

Digital Media Literacy Among University Students: Evaluating Information Awareness and Social Media Practices at Universitas Negeri Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the level of digital media literacy among students of Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), particularly in relation to information awareness and social media practices. A quantitative survey design was employed involving 55 active undergraduate students selected through non-probability sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on four dimensions of media literacy: information access, information evaluation, digital awareness, and responsible social media use. The instrument was validated through expert judgment and demonstrated acceptable reliability. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and mean scores. The findings indicate that UNIMED students generally possess a high level of digital media literacy. Students demonstrate strong awareness of the importance of verifying information, understanding the potential risks of misinformation, and utilizing social media responsibly. However, the results also reveal that awareness does not always translate into consistent information verification practices, indicating a gap between digital literacy knowledge and actual online behavior. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening media literacy education within higher education institutions through the integration of critical thinking, information verification, and digital citizenship competencies. This study contributes empirical evidence on university students' digital media literacy and provides recommendations for developing educational strategies that foster responsible and critical engagement with social media.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tingkat literasi media digital di kalangan mahasiswa Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), khususnya dalam kaitannya dengan kesadaran informasi dan praktik media sosial. Desain survei kuantitatif digunakan yang melibatkan 55 mahasiswa sarjana aktif yang dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel non-probabilitas. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner terstruktur berdasarkan empat dimensi literasi media: akses informasi, evaluasi informasi, kesadaran digital, dan penggunaan media sosial yang bertanggung jawab. Instrumen ini divalidasi melalui penilaian ahli dan menunjukkan keandalan yang dapat diterima. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, termasuk persentase dan skor rata-rata. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa UNIMED umumnya memiliki tingkat literasi media digital yang tinggi. Siswa menunjukkan kesadaran yang kuat akan pentingnya memverifikasi informasi, memahami potensi risiko misinformasi, dan memanfaatkan media sosial secara bertanggung jawab. Namun, hasilnya juga mengungkapkan bahwa kesadaran tidak selalu diterjemahkan ke dalam praktik verifikasi informasi yang konsisten, menunjukkan kesenjangan antara pengetahuan literasi digital dan perilaku online yang sebenarnya. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya penguatan pendidikan literasi media di institusi pendidikan tinggi melalui integrasi pemikiran kritis, verifikasi informasi, dan kompetensi kewarganegaraan digital. Studi ini menyumbangkan bukti empiris tentang literasi media digital mahasiswa dan memberikan rekomendasi untuk mengembangkan strategi pendidikan yang menumbuhkan keterlibatan yang bertanggung jawab dan kritis dengan media sosial.

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Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the way individuals access, produce, and disseminate information. Among the most significant manifestations of this transformation is the widespread adoption of social media platforms, which have become integral to daily communication, information exchange, entertainment, and educational activities (Nasrullah, 2017). Social media enables users to interact without spatial and temporal limitations, creating an interconnected digital environment that influences social, cultural, political, and educational practices worldwide (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

University students represent one of the most active demographic groups in social media utilization. As digital natives, students rely heavily on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook for academic communication, information seeking, networking, and self-expression (Prensky, 2001). At Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), social media has become an essential component of students' academic and social lives, facilitating access to learning resources, collaborative discussions, organizational activities, and professional development opportunities.

Despite its numerous benefits, the increasing dependence on social media has also generated significant challenges. The digital ecosystem is characterized by information abundance, algorithmic filtering, misinformation, disinformation, clickbait content, cyberbullying, and privacy risks (Livingstone, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). The ease with which information can be created and shared allows users to function simultaneously as content consumers and producers, often without sufficient verification of information sources. Consequently, individuals may become vulnerable to false information, ideological manipulation, and digital exploitation if they lack adequate media literacy competencies (Potter, 2019).

Media literacy has emerged as a critical competency in the digital era. It refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate messages across various media platforms while understanding the social, economic, political, and technological contexts in which media operate (Potter, 2019; Hobbs, 2010). Media literacy extends beyond technical skills and encompasses critical thinking, ethical awareness, digital responsibility, and reflective engagement with media content. Individuals with strong media literacy skills are more capable of identifying misinformation, evaluating source credibility, understanding persuasive strategies, and participating responsibly in digital environments (Koltay, 2011).

