media usage and behaviours using the social media logics, such as norms, strategies, and economics. The researchers identified four metaphors from such logics: “a town square,” “a beauty pageant,” “a parliament,” and “a masquerade ball”. They argued that SOCIAL MEDIA IS A TOWN SQUARE underscores the significance of social media platforms in users’ lives, the fear of missing out, augmented reality, and the concept of digital separation. SOCIAL MEDIA IS A BEAUTY PAGEANT pertains to

self-presentation or image construction, social comparison, and self-assessment. SOCIAL MEDIA IS A PARLIAMENT highlights how social media platforms function as forums for online discussion, social media capital, homophily, and polarisation. Lastly, SOCIAL MEDIA IS A MASQUERADE BALL relates to anonymity, loss of individuality, and deceptive self-representation.

It could be concluded from the aforementioned studies that the complexities of social media and its impact on users' lives can be enquired through metaphorical analysis. While Reinhardt emphasises the diverse conceptual understanding of social media and offers a nuanced perspective on its dynamics in language education, le Roux and Perry also employ metaphors to explain different facets of social media usage and behaviours, resulting in four distinct metaphors of social media.

Related Studies

In this section, two themes of metaphorical understanding will be discussed regarding metaphors and EFL learning as well as metaphors and social media. The first section, concerning metaphors and EFL learning, will be discussed as follows.

Regarding metaphors and EFL learning, Erdem (2018) found that, through the elicitation task "English is like... because...", first-year EFL students in Turkey from social science departments tended to create more positive metaphors for English learning. However, those from hard science departments generated more negative metaphors. Graduates of medical vocational high schools had the highest percentage of negative metaphors, while graduates from Anatolian high schools had the highest positive metaphors percentage. The findings revealed the prevalent perception of English as difficult but necessary, with categories such as "difficulty," "necessity," and "cultural contribution" emerging frequently.

In Saudi Arabia, Abdulaal et al. (2023) investigated Saudi EFL students' conceptual metaphors of language learning, using both verbal and visual modes. Twelve upper-intermediate learners' written and drawn descriptions were analysed to understand their mental representations. The findings revealed that students' metaphorical representations, both verbal and non-verbal, share similar perspectives, highlighting language learning as an exciting and uniquely personal experience. Most participants had positive attitudes towards learning English, viewing it as an engaging journey, although a few expressed negative experiences. These findings are significant in understanding the importance of multimodal approaches in capturing the complex, often hidden, beliefs and attitudes of language learners.

Alharbi et al. (2024) explored how EFL learners in Saudi Arabia perceived English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. From the elicitation task, “Learning English is like ...,” it was found that key metaphors include learning as a natural phenomenon (“storm/tornado”), labour or birth (“giving birth”), and war (“battle”). This highlighted the challenges and effort evolved. The participants also viewed learning as a hardship (“digging a hole”), and effortful process needing support (“task/journey”), with both positive and negative perceptions. Positive metaphors related to growth and achievement, while negative ones emphasised difficulties and frustrations. Taking these findings into consideration, understanding metaphors from the students’ perceptions could help educators address students’ challenges, promote positive perceptions, provide support, and facilitate reflective practices.

According to the aforementioned studies, it could be concluded that EFL learners from different contexts regard language learning with either positive or negative metaphors. Despite these insights, there is a research gap in exploring how EFL learners perceive social media through metaphors and its impact on their language learning. The following will discuss this issue.

In terms of metaphors and social media, Kondratyeva and Novoklinova (2020) explored how “social networks” were represented in Russian online discourse between 2014-2019. Content analysis of the study revealed that social networks are commonly viewed as communication hubs (“ocean”), where individuals invest significant amounts of time (“home”) and store various information, albeit not always reliable (“ocean”, “garbage hole”). Additionally, the intricate structure of social networks (“web”, “network”, “jungle”) has been recognised. Interestingly, metaphors in Russian online discourse predominantly carry negative connotations, highlighting addition to social networks and the challenge of disconnecting from virtual reality (“web”, “swap”, “jungle”, “disease”).

According to Kaban (2021), the content analysis method was employed to analyse responses from 136 Turkish participants, matching the metaphor structure. The analysis categorised the metaphors in several themes, including “addiction,” “not real,” “everything is in it,” “communication channel,” “usage,” “indispensable,” “feature,” and “harmful”. In this study, participants used metaphors, such as “bottomless well,” “life,” “drugs,” “swamp,” “news tool,” “alcohol,” “mask,” “car,” and “virus” to describe social media. Based on these findings, it is suggested that awareness training be provided to teachers, students, and parents to leverage the benefits of social media in education. Additionally, the study revealed that participants generally held negative perceptions towards social media.

With regard to the study on social media metaphor, Sağar and Özçelik (2023) used a questionnaire with 182 Turkish high school students aged 14-18, revealing 93 metaphors. Content analysis of the study unveiled the most commonly used metaphors to be “book,” “water,” “cigarette,” “teacher,” “chocolate,” and “life”. Positive metaphors noted in the study encompassed “happiness,” “need,” and “useful,” wherein “happiness” was linked to “chocolate,” “needs” related to “water” and “life”, and “useful” associated with “book” and “teacher”. Regarding negative metaphors, three themes emerged: “addiction,” “time waste,” and “harmful”. Interestingly, “cigarette” within the most frequently used metaphor was associated with “addiction”.

