

TikTok Social Media Literacy in Verifying the Dissemination of Hoax News among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The ability to exercise media literacy is essential for filtering digital information, preventing the spread of hoaxes, and protecting the public from disinformation in the era of social media. This study explores how Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program students, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (class of 2021) apply media literacy in filtering information from the TikTok platform. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, with five students as subjects, utilising interviews, observation, and data analysis based on the framework of Huberman and Miles. The findings indicate that students demonstrate varying levels of media literacy when verifying information on TikTok. While some can critically evaluate and filter content, many still consume and accept information without verification. TikTok's algorithm prioritises viral content and accelerates the spread of hoaxes, especially when the content is visually engaging. The lack of digital literacy education, social influence, and limited training in information verification further exacerbate the issue. Students tend to verify information only when it is perceived as personally relevant. Therefore, enhancing media literacy is crucial to enable students to be more critical, selective, and responsible in accessing and disseminating information. Conclusion: The students' media literacy level is moderate, playing a role in evaluating, producing content, and verifying information on social media.

Keywords:

Social Media, Literacy, Hoax News, TikTok

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A. INTRODUCTION

The number of internet users in Indonesia continues to grow, reaching 196.71 million in 2020 according to the APJII and ISC Survey, an increase from 2018 (Sya'diyah & Anggraini, 2020). As of January 2020, social media users had reached 160 million (Salsabila et al., 2023). Despite this growth, the national digital literacy index remains low at only



3.47 (Oktavian & Sulistyowati, 2024). Media literacy, defined as the ability to critically engage with media and the messages it conveys (Hanum, 2021), is thus essential to enabling individuals to assess sources of information accurately (Hobbs, 2010). On the other hand, social media has accelerated the spread of hoaxes, significantly shaping public perception (Syukur et al., 2016). Consequently, media literacy skills are increasingly crucial in navigating the complex flow of digital information (Wiryanda et al., 2023).

Media literacy entails understanding and verifying information received through various media, including platforms such as TikTok, which is highly popular among teenagers and university students in Indonesia (Warsito, 2019). A lack of attention to content verification, especially from accounts sharing educational or fun facts, has led to unverified information being easily accepted as truth (Hidayat & Lubis, 2021). Among students of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program (KPI), Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, State Islamic University of North Sumatra (class of 2021), low levels of media literacy may contribute to the spread of hoaxes. TikTok's algorithm, which prioritises virality, further exacerbates disinformation. Therefore, strengthening media literacy is necessary in Indonesia's digital space, especially among university students.

Media literacy plays a vital role in preventing the spread of hoaxes and misinformation, