

Students' Perceptions of Social Media Information Through the Lens of Critical Digital Literacy

Alfian¹, Meiyanti Nurchaerani²

¹Universitas Esa Unggul,

²Universitas Esa Unggul

Email Correspondence: alfian@esaunggul.ac.id

Abstract

Social media has become an essential part of students' daily lives and a dominant source of information. However, the reliability and bias of online information often remain unquestioned. This study investigates how senior high school students perceive and evaluate information from social media within the context of critical digital literacy. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through interviews and observations involving students who actively engage with social media for academic and personal purposes. The findings reveal that while some students demonstrated an awareness of the need for digital literacy, the majority relied on social validation cues such as likes, shares, and comments to assess the credibility of content. The study underscores the need for digital literacy education that goes beyond basic technical skills to foster critical thinking and the ability to evaluate online information effectively.

Keywords: Digital Literacy; Social Media; Critical Awareness; Digital Education

Introduction

Social media has become one of the primary gateways through which students encounter news, academic resources, and everyday information. Platforms such as *Instagram*, *TikTok*, *X*, and *YouTube* are no longer used solely for entertainment but they function as powerful information environments that shape how young people learn, form opinions, and participate in civic life. Abdullah (2022) asserted that students widely recognize social media's benefits for communication, collaboration, and learning. However, it brings considerable risk as the rapid pace and algorithm driven amplification inherent to social media tend to favor emotionally charged content and immediate sharing resulting unverified, biased, or deliberately misleading information (Al-rawi & Al-rawi, 2017; Ana, Pedrero-esteban, Rubio-romero, & Jim, 2021). In line with this risk, Johnston, et al (2020) found that high school students struggled to evaluate news shared via social media and often relied on superficial features such as images, headlines, and popularity cues when judging accuracy.

Although senior high school students are highly active in the digital world, there remains a significant gap in their ability to assess the credibility of information obtained from social media. Many youths overestimate their ability to detect false information, yet frequently fail to recognize misleading content and tend to respond passively, for example by ignoring it rather than challenging or verifying it. In other words, students are immersed in digital environments but are not always equipped to engage with them critically (Kops, Schittenhelm, & Wachs, 2025). In Indonesia context, Nafisah et.al (2024) found that Social media seems to have only a modest impact on students' overall school experience and their academic pursuits are influenced by both the positive and negative consequences of social media use. Similarly, Dharmastuti and colleagues (2020) reported that adolescents' critical thinking before sharing social media content was strongly influenced by attitudes, perceived control, and their level of digital media literacy.

Given these challenges, the concept of critical digital literacy has become increasingly important. Critical digital literacy refers to the ability to not only consume digital content but to engage with it thoughtfully, discerning its reliability, recognizing bias, and understanding its implications. This study seeks to explore how students perceive and evaluate the information they encounter on social media platforms through the lens of critical digital literacy. It aims to investigate the cognitive processes, external factors, and challenges that students face when assessing the reliability and bias of online content.

By understanding these perceptions, this research aims to shed light on how students navigate the complexities of digital information, both for academic and personal purposes, and the factors that influence their critical judgment in the context of their digital literacy. Through this exploration, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how students interact with and

make sense of the vast amount of information available on social media today. This research aims to answer the key question: How do senior high school students perceive and assess the reliability and bias of information from social media platforms, and what factors shape their critical judgment within the framework of their digital literacy?

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Digital Literacy and Social Media Information Evaluation

Critical digital literacy has emerged as a key concept in understanding how individuals, particularly students, engage with and evaluate information in digital environments. Digital literacy encompasses the ability to use digital tools effectively, however, critical digital literacy extends this concept to involve skills in evaluating the reliability, bias, and ethical implications of online content. This framework emphasizes the need for students not only to consume information but also to critically assess its credibility and relevance, particularly in an age where misinformation spreads easily through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Social media platforms, by their nature, prioritize engagement driven content, often favoring sensational, emotionally charged material. Algorithms on these platforms are designed to amplify content that garners immediate reactions, regardless of its truthfulness or educational value. This raises concerns, particularly in the context of high school students who are frequent social media users but may lack the necessary skills to discern fact from misinformation. According to Heiss et.al (2023), the fast paced nature of social media and its algorithmic biases create an environment where students are more likely to be exposed to, and share, unverified or biased content. These challenges necessitate the development of critical digital literacy frameworks, designed to help students evaluate and engage with information responsibly.