The results of Sağar and Özçelik’s study could be incorporated with Reinhardt’s and le Roux and Perry’s frameworks in that “happiness” metaphor is analogous to “playground” by Reinhardt whereas “need” is related to “a town square” by le Roux and Perry. This means that, through metaphors, social media could be understood in relation to human cognition, where diversity persists in different contexts. It can also be noted by the studies of Kondratyeva and Novoklinova as well as by Kaban in that Russian and Turkish participants perceived social media differently, ranging from usefulness to doubt. Their findings lead to questions of how Thai EFL learners perceive social media and how social media plays a role in their use.

Methodology

Based on the literature, it becomes apparent that the exploration of Thai EFL students’ perceptions towards social media, using metaphorical categories, is an under researched area in Thailand. This research gap is particularly significant given the reported high usage of social media among Thai teenagers (StatCounter, 2024). Furthermore, as argued by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the use of metaphors could delve into the dynamic aspects of attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and experiences, this present study aims to address this gap by focusing on metaphorical perceptions of social media. The methodology of the study is presented in the following section.

Participants

The participants in the present study include first-year university students from a government university in Bangkok. The basic criterion for the selection is that they were enrolled in an English course focusing on language and social media during the academic semester 2/2023. The course also included a lesson on social media language and metaphors. The questionnaire was distributed to approximately 750 students enrolled in the

course at the university. However, 145 participants returned the online questionnaire, meeting the minimum requirement of recruiting participants, which is at least 10% (Woodrow, 2014).

Instrument

In the present study, an elicitation task was used to explore Thai EFL students' perceptions of social media through metaphorical categories. This approach acknowledges the potential limitations in capturing the depth and authenticity of conceptual metaphors as they occur in natural language use. Despite this, such an approach can elicit responses that are more reflective of the participants' conscious cognitive processes, albeit less representative of the spontaneous use of metaphors in everyday communication (Alharbi et al., 2024; Erdem, 2018).

According to Kövecses (2019), human cognitive processes can give rise to either deep-shallow or deliberate-non-deliberate metaphors, representing different levels of metaphorical understanding. However, relying solely on an intuitive method might not yield rich data, particularly in communication and education (Bohnmeyer, 2021; Low, 2017). One way to capture participants' conceptual metaphors is through the use of eliciting metaphor (Low, 2017).

In this study, an online questionnaire was used to prompt participants to express their conceptual metaphors towards social media, identified what social media was like, and explained their reasoning in English. However, participants might use their native language to write their perceptions in the statement "Social Media is like ... because ...", but they were required to include their reasoning in the phrase 'because ...' so that they could further explain their perceptions to avoid misinterpretation by the researcher.

The questionnaire's design followed the three processes suggested by Bohnmeyer (2021): "a stimulus, a task, and a response" (p. 58). In the first part, participants responded to four questionnaire items: age, the duration of social media use per day, the number of social media sites they use, and the frequency of social media posting. This helped establish the context of social media use in everyday life, which did not require too much cognitive processing for the following task (Low, 2017).

The second part of the questionnaire comprises the statement, "Social media is like ... because ...". As discussed in Bohnmeyer (2021) and Low (2017), and demonstrated in the studies by Alharbi et al. (2024), Erdem (2018), Kaban (2021) and Sağar and Özçelik (2023), a direct question such as "X is Y" is commonly used in education to deliberately elicit participants' perceptions of social media metaphor. However, some researchers (e.g., Wan,

2012; Zhang, 2021) have argued that using the structure “X is Y” may not sufficiently yield conceptual metaphors unless appropriate training in creating and understanding metaphors is provided prior to the elicitation task (Wan, 2012).

In the present study, all participants were enrolled in a course on language and social media, which included a lesson on social media language and metaphors, consistent with metaphor training suggested by Wan (2012). The use of “Social media is like ... because ...” could arguably enable participants to explicitly convey their perceptions about social media and justify them based on the reasons provided within the statement. In this study, participants were required to complete both parts of the statement in English to explain their perceptions towards social media metaphor. Research by Alharbi et al. (2024) and Erdem (2018) demonstrates that the “X is like Y because” elicitation task is sufficient to explore EFL students’ perception, thereby making additional statements unnecessary.

The Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index for the questionnaire was 0.87, as rated by three experts in the field of Applied Linguistics. Two question items were slightly modified based on the experts’ suggestions prior to launching the questionnaire to the participants. The use of the questionnaire in the present study had also been ethically granted by the ethics committee of the university.

It is also worth noting that, within the Thai context, it is unlikely that the English language is used in everyday life, so the elicitation task is the only practical tool in the present study.

Data Collection

The online questionnaire was launched from May to June 2024 to first-year university students studying in a government university in Bangkok. These participants were expected to currently enrol in an English course in language and social media in the second semester of the academic year 2023.

Participants’ names and personal information were not recorded in the questionnaire, and they could opt out of the study at any time during the data collection process.

After the questionnaires were collected, all five questions were recorded in a spreadsheet. The second part of the questionnaire was carefully reviewed by the researcher. If either part of the statement is not written, the entire questionnaire was eliminated to avoid any ambiguity on the English metaphor provided.

Data Analysis

After collecting data from both parts of the questionnaire, the researcher carefully ensured that all information was entered, particularly ensuring both parts of the statement “social media is like ... because ...” were included. If either part was missing, the entire statement was excluded from the analysis.

For data in Part 1, all data related to social media use were calculated using mean scores and presented descriptively through graphical representations.

Concerning data in Part 2, words obtained from the phrase “social media is like ...” were categorised using the frameworks of le Roux and Parry (2020) and Reinhardt (2020) for analysis. The analysis was conducted twice to ensure accuracy, and an expert in Applied Linguistics reviewed this part of the analysis. When the responses were provided in students’ L1, the researcher translated them, and the translation was double rechecked by both the researcher and an expert in Applied Linguistics for accuracy.

Following the categorisation of words, descriptive statistics was used to normalise the percentage of each frequency found in each category, allowing for comparison of how social media was perceived among the different categories identified in the study.

The second part of the phrase “because ...” was analysed using the thematic content analysis. Details of the reasons were then grouped into themes and sub-themes to illustrate participants’ perceptions towards social media from various perspectives. This process was also reviewed by another expert in Applied Linguistics to ensure the reliability of the data.

The details of Part 1 and Part 2 were used to answer Research Question 1 regarding how social media was conceptualised, possibly through emerging metaphors. Data from the phrase “because ...” was used to answer Research Question 2 regarding participants’ perceptions towards social media.

Results

The study identified six primary categories under which social media metaphors were classified: Personal Space, Society, Information, Communication, Addiction, and Necessity. As can be seen in Figure 1, Personal Space was the most frequently cited, accounting for 33.80% (49 instances) of the total 145 participants. The Society category comprised 19.31% (28 instances), followed by Information with 14.48% (21 instances). The Communication and Addition categories were similarly represented, with

13.10% (19 instances) each. The least frequently found category was Necessity with 6.21% (9 instances).

Figure 1

Thai EFL Students' Conceptualisations of Social Media in Percentage

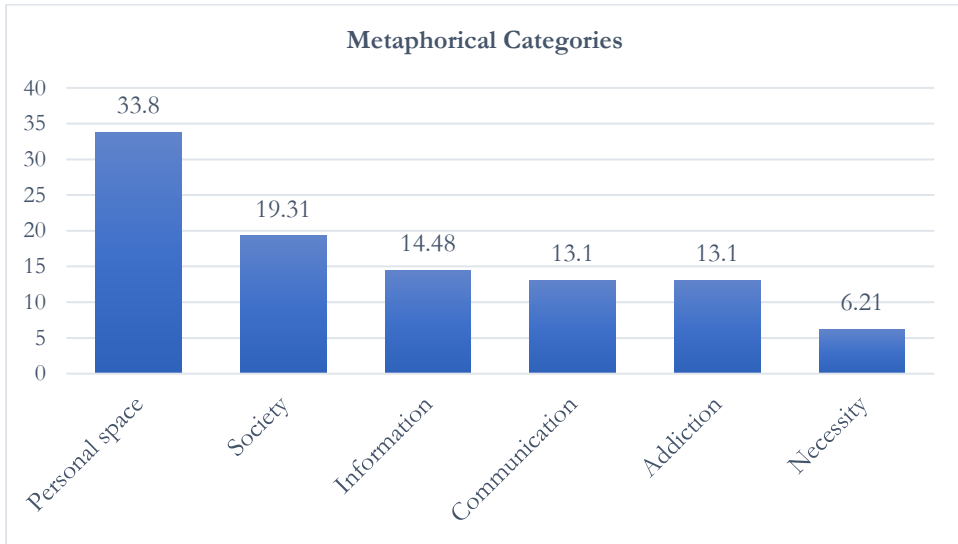


Table 1 represents the sub-themes of each metaphorical category. In the “personal space” category, there were nine metaphors: “diary,” “life/body,” “friends/close people,” “sharp objects,” “personal rooms/spaces,” “containers,” “accessories,” “gadgets,” and “animal.” For the “society” category, four metaphors included “community,” “public places,” “another world,” and “home.” The third category, “information,” encompassed the sub-themes “news/newspapers,” “book,” and “nature.” The “communication” category consisted of “tools/technology,” “meeting places/things,” and “conversation/talk.” In the “addiction” category, two metaphors were found: “drugs/medicines” and “addictive substances.” Finally, the “necessity” category comprised “food/water,” “money,” and “feeling.”

From these findings, it can be argued that social media was perceived and categorised into two spectrums: social and media, based on Page et al. (2014). For the social perspective, categories such as “personal space,” “society,” “addiction,” and “necessity” reveal the multifaceted conceptualisations of the social view. Regarding media, the categories “information” and “communication” were identified. However, these two

distinct spectrums are not discrete; instead, there is a mixture of the two concepts. This is exemplified in the following section.