For university students, media literacy is particularly important because academic success increasingly depends on the ability to locate, evaluate, and utilize reliable information. Students who possess inadequate media literacy may experience difficulties distinguishing factual information from misinformation, interpreting media messages critically, and maintaining ethical digital behavior (Livingstone et al., 2021). Furthermore, excessive and uncritical use of social media has been associated with information overload, reduced attention spans, polarization, and various psychosocial consequences (Guess et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Previous studies have demonstrated that media literacy contributes positively to critical thinking, digital citizenship, information evaluation skills, and responsible online participation (Hobbs, 2010; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Research conducted among university students in various countries has shown that higher levels of media literacy are associated with stronger resistance to misinformation and more effective use of digital information resources (Vraga & Tully, 2021). However, existing studies have predominantly focused on digital literacy in general,

misinformation detection, or social media usage behavior. Empirical investigations specifically examining the level of media literacy among university students in Indonesian higher education contexts remain relatively limited, particularly within regional public universities.

Moreover, previous studies in Indonesia have largely concentrated on internet usage patterns, digital competencies, and online learning adaptation, while relatively few have comprehensively assessed students' media literacy across cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral dimensions in relation to social media use (Kurnia & Astuti, 2017; Nugroho et al., 2021). Consequently, there remains a need for empirical evidence regarding how university students critically engage with social media content and how prepared they are to navigate contemporary digital information environments.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the level of media literacy among students of Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) in using social media. Specifically, the study examines students' abilities to access, understand, evaluate, and utilize information obtained through social media platforms. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on media literacy in higher education and provide empirical insights for developing digital literacy and media education programs within Indonesian universities. Furthermore, the study offers practical implications for strengthening students' critical media competencies, fostering responsible digital citizenship, and enhancing the educational potential of social media in the contemporary digital society.

Although numerous studies have examined digital literacy, social media use, and information behavior among university students, most have focused on technological competencies, online learning adaptation, or general digital skills rather than specifically investigating media literacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing access, analysis, evaluation, and responsible media engagement (Hobbs, 2010; Koltay, 2011; Kurnia & Astuti, 2017). Furthermore, previous studies have predominantly explored media literacy within Western contexts or among secondary school students, while empirical evidence concerning media literacy levels among Indonesian university students remains relatively limited. Existing research also tends to emphasize the risks of social media use without adequately assessing students' critical capacities to interpret, verify, and utilize information encountered in digital environments (Livingstone et al., 2021; Vraga & Tully, 2021).

Consequently, there remains a significant research gap regarding the actual level of media literacy among higher education students in regional Indonesian universities and how they navigate increasingly complex social media ecosystems. Addressing this gap, the present study offers novelty by providing an empirical assessment of media literacy among Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) students through an analysis of cognitive, evaluative, and behavioral dimensions of social media use. The study contributes to the growing discourse on digital citizenship and media education by generating contextual evidence from an Indonesian higher education setting, thereby offering practical implications for strengthening media literacy programs and promoting responsible digital engagement among university students.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive survey design to analyze the level of media literacy among Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) students in using social media. A survey method was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to collect data from a relatively large number of respondents and describe existing conditions objectively

through numerical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study was conducted between October and November 2025 at Universitas Negeri Medan. The target population consisted of undergraduate students actively enrolled at UNIMED and actively using social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), and YouTube. A total of 55 students participated in the study. Respondents were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. This sampling method was chosen because the study aimed to obtain preliminary descriptive data regarding students' media literacy levels and because respondents were recruited based on accessibility and willingness to participate in the online survey (Etikan et al., 2016). Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it is widely used in exploratory and descriptive studies involving university students.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via WhatsApp and Instagram. The questionnaire was developed based on media literacy dimensions proposed by Potter (2019) and Hobbs (2010), encompassing four major dimensions: (1) media access, referring to students' ability to access and utilize social media platforms; (2) media understanding, referring to the ability to comprehend information and media messages; (3) critical evaluation, referring to the ability to assess information credibility and identify misinformation; and (4) responsible media use, referring to ethical and responsible behavior in social media engagement. The instrument consisted of 20 statements measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire underwent content validation through expert judgment involving two lecturers specializing in educational technology and digital literacy. Suggestions from the experts were incorporated to improve item clarity, relevance, and construct representation. Instrument reliability was subsequently tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The reliability analysis yielded an Alpha value exceeding 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and reliability of the instrument for research purposes (Hair et al., 2019).

The collected data were processed through editing, coding, scoring, and tabulation stages before being analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. The analysis included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to describe students' media literacy levels. To facilitate interpretation, media literacy scores were categorized using the following interval criteria: 1.00–2.33 = Low, 2.34–3.66 = Moderate, and 3.67–5.00 = High. These categories were adapted from commonly used Likert-scale interpretation procedures in educational and social science research (Sugiyono, 2022).

Research ethics were carefully considered throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained electronically at the beginning of the survey. Respondents were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and all information collected would be used solely for academic research purposes. Participants were also informed that they could discontinue their participation at any stage without any consequences.

Table 1. Operational Definition of Media Literacy Variables

Dimension	Indicator	Number of Items
Media Access	Ability to access and use social media platforms	5
Media Understanding	Ability to understand media messages and information	5

Dimension	Indicator	Number of Items
Critical Evaluation	Ability to verify information and identify misinformation	5
Responsible Media Use	Ethical and responsible use of social media	5
Total		20 Items

Results and Discussion

Media Literacy Level of UNIMED Students in Using Social Media

The findings indicate that UNIMED students generally demonstrate a relatively high level of media literacy across the four dimensions examined: information access, information analysis, information evaluation, and responsible media use. The descriptive analysis shows that students are accustomed to accessing information through social media and possess adequate skills to evaluate information credibility before sharing content. To provide a clearer overview, Table 2 summarizes the average score for each media literacy dimension.

Table 2. Recapitulation of Media Literacy Levels among UNIMED Students

Dimension	Mean Score	Category
Information Access	4.18	High
Information Analysis	4.07	High
Information Evaluation	3.96	High
Responsible Media Use	4.12	High
Overall Media Literacy	4.08	High

Note: Categories were determined using the following intervals: 1.00–2.33 (Low), 2.34–3.66 (Moderate), and 3.67–5.00 (High).

The results indicate that the highest score was obtained in the information access dimension, suggesting that students are highly familiar with digital platforms and social networking applications. Meanwhile, the lowest score appeared in the information evaluation dimension, indicating that although students actively consume information, critical assessment of content credibility remains an area requiring further improvement.

Information Access Competency

The findings reveal that most students use social media as a primary source of information for academic, social, and entertainment purposes. Respondents reported frequent access to various platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and YouTube. This finding reflects the characteristics of Generation Z as digital natives who have grown up in an environment saturated with digital technologies (Prensky, 2001).

The high score in information access demonstrates that students possess strong technical skills in navigating digital platforms. This finding is consistent with the Digital Literacy Framework proposed by Van Dijk (2020), which emphasizes operational and informational skills as foundational competencies for effective digital participation.

However, access alone does not guarantee meaningful media literacy. Potter (2019) argues that media literacy extends beyond information consumption and requires individuals to actively process and interpret media messages. Therefore, the ability to access information should be accompanied by analytical and evaluative competencies.

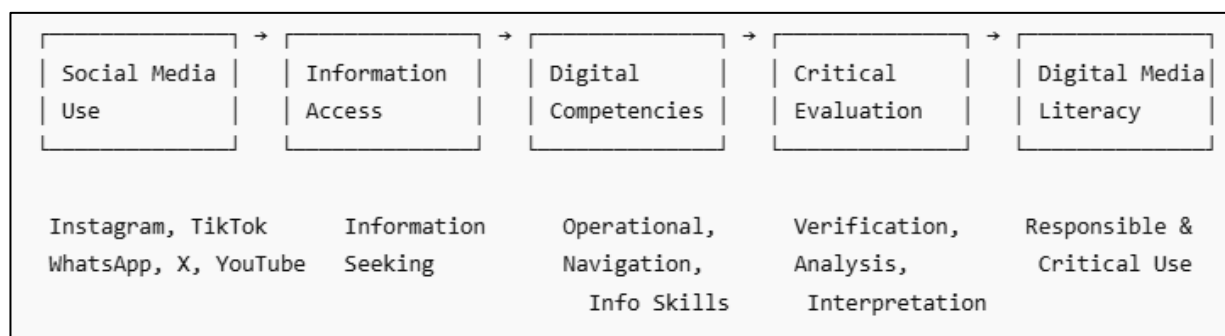


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway from social media use to digital media literacy among university students

The framework illustrates that frequent use of social media platforms facilitates information access and the development of digital access competencies. However, comprehensive digital media literacy can only be achieved when students complement information access with critical evaluation skills, including verification, analysis, and interpretation of online information (Potter, 2019; Van Dijk, 2020).

Information Analysis and Critical Interpretation

The analysis dimension also achieved a high score, indicating that students are generally capable of identifying the purpose, message, and context of media content. Many respondents stated that they compare information from multiple sources before forming conclusions.

This finding supports the argument of Hobbs (2017), who emphasizes that media literacy involves critical inquiry and reflective thinking. Students who compare multiple information sources demonstrate the ability to recognize bias, framing, and selective presentation of information within digital media environments.

Nevertheless, interview comments and survey responses suggest that some students still rely heavily on social media algorithms when selecting information sources. This tendency may increase exposure to echo chambers and filter bubbles, which limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). Consequently, critical media analysis skills should continue to be strengthened through higher education curricula.

Information Evaluation and Misinformation Detection

Although categorized as high, information evaluation received the lowest average score among all dimensions. This finding indicates that some students still experience difficulties in verifying information accuracy before sharing content. The result is particularly relevant in the contemporary digital ecosystem where misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly through social networking platforms. According to Guess et al. (2020), individuals with limited verification habits are more likely to disseminate false information unintentionally.

The findings suggest that students generally understand the importance of fact-checking, yet practical verification behavior remains inconsistent. This phenomenon reflects what Livingstone (2018) describes as the gap between media literacy knowledge and media literacy practice. Individuals may understand the importance of verification but fail to consistently apply these skills during everyday social media use.

Therefore, strengthening fact-checking skills and information verification practices should become a priority within university digital literacy programs.

Responsible Media Use and Digital Citizenship

The responsible media use dimension achieved a high score, indicating that students generally demonstrate awareness regarding ethical communication, privacy protection, and responsible online behavior. Students reported considering the potential consequences of posting

content online and expressed concern about spreading harmful information. This finding aligns with the concept of digital citizenship, which emphasizes responsible participation in online communities (Ribble, 2015).

From a media literacy perspective, responsible media use represents the highest level of competency because it integrates knowledge, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making (Hobbs, 2017). Students who demonstrate responsible digital behavior are more likely to contribute positively to online discourse and community development.

However, several respondents acknowledged occasional participation in viral trends without fully considering potential ethical implications. This suggests that digital citizenship education should remain an ongoing component of higher education initiatives.

Discussion

The overall findings demonstrate that UNIMED students possess a relatively high level of media literacy. This result supports previous studies indicating that university students generally exhibit stronger digital competencies than other demographic groups due to their intensive exposure to information technologies (Ng, 2012; Van Laar et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the results also reveal that media literacy is multidimensional. While students perform strongly in information access and media usage, challenges remain in information verification and critical evaluation. This finding corroborates previous research showing that digital natives are not automatically critical media users despite their extensive technological familiarity (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Potter's (2019) cognitive model of media literacy, which suggests that effective media literacy involves a combination of knowledge structures, personal locus, competencies, and skills. Students who demonstrate higher levels of analytical and evaluative abilities are better positioned to resist misinformation and engage in informed decision-making.

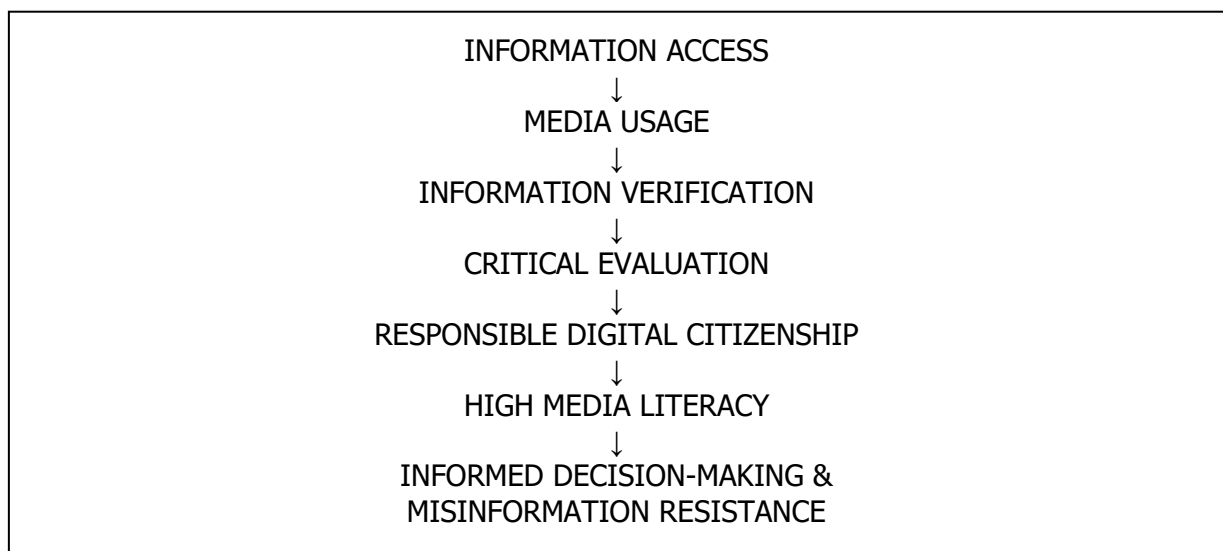


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Media Literacy Competencies among UNIMED Students
Source: Developed by the authors based on Potter (2019), Van Dijk (2020), and Vuorikari et al. (2022).