To overcome these challenges, it is suggested that digital literacy programs need to be dynamic and adaptable, continually evolving to reflect the changing nature of digital media. Furthermore, educators should focus not only on providing students with the tools to assess information but also on fostering a deeper understanding of the ethical implications of digital content, encouraging responsible engagement with online platforms.

Students' Evaluation of Information on Social Media in Indonesian Context

In Indonesia, research on students' ability to evaluate social media content reveals that students possess a solid awareness of how to verify digital information and protect personal data. However, they face significant challenges, such as insufficient understanding of the importance of digital literacy and difficulties in distinguishing reliable information (Amalliah, Sihombing, Salsabila, & Habibi, 2025). Moreover, Silvhiany et.al (2021), showed that many Indonesian EFL-students, despite regular social media use, they had difficulty distinguishing reliable online content, underscoring that awareness does not always translate into effective evaluation.

These studies collectively underscore the challenges Indonesian students face when evaluating social media content. Despite being digital natives, many students lack the essential critical skills needed to engage with online content responsibly. The rapid spread of misinformation indicated that there is an urgent need for more comprehensive digital literacy programs in Indonesian schools, specifically designed to equip students with the skills to critically evaluate social media, identify bias, and make informed decisions about the content they consume and share.

Impact of Social Media Features on Information Evaluation

The design of social media platforms plays a crucial role in shaping how students assess and interact with information. Features such as algorithms, content recommendations, and the ability to quickly share information amplify both true and false content. These platform characteristics create an environment where students are more likely to encounter emotionally charged content, which can be misleading or polarizing (Al-rawi & Al-rawi, 2017).

Furthermore, the visual elements of platforms like Instagram and YouTube significantly influence students' judgments of credibility. Research has shown that students are more inclined to trust content that is visually attractive or highly engaged with, often without critically evaluating its substance. This reliance on visual cues diverts attention from a more thorough evaluation of content based on logic and evidence (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore how senior high school students in Indonesia evaluate information on social media platforms. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions, decision making processes, and the challenges they face in distinguishing reliable from unreliable content online. This design allows for an in-depth examination of students' experiences with social media and their cognitive approaches to evaluating the credibility of digital information (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, 2018).

The participants of this study consisted of 30 senior high school students, ages 16 to 18, selected from a public school in Jakarta, Indonesia. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which focused on those who are active users of social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). The sample was chosen to ensure students had sufficient exposure to and experience with social media content, making them ideal candidates for the study. The participants were selected to represent a variety of academic backgrounds and genders, ensuring a well-rounded sample. Consent was obtained from the students and their anonymity was guaranteed throughout the research process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 30 participants to explore their strategies for evaluating social media content. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to ensure clear communication. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis. The interview guide focused on several key areas, including the students' social media usage patterns, the approaches they use to verify information, the challenges they face in distinguishing reliable from unreliable content, and their overall attitudes toward digital literacy and its importance. Along with the interviews, participant observation was employed to gather additional contextual data on how the students interacted with social media in everyday settings. The researcher observed the students during classroom activities and informal peer discussions related to social media.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews and participant observations were analyzed using thematic analysis since it helps the researcher to identify and interpret patterns (or themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, open coding was conducted, where significant phrases or segments from the data were identified and labeled with codes. These codes were generated inductively, focusing on recurring patterns such as students' strategies for verifying information, their challenges with distinguishing misinformation, and their attitudes toward social media literacy. In the final step, the researcher interpreted the identified themes in relation to the existing literature on digital literacy and social media use.

Findings and Discussions

Using semi-structured interviews and participant observation, data were collected from 30 high school students, ages 16 to 18, at a public high school in Jakarta, Indonesia. The data analysis revealed several key themes that reflect students' perceptions, decision-making processes, and the challenges they face in distinguishing reliable from unreliable content on these social media platforms.

Students' Approaches to Evaluating Social Media Content

The first theme that emerged from the data is the variety of approaches students use to evaluate the reliability of content on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. While some students demonstrated a strong sense of digital literacy, most relied on basic digital skill to assess credibility. Specifically, students often based their judgments on visual cues such as the number of likes, shares, and comments a post receives, particularly on visually driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These cues were frequently used as indicators of social validation, where the more likes or shares a post has, the more likely students felt it was trustworthy. For instance, one participant shared:

"I usually look at the number of likes or comments. If a post has many likes, it feels like it's more trustworthy, especially on Instagram."

This reliance on social validation can be explained by the algorithmic design of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which prioritize content that generates high engagement, making it more visible to users. As a result, students are often exposed to content that has already been validated through widespread engagement, reinforcing the idea that popularity correlates with credibility. This

form of content consumption is prevalent in a media environment where immediate, visually appealing content is prioritized over more deliberate, in-depth evaluation of information (Friggeri, Eckles, & Cheng, 2014). However, despite their reliance on social validation cues, several students acknowledged the limitations of using such metrics as indicators of trustworthiness. For example, while many students noted that posts with high engagement made them feel the content was reliable, they also admitted that they rarely questioned the accuracy or bias of the content itself. One participant said:

"I look at the likes, but I don't check if the information is correct. If it has many likes, I assume it's okay."

This statement reveals an important aspect of how students interact with social media content: they often take shortcuts in evaluation, assuming that popular content is automatically credible. However, as noted by other students, they sometimes realize that content that gains traction can still be misleading or biased, but the fast-paced nature of social media and the overwhelming amount of content make it difficult to engage in more thorough evaluations.

This observation aligns with Pennycook and Rand's (2018) findings, which suggest that social media users, particularly younger audiences, often mistake popularity for truth and use engagement metrics like likes and shares as a proxy for reliability. It also reflects confirmation bias, where students tend to trust content that aligns with their beliefs and is validated by their social circles or the broader online community.

Several students reflected on their awareness of this limitation, noting that while they relied on engagement metrics, they were also starting to question this approach. However, despite this awareness, they struggled to implement more rigorous verification strategies. The gap between awareness and application of critical thinking skills in evaluating online content suggests the need for formal digital literacy education that teaches students not only to recognize these biases but also to apply critical evaluation techniques consistently across platforms.

In conclusion, students' reliance on social validation cues such as likes and shares reflects the ease with which social media users accept popular content as credible. While this approach may be quick and convenient, it also opens the door for misinformation and misleading content to spread widely. Addressing this issue requires moving beyond the superficial evaluation of engagement metrics and fostering more critical engagement with content that encourages students to question its accuracy, source, and potential biases, regardless of its popularity on social media platforms.

Lack of Critical Thinking Skills in Content Evaluation

The theme of lack of critical thinking skills when evaluating content on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X was a significant finding in this study. Despite being frequent users of these platforms, most students struggled to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information, which aligns with prior research highlighting the challenges faced by young people in critically engaging with online content (Narmanlioğlu & Bayrakçı, 2021). This inability to engage in deep critical analysis may stem from several factors, including the design of social media platforms, the lack of digital literacy education, and the overwhelming amount of information available.

Many students admitted that they had never been taught how to critically assess social media content in school, which is consistent with findings from Leu et al. (2015), who noted that digital literacy education is often underemphasized in traditional curricula. While students were often aware that not all information on social media could be trusted, they reported relying on superficial indicators, such as platform popularity or the familiarity of content creators, to assess content credibility. For example, one participant said:

"If the news is on Instagram or a well-known YouTube channel, I believe it's true. I don't think to double-check it."