Table 1

Sub-themes of Metaphorical Categories on Social Media

Categories	Metaphors	Frequencies	Percentage
Personal space	diary	13	
	life/body	9	
	friends/close people	9	
	sharp objects	6	
	personal rooms/spaces	4	
	containers	3	
	accessories	2	
	gadgets	2	
	animal	1	
<i>Subtotal</i>		49	33.80
Society	community	12	
	public places	8	
	another world	6	
	home	2	
<i>Subtotal</i>		28	19.31
Information	news/newspapers	10	
	book	8	
	nature	3	
<i>Subtotal</i>		21	14.48
Communication	tools/technology	9	
	meeting places/things	7	
	conversation/talk	3	
<i>Subtotal</i>		19	13.10
Addiction	drug/medicine	15	
	addictive substances	4	
<i>Subtotal</i>		19	13.10
Necessity	food/water	4	
	money	3	
	feeling	2	
<i>Subtotal</i>		9	6.21
Grand total		145	100%

1. Personal Space

In the “personal space” category, social media were primarily perceived as tools or media, with 33.80% (49 instances) of participants using it to keep their personal experiences, post their contents, and learn updated information. Metaphors found in this category included “diary,” “life/body,”

“friends/close people,” “sharp objects,” “personal rooms/spaces,” “containers,” “accessories,” “gadgets,” and “animal.”

In this category, it is interesting to note that “sharp objects,” “containers,” “accessories,” and “gadgets” are included because they symbolise how social media integrates into and influences personal and intimate aspects of users’ lives. This means that these metaphors capture the multifaceted ways in which users interact with social media, integrating it into their personal lives. Despite being objects, they symbolise various dimensions of personal engagement and the intimate role social media plays.

Table 2

“Personal Space” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
Diary	“diary,” “your own booklet,” “the area to keep memories”
Life/Body	“part of life,” “body,” “memory,” “organ,” “eye”
Friends/Close People	“friend,” “girlfriend,” “secretary,” “people”
Sharp Objects	“double-edged sword,” “knife,” “weapon”
Personal Rooms/Spaces	“bed,” “comfort space,” “an imaginary world of mine,” “virtual life”
Containers	“box,” “canvas,” “Genie of the lamp”
Accessories	“mirror,” “shoe”
Gadgets	“entertainment,” “headphones”
Animal	“bird”

Social media is often perceived as an extension of personal space, similar to keeping a diary or maintaining personal relationships. The frequent use of the “diary” metaphor indicates that users view social media as a platform for documenting and reflecting on their lives. This perception emphasises the intimate and personal nature of social media, where individuals can share their thoughts, experiences, and memories.

For examples,

I like to post some of photos or videos on a share story function on my Instagram. (S19)

You can keep any story in your life on social media ... for me I post a photo in my private account for keeping memories. (S20)

I actually post EVERYTHING on it in my private account as my daily diary. So, when I want to recap or miss those old days I just go through my social media and take a look those memories. (S113)

Comparisons to life or body parts suggest that social media is deeply integrated into users' daily routines, becoming almost inseparable from their identities. Meanwhile, metaphors like "sharp objects" highlight the potential risks associated with social media use, acknowledging that it can be both beneficial and harmful.

For examples,

Life/Body

"Part of life": There are many stories that interest me. (S127)

"Organ": It can update viral or news from around the world as a electronic newspaper. (S129)

"Eye": Many people in society constantly update and observe the situations in their hometowns to adapt and perceive them as if they were seeing them with their own eyes, becoming more aware of trends. (S138)

Sharp Objects

"Double-edged sword": It has both pros and cons if you use social media at the good way, it can make many benefits for you. (S23)

"Knife": It could be benefit for yourself if you use it in a good way but you don't it could cut or get worse. (S35)

Interestingly, the term "entertainment" appears under "gadgets" in "personal space" because users often perceived social media as a source of leisure and amusement, similar to how they use gadgets. Meanwhile, "headphones" are categorised under "gadgets" rather than "tool/technology" to emphasise their role in providing personal entertainment rather than merely being technological tools for community interactions. This is exemplified below:

"entertainment": I usually like to watch YouTube and IG reels. (S72)

"headphones": I can live without them but it's better to have them. (S117)

2. Society

Regarding the perception of social media as a "society", 19.31% (28 instances) of participants viewed social media as a representation of the social

aspects of life. This category includes metaphors such as “community,” “another world,” “public places,” and “home.”

Table 3

“Society” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
Community	“community,” “place,” “a real social,” “a park or public space”
Another World	“universe,” “another world,” “the metaverse of people,” “reduced world”
Public Places	“7-11,” “Thai market,” “classroom,” “gallery,” “masquerade,” “museum”
Home	“second home,” “another house in our life”

The perception of social media as a societal space highlights its role in fostering social interactions and public discourse. Describing it as a “community” or “place” suggests that users see social media as a venue for socialising, sharing ideas, and connecting with others. This communal aspect is vital for networking and forming social bonds.

For examples,

It is the platform that we can see friend’s activity and show your personal lifestyle. (S13)

When you use social media, you can connect the world in your phone; you can see and hear many posts from another side of the world in a few minute. (S103)

Metaphors like “another world” and “public spaces” reflect the immersive and expansive nature of social media, where users can escape from their immediate reality and engage with a broader, virtual community. Describing it as “home” conveys a sense of comfort and belonging, indicating that users often find a safe space on social media to express themselves and interact with like-minded individuals.