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual relationship among the dimensions of media literacy identified in this study. The model demonstrates that media literacy is a multidimensional competence that develops progressively, beginning with the ability to access information, followed by media usage, information verification, critical evaluation, and ultimately responsible digital citizenship. The findings indicate that UNIMED students generally exhibit strong competencies in accessing and utilizing digital information through various social media platforms. However, higher-order competencies, particularly information verification and critical evaluation, remain comparatively less developed.

This pattern supports Potter's (2019) cognitive model of media literacy, which argues that media literacy extends beyond technical access to include analytical and evaluative abilities that enable individuals to interpret, assess, and respond critically to media messages. Similarly, Van Dijk (2020) emphasizes that digital participation requires not only operational skills but also informational and strategic skills that facilitate meaningful engagement with digital environments.

The model further suggests that responsible digital citizenship emerges when individuals are capable of critically evaluating information before consuming, sharing, or producing digital content. In this regard, the relatively lower performance observed in information verification indicates that students may still be vulnerable to misinformation, disinformation, and misleading online content. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that extensive exposure to technology does not automatically translate into critical media literacy competencies (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

Consequently, universities should not limit digital literacy initiatives to technical training on technology use. Instead, higher education institutions need to strengthen critical media literacy through learning activities that promote fact-checking skills, source credibility assessment, reflective thinking, and ethical digital participation. By developing these competencies, students can become informed information consumers, responsible social media users, and active digital citizens capable of navigating increasingly complex information ecosystems.

Furthermore, the findings align with the European Commission's DigComp framework, which identifies information and data literacy, communication, content creation, safety, and problem-solving as essential competencies for digital citizens (Vuorikari et al., 2022). The relatively lower performance in information evaluation indicates the need for targeted educational interventions focusing on fact-checking, source credibility assessment, and misinformation detection.

The study also contributes to the growing literature on media literacy in higher education by providing empirical evidence from Indonesian university students. While previous studies have primarily examined digital literacy or social media usage patterns, this study offers a more comprehensive assessment of media literacy competencies across multiple dimensions. The findings suggest that universities should move beyond technical digital skills training and prioritize critical media literacy education to prepare students for increasingly complex information environments.

Overall, the results indicate that media literacy among UNIMED students is generally high; however, strengthening critical evaluation and verification skills remains essential to ensure that students can function as responsible digital citizens and informed information consumers in the contemporary digital era.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the media literacy level of Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) students in using social media is generally categorized as **high**. Students demonstrate adequate abilities in accessing, understanding, evaluating, and utilizing information disseminated through social media platforms. The highest scores were found in the dimensions of information access and awareness of responsible social media use, reflecting students' familiarity with digital technologies and their active engagement in online communication. Furthermore, students exhibit positive attitudes toward verifying information, recognizing misinformation, and using social media ethically in both academic and social contexts.

However, the findings also reveal that a high level of media literacy does not automatically guarantee consistent critical evaluation of digital content. Several respondents still showed

limitations in systematically verifying information sources and identifying misleading content before sharing it. This suggests the existence of a gap between media literacy awareness and actual digital practices, which has been widely highlighted in contemporary studies on digital literacy and misinformation (Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

The study further confirms that media literacy among university students is influenced not only by individual knowledge and digital skills but also by learning experiences, social environments, and exposure to information technology. Therefore, strengthening media literacy should become an integral component of higher education through the integration of digital literacy, critical thinking, information verification, and digital citizenship competencies into academic activities and student development programs (Ng, 2012; Choi, 2016).

This study contributes empirically to the growing body of research on media literacy among higher education students in Indonesia by providing evidence of the current literacy profile of UNIMED students. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for universities, educators, and policymakers in designing programs that promote critical, ethical, and responsible social media use. Future studies are encouraged to employ larger and more diverse samples and to explore the relationships between media literacy, digital citizenship, critical thinking, and online behavioral patterns in different educational contexts.

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