This reliance on the platform's popularity or influencers as indicators of trustworthiness highlights a shallow evaluation process. On platforms like TikTok and YouTube, where content creators often build large followings, students may trust the content simply because of the creator's popularity or the platform's reputation, rather than critically evaluating the actual information presented.

The lack of critical thinking also reflects the speed and ease with which information is shared on social media platforms. Students are often exposed to a high volume of content in a short amount of time, and the fast-paced nature of platforms like TikTok and Instagram makes it challenging for them to pause and critically evaluate each piece of information. The instant gratification provided by these platforms, where content is consumed rapidly and shared immediately, creates an environment where superficial evaluations dominate, and deeper engagement with the content is rare.

In conclusion, the lack of critical thinking in students' approach to evaluating social media content highlights a significant gap in their ability to engage with online information responsibly. As digital literacy continues to play an increasingly important role in shaping how students consume information, it is crucial for educational systems to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of social media content critically. Without such training, students will remain vulnerable to misinformation, confirmation bias, and the overwhelming influence of social validation cues, limiting their ability to make informed decisions in the digital world.

Challenges in Distinguishing Misinformation from Reliable Information

The third theme, challenges in distinguishing misinformation from reliable information, sheds light on a growing issue that is increasingly relevant in today's digital age. The students in this study reported that the speed at which content is shared, combined with the emotionally charged nature of much online content, made it difficult for them to engage in meaningful evaluation of the information they encountered.

This observation aligns with previous research showing that content that evokes strong emotional reactions is more likely to be shared and believed, even if it is inaccurate. Friggeri et al. (2014), demonstrated that emotionally engaging content on social media has a higher likelihood of being shared, despite its reliability. Similarly, Pennycook and Rand (2018) argue that emotional content often plays a significant role in spreading misinformation, as it typically bypasses critical reasoning processes in favor of immediate emotional responses.

One of the key findings of this study was that students often failed to engage in deep critical evaluation of online content, especially when it was emotionally compelling. The students' reliance on content that aligns with their personal beliefs or emotional reactions underscores the importance of addressing confirmation bias in digital literacy education. The confirmation bias observed in this study supports the findings of Friggeri et al. (2014), who highlight how biases influence the decision-making process, leading individuals to selectively accept information that confirms their existing views while ignoring information that challenges them. As one student noted in the interview:

"When I see something that confirms what I already think, I don't check it, because I feel like it's probably true."

The challenge of distinguishing misinformation from reliable information is further exacerbated by the overload of information that students face on social media. The sheer volume of content shared daily on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X makes it increasingly difficult to engage in careful analysis and fact-checking. As Leu et al. (2015), have also emphasized, the digital literacy gap becomes more pronounced in environments where users must quickly filter through large amounts of unverified information.

The findings of this study underscore the significant challenge students face in distinguishing misinformation from reliable information in the fast-paced digital landscape of social media. Students reported that the speed at which content is shared, combined with its emotionally charged nature, often hindered their ability to engage in thorough and meaningful evaluation.

The overwhelming volume of content shared daily on social media platforms makes it even more difficult for students to engage in careful evaluation and fact-checking. With such a vast amount of unverified information available, students struggle to filter through it and this highlights the pressing need for digital literacy education that not only teaches students how to verify online information but also helps them recognize and overcome their own biases and emotional responses when interacting with content.

Conclusion

This study explored how senior high school students in Indonesia evaluate social media content, focusing on their ability to distinguish between reliable information and misinformation. The findings reveal that students rely on a variety of approaches to assess the credibility of content on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), with a significant emphasis on social validation cues such as likes, shares, and comments. While some students demonstrated a basic understanding of digital literacy, most depended on these superficial indicators, assuming that popular content is automatically trustworthy. However, students acknowledged the limitations of this approach, recognizing that popularity does not necessarily equate to credibility, but still struggled to implement more rigorous evaluation methods.