For examples,

Another World

“Another world”: It is another community that we are part of in the world of the internet. (S141)

“Metaverse of people”: Every people always used the platform of social media for communication with others. (S133)

Public Spaces

“7-11”: You can find a various type of content to consume, and it opens 24 hours, no closing days. (S1)

“Thai market”: (It) has many people, information and something that’s funny for exchange every day. (S57)

Home

“second home”: It has community to share and see people life on the internet. (S50)

“Another house in our life”: It is where you can show your personality and also your lifestyle with people you want to share with. You can talk to them, play games, share stories ,etc. These things are like the things you can do at home. Another reason is privacy. Like you can choose to lock the door or not , if not it means you allow other people to join with your life as a public account. Moreover, the reason is that in social media everyone has their own style like the house that is always different in each. (S73)

3. Information

The “information” category, representing 14.48 per cent (21 instances) of the metaphors, focused on the role of social media as an informational resource. This category includes metaphors such as “news/newspapers,” “book,” and “nature”.

Table 4

“Information” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
News/Newspapers	“news,” “newspaper,” “source”
Books	“book,” “friendship online book,” “book with many sections”
Nature	“forest,” “wind,” “planting a tree”

Social media is heavily perceived as an information hub. The comparison to “news” or “newspapers” highlights its role in providing real-time updates and keeping users informed about current events. This

perception reinforces the idea of social media as a critical source of information dissemination.

For examples,

News/Newspapers

“Newspaper”: I use it to keep up with local news, including updates from my friends, and for communication. (S41)

“Source”: It provides constant updates on important events such as weathers or politics. (S55)

Describing social media as a “book” suggests that users view it as a repository of knowledge, where they can learn and explore various topics. This serves as sources of learning with some aspects of social engagement. Metaphors related to nature, like “a forest” or “a wind,” imply that social media is a dynamic and constantly changing environment, reflecting the unpredictable flow of information and trends.

For examples,

Book

We can know everything about other people, news or anything we want to know. (S132)

They can keep in touch with others in your life and you can know about life of your friends. (S98)

Nature

“Forest”: Many things are going on, but you don’t know all of it. (S32)

“Wind”: It has new topic every day. Some days, it has a strong wind when social media has serious topic or social media issues. Thus, social like wind are calm and strong daily. (S68)

4. Communication

The “communication” category, representing 13.10% (19 instances) of the total, emphasised the communicative functions of social media. This category includes metaphors related to “tools/technology,” “meeting places/things,” and “conversation/talk.”

It is important to note that the “communication” category was created based on the assumption that social media serves as a platform or medium where users interact and communicate with each other, in addition to being a source of information in the “information” category. This

assumption takes into account the dynamic nature of information and communication.

Table 5

“Communication” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
Tools/Technology	“connector,” “tool,” “web,” “media,” the net”
Meeting Places/Things	“a bulletin board,” “a dining table,” “a letter,” “mails”
Conversation/Talk	“conversation,” “communication,” “talking”

Social media is perceived as a powerful communication tool. Metaphors like “a connector” or “a tool” emphasise its utility in linking people and facilitating interactions. This perception underscores the practical aspect of social media as a medium for staying in touch and communicating efficiently.

For examples,

Tools/Technology

“Connector”: It helps connect people together. (S16)

“Tool”: Using social media to communicate is now the easiest way to connect each other. (S58)

The use of meeting place metaphors, such as “a dining table” or “a bulletin board,” conveys the idea that social media serves as a virtual gathering space where people can share information, ideas, and experiences. Describing it as a “conversation” highlights its role in fostering dialogue and interaction among users, serving as a means of social interaction.

For examples,

Meeting Places

“Bulletin board”: We can see what they want us to see as a post (S9)

“Dining table”: It a place where we can share many things in life to our friends. (S22)

Conversation/Talk

“Conversation”: You can contact each other at any time. (S17)

“Communication”: Everyone can communicate and keep in touch. (S78)

5. Addiction

The “addiction” category accounted for 13.10 per cent (19 instances) of the metaphors, highlighting concerns about the potentially addictive nature of social media. This category includes metaphors related to “drug/medicine” and “addictive substances”.

Table 6

“Addiction” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
Drug/Medicine	“drug,” “medicine”
Addictive Substances	“addiction,” “nicotine,” “alcohol”

The frequent comparison of social media to addictive substances like drugs and nicotine reveals users’ awareness of its potentially addictive nature. These metaphors suggest that social media can be highly engaging, often leading to compulsive use and dependency.

For examples,

Drug/Medicine

“Drug”: Once you become addicted, you can’t stop using it. (S30)

“Drug”: We know it is not good, but we can’t stop keeping using them. (S95)

Addictive Substances

“Nicotine”: I addicted (to it). (S125)

“Alcohol”: It’s easily addictive (S69)

The perception of social media as an addiction highlights the darker side of its appeal, where users recognise the challenges of balancing its use with other aspects of life. The comparison to medicine also implies that, while potentially addictive, social media can have positive effects if used in moderation.

For example,

“Medicine”: There will be something to heal when you’re lonely. (S109)

6. Necessity

The “necessity” category accounted for 6.21% (9 instances) of the metaphors, reflecting the essential role that social media plays in modern life. This category includes metaphors related to “food/water,” “money,” and “feelings”.

Table 7

“Necessity” Subcategories

Subcategories	Example metaphors
Food/Water	“coffee,” “water,” “Oreo frappe,” “eating honey in a forest”
Money	“wallet,” “money,” “coin”
Feelings	“a need,” “necessity”

Describing social media as a necessity indicates that it is considered an essential part of modern life. Metaphors like “food” or “water” suggest that users see it as something fundamental to their daily existence, much like basic sustenance.

For examples,

Food/Water

“Oreo frappe”: It’s not a thing that everyone needs, but it’s a thing that everyone prefers. (S126)

“Water”: I want it every time. (S136).

The comparison to money highlights its value and indispensability, reflecting the idea that social media is crucial for various activities, including communication, information access, and entertainment. These metaphors highlight the pervasive role of social media in fulfilling daily needs and desires.

For examples,

Money

“A wallet”: We use it every day for many purposes such as communicating and online banking. (S64)

“Money”: We can’t live without money as social media that everyone can’t live without it. (S110)

Discussion

This study set out to investigate Thai university students' metaphorical perceptions of social media, aiming to understand how these perceptions could inform pedagogical practices in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. Using conceptual metaphors as a framework, this research provided insights into how social media is perceived and used among these participants.

Metaphorical Conceptualisations of Social Media

The study revealed a diverse range of metaphors used by Thai students to describe social media, aligning with the findings of previous studies in different cultural contexts. Key metaphors found in the present study were “personal space,” “society,” “information,” “communication,” “addiction,” and “necessity”.

In the present study, the “personal spaces” category led to perceptions of social media as a personal record and freedom. The “diary” was the most common, reflecting virtual spaces for identity reflection and memory keeping. This mirrors the “beauty pageant” metaphor by le Roux and Parry (2020), the “mirror” mirror by Reinhardt (2020) and the “ocean” and “garbage hole” metaphors by Kondratyeva and Novoklina (2020), but in Thai context, it is expressed as “diary” and “friends/close people.” This suggests that Thai learners perceive social media based on their local context. The use of “diary” indicates personal reflection, while “friends/close people” signifies social interactions within intimate circles, reflecting cultural values and daily experiences. This illustrates the importance of local context in shaping social media perceptions.

In terms of “society”, the “community” category was found the most frequent, extending the perceptions of self-reflection to a larger space for various types of people to interact. This reflects the “playground” metaphor by Reinhardt (2020) and the “town square” by le Roux and Parry (2020), highlighting a central meeting place for spontaneous interaction. Local context plays a significant role in shaping metaphorical perceptions of social media, illustrated by cultural analogies such as “7-11” and “Thai market” in Thailand. These places are seen as hubs of daily social interaction and community bonding, similar to the “playground” metaphor emphasising creativity and spontaneous interaction, and the “town square” metaphor highlighting public discourse and civic engagement. These metaphors—“community,” “7-11,” “Thai market,” “playground,” and “town square”—demonstrate how cultural contexts influence our understanding and use of

social media. Recognising these contexts is essential for designing culturally inclusive and sensitive social media platforms.

In the context of “information”, the category labelled as “news/newspapers” stands out significantly for its role in providing updated current events, thereby serving as a primary source of information. This findings aligns with Reinhardt’s (2020) “window” metaphor, suggesting that it offers learners an opportunity to engage deeply with authentic language usage. Notably, within this category, Thai participants used “news/newspapers” more than “books”, which is different from Sağar and Özçelik (2023). Nonetheless, both “news/newspapers” and “books” recognised by Thai university students as pertinent sources of information with their specific local educational settings. This perception is similar to the high school educational contexts described in Sağar and Özçelik (2023), indicating a shared understanding across different educational levels.

Regarding “communication”, the “tools/technology” category was the most prominent with various sub-categories, such as, “connector,” “tool,” “web,” “media,” and “the net”. These findings disregard Reinhardt’s (2020) proposal, which seeks to extend the perception of social media beyond traditional Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) frameworks. Instead, Thai participants viewed social media as a complex network for social connection, aligning with Kondratyeva and Novoklina’s (2020) descriptions of a “web,” “network,” and “jungle”. This conceptualisation aligns with the dual roles of ‘social’ and ‘media’ highlighted by Page et al. (2014) and Lehmann (2024), who describe social media as a medium for online communication where users interact within and across communities.

In the context of social media as an “addiction”, the most frequently used category was “drug/medicine”. This highlights the darker side of social media’s appeal, where users recognised the challenges of balancing its use with other aspects of life. This finding echoes Sağar and Özçelik’s (2023) “cigarette” metaphor within the “addiction” category. Notably, in the Thai context, the word “drug” was the most prominent, diverging from Sağar and Özçelik’s findings. This divergence reflects how Thai and Turkish cultures influence the definition of “addiction” through metaphorical categories. Interestingly, the study also revealed that “medicine” was associated with healing from loneliness, indicating a positive side of “addiction”.