The study also highlighted a lack of critical thinking skills in students when engaging with social media content. Despite frequent use of platforms, most students struggled to critically assess the reliability of the information they encountered. Furthermore, the study revealed the challenges students face in distinguishing misinformation from reliable information. The fast pace at which content spreads, coupled with its emotionally charged nature, often prevents students from engaging in meaningful evaluation. Students reported that emotional content, which typically triggers immediate reactions, was more likely to be trusted and shared, regardless of its accuracy. This highlights the importance of addressing confirmation bias in digital literacy education, as students often trust content that aligns with their personal beliefs or emotional reactions.

In conclusion, while students are highly engaged with social media, their ability to evaluate information critically remains underdeveloped. This research underscores the urgent need for schools to implement digital literacy programs that not only teach students how to verify information but also help them recognize and manage their biases, emotional responses, and the influence of social media algorithms. By equipping students with these essential skills, educators can foster a generation of more informed, responsible digital citizens capable of navigating the complexities of social media content with greater discernment and accountability.

While this study contributes valuable insights into how students evaluate social media content, future research can build on these findings by expanding the sample size, including more platforms, and using longitudinal designs to assess the long-term impact of digital literacy interventions.

References

- Al-rawi, A., & Al-rawi, A. (2017). Viral News on Social Media. *Digital Journalism*, 0811(October), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1387062>
- Alshalawi, A. S. (2022). *The Influence of Social Media Networks on Learning Performance and Students' Perceptions of Their Use in Education: A Literature Review*. 14(4).
- Amalliah, A., Sihombing, M., Salsabila, C., & Habibi, M. (2025). *Innovative Education Strategies for Enhancing Digital Literacy and Student Intelligence*. 2(2).
- Ana, P., Pedrero-esteban, L. M., Rubio-romero, J., & Jim, C. (2021). *Fake News Reaching Young People on Social Networks: Distrust Challenging Media Literacy*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. In *Writing Center Talk over Time* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469237-3>
- Dharmastuti, A., Budi, B., & Hitipeuw, I. (2020). *Adolescent Critical Thinking prior to Social Media Information Sharing*. 13(10), 1195–1213.
- Friggeri, A., Eckles, D., & Cheng, J. (2014). *Rumor Cascades*. 101–110.
- Heiss, R., & Nanz, A. (2023). *Computers in Human Behavior Social media information literacy: Conceptualization and associations with information overload, news avoidance and conspiracy mentality*. 148(July). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107908>
- Johnston, N., & Johnston, N. (2020). Living in the World of Fake News: High School Students' Evaluation of Information from Social Media Sites Living in the World of Fake News: High School Students' Evaluation of Information from Social Media Sites. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 69(4), 430–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2020.1821146>
- Kops, M., Schittenhelm, C., & Wachs, S. (2025). Computers in Human Behavior Young people and false information: A scoping review of responses, influential factors, consequences, and prevention programs. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 169(February), 108650.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108650>

- Leu, D. J. (2015). *The New Literacies of Online Research and Comprehension : Rethinking the Reading Achievement Gap*. 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.85>
- Mihailidis, P., & Viotty, S. (2017). *Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture : Civic Expression , Fake News , and the Role of Media Literacies in “ Post-Fact ” Society*. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217701217>
- Nafisah, A., Ahmed, N. S., Balamurugan, T., & Gimka, K. (2024). *The Effect of Social Media on Students ' School Life in Indonesia*. 3(2), 80–90.
- Narmanlıoğlu, H., & Bayrakçı, S. (2021). Digital literacy as whole of digital competences: scale development study tt - digital literacy as whole of digital competences: scale development study. *Düşünce ve Toplum Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (4), 1–30.
- Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2018). *Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news*. 147(12), 1865–1880. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000465>.Fake
- Silvhiany, S. (2021). *Critical Digital Literacy : EFL Students ' Ability to Evaluate Online Sources*. 6(1), 249–269.