Finally, the category “necessity” was mostly associated with “food/water” in terms of “coffee,” “eating honey in a forest,” “Oreo frappe,” and “water.” This finding is different from Sağar and Özçelik’s (2023) findings where “need” was perceived as a positive metaphor. However, in the Thai context, participants viewed “food/water” as not strictly necessary but rather as part of their daily routines. This reflects

heightened awareness regarding the excessive importance of social media. It reinforces the notion that life without social media is incomplete.

Students' Perceptions Towards Social Media

Based on the findings, three key themes regarding their perceptions of social media were found: Positive perceptions, negative perceptions, and ambivalent perceptions.

Positive Perceptions

Thai university students view social media as a beneficial tool in several ways. Firstly, it acts as a personal space where users can document their lives, similar to a diary. Students appreciate being able to keep and revisit memories, indicating social media's role in personal storytelling and memory preservation. This aligns with Reinhardt's (2010) "mirror" metaphor and le Roux and Parry's (2020) "beauty pageant" metaphor, which depict social media as a platform for self-expression and self-presentation. For instance, one student described it as *"the modern diary that allows us to document our lives, share it with others, and can go back to read again whenever you want."* It could be argued that the "personal space" metaphor, while appearing self-contained, represents a place of freedom where users may choose to interact with other social communities.

Social media also serves as a community platform, facilitating social interaction and connectivity. Students enjoy using it to stay in touch with friends and family, share life experiences, and participate in various online communities. This sense of connectedness is crucial, as one student noted, *"it's where you can communicate with friends,"* highlighting the platform's role in maintaining social bonds. This is supported by le Roux and Parry (2020), who found that social media enhances social capital by providing a space for individuals to maintain and strengthen relationships (like "a parliament" metaphor).

Additionally, social media is perceived as an important source of information. It provides access to news and knowledge, making it an educational tool. One student remarked, *"it can take you to learn anywhere around the world. You can access information more easily,"* emphasising its educational benefits. Sağar and Özçelik (2023) found that social media platforms can serve as effective tools for academic engagement and learning, providing students with access to a wealth of information and resources (as in "teacher" and "book" metaphors).

It can be summarised that the positive perceptions towards social media are represented in terms of individual freedom, a platform for social interaction and communication, and as an updated source of information.

Negative Perceptions

Conversely, some students express concerns about social media's negative impacts. A significant issue is its addictive nature, likened to addictive substances. Several metaphors such as “drug” and “medicine” illustrate how social media can lead to compulsive use, affecting students' time management and mental health. One student confessed, *“it makes me addicted,”* pointing to the potential for overuse and dependency. This concern is echoed by Kondratyeva and Novoklinova (2020) and Kaban (2021), who highlighted the prevalence of social media addiction and its negative impact on psychological well-being.

Moreover, social media is seen as a place where people hide their true identity as represented in “masquerade.” One student reported, *“As people assume their identity is completely covered up, they said what truly on their mind, or even, lie without consequence”* This suggests that individuals engage in inauthentic behaviour, leading to a loss of individuality. Kaban (2021) confirms this through a content analysis of Turkish participants, categorising metaphors such as “mask” under negative themes. The study highlights social media's role in deceptive self-representation and loss of authenticity.

Besides addiction and identity loss, social media is perceived to affect participants in terms of FOMO (fear of missing out). In the study, the “wind” metaphor was found to relate to this concept. One participant reported, *“It has new topic every day. Some days, it has a strong wind when social media has serious topic or social media issues. Thus, social like wind are calm and strong daily.”* This aligns with Wisessathorn et al. (2022), who identified FOMO as a significant factor in social media engagement, emphasising users' fear of missing out on current trends and events.

Finally, the “necessity” metaphors, such as “money,” denote that social media is perceived as a must-have thing in life. One participant confessed, *“We can't live without money as social media that everyone can't live without it.”* This negative perspective means that individuals see social media as indispensable to daily lives, similar to an essential commodity. This viewpoint is supported by Kondratyeva and Novoklinova (2020), who found that Russian participants viewed social networks as integral to their daily existence, with metaphors such as “home” and “ocean” affecting their significant role in storing information and time investment. Similarly, Wisessathorn et al.

(2022) identified that social media engagement involves a habitual component, further emphasising its perceived necessity in users' lives.

In summary, based on metaphorical perceptions, negative perspectives towards social media include its addictive nature, the potential for inauthentic behaviour, the fear of missing out on trends and events, and the perceived indispensability of social media in daily life.

Mixed Perceptions

Interestingly, many students recognise that social media has both benefits and drawbacks, depending on its usage. It is often described using ambivalent metaphors, such as “containers,” suggesting that its impact is contingent on how it is used. For example, a student stated, *“it could be something good and bad as how we use it,”* underscoring the dual nature of social media. This balanced view is supported by Sağar and Özçelik (2023), who found that the effects of social media on well-being depend on the context and manner of its use.

Another perspective is the idea of social media as a “personal room or space.” While it offers a retreat from the outside world and a platform for self-expression, it can also foster unrealistic self-presentation and social comparison. One student reflected, *“somebody really serious about how their social media looks from others’ perspective and they use it like it’s their own life,”* indicating the potential for social media to influence self-esteem and identity. This is consistent with the findings of Wisessathorn et al. (2022), who noted that social media can impact body image and self-esteem through constant exposure to idealised images.

Moreover, social media is seen as a “double-edged sword,” much like sharp objects. This suggests that social media is perceived as having the power to connect but also the potential to harm. This is reflected in statements such as, *“it can keep people in touch but also destroy mental health,”* highlighting the risks associated with excessive or inappropriate use. The dual nature of social media is discussed by Thianthai (2022), who argues that while it fosters connectivity, it can also lead to shallow interactions and increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety. It could be argued that while social media is useful for staying informed and connected, it also raises concerns about privacy, addiction, or misinformation.

Finally, one student reported, *“Sometimes we want to stick with them but sometimes not.”* as the “girlfriend” metaphor. This suggests an awareness of social media addiction while recognising the ability to disengage when necessary, reflecting both connection and burden. This aligns with Sağar and Özçelik’s (2023) findings, where social media was described using both

positive and negative metaphors, such as “happiness” and “addiction.” Similarly, Reinhart’s (2020) discussion of metaphors like “windows” and “playgrounds” highlights social media’s multifaceted nature. This “girlfriend” metaphor also echoes the ambivalence seen in Russian online discourse (Kondratyeva & Novoklinova (2020), which views social networks as both engaging and difficult to disconnect from.

In summary, social media involves a mix of personal expression and unrealistic self-presentation, connections between people and their potential to cause harm, such as mental health, as well as various uses with both benefits and burdens.

Conclusion

This study explored Thai university students’ metaphorical perceptions of social media. It was found that Thai university students categorised social media into six categories: “personal space,” “society,” “information,” “communication,” “addiction,” and “necessity.” This reviews how cultural context shapes these perceptions. For instance, social media was often linked to a “diary” or “friends/close people,” reflecting its role in personal reflection and social interaction. Additionally, metaphors like “7-11” and “Thai market” highlighted the community aspect, while “news/newspapers” denoted its function as an information source. These findings reveal that unique cultural expressions play an important role in social media perception by Thai EFL students.

Students’ perceptions of social media were categorised into positive, negative, and mixed views. Positively, social media was seen as a beneficial tool for personal storytelling, social connectivity, and accessing information. Conversely, negative perceptions included its addictive nature, fostering inauthentic behaviour, and inducing FOMO (fear of missing out). Mixed perceptions recognised social media’s dual nature, balancing its potential for personal expression and connection with risks of mental health issues and unrealistic self-presentation. These ambivalent views present the complexity of social media’s impact on users.

The research has two major implications. Firstly, theoretically, understanding metaphorical perceptions can enhance EFL instructors’ comprehension of how social media is integrated into Thai EFL students’ daily life and identity formation. Secondly, in terms of pedagogy, these insights can help EFL instructors design more culturally responsive EFL curricula that address students’ specific needs and concerns. For example, EFL instructors can use the “diary” metaphor to guide journaling activities on social media platforms, which provide a familiar and engaging way for

students to practice English. In terms of negative perceptions such as “addiction,” EFL teachers can incorporate digital literacy education which helps equip students with the skills to navigate social media responsibly while using it as a tool for language learning. This method, which integrates content and language instruction, can be particularly effective in making lessons relevant and practical for students (Kanokpermpoon, 2023). In addition, recognising social media as a “community space” suggests integrating collaborative projects that use social media to connect students with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Such projects can foster intercultural communication skills and provide authentic contexts for language use, making the learning experience more meaningful and dynamic.

However, this study has limitations in terms of cultural specificity, limited sample size, and reliance on self-reported data, which may affect generalisability. In the present study, only Thai EFL students in a particular setting were recruited, which resulted in culturally bounded perceptions like “7-11” and “Thai market.” This suggests the needs for other groups of EFL students to compare the results. Additionally, self-reported data using the elicitation task for metaphorical perception might not explicitly capture social media perceptions compared to authentic language use. Further research could incorporate multiple methods into the enquiry, such as, interviewing participants, or conducting comparative studies with specific interventions in using English in social media.

Acknowledgements

This research project was supported by research funding (Contract No 03/2567) from the Language Institute of Thammasat University.

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Appendix A

Social Media Perception Questionnaire

This study aims to understand how Thai citizens perceive the use of social media in the Thai context.

Your information will only be used in the present study in terms of research summary and publication. No personal information will be shown elsewhere.

This form is open for your personal judgement, and you may close this form at any time you prefer.

Part 1: Social Media Use

Directions: Please choose the best answer that applies to you for each question.

1. How old are you?
☐ Under 18 ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34
☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54
2. How many hours do you spend on social media every day?
☐ Less than 1 hour ☐ 1 hour ☐ 2-3 hours
☐ 4-5 hours ☐ More than 5 hours
3. How many social media sites are you on?
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3
☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 and above
4. How often do you post on social media?
☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Monthly
☐ Other, please specify _____

Part 2: Social Media Perception

Directions: Please write to complete the following sentence in English. Please provide both parts of the statement.

The statement to be completed is: "Social media is like ... because ..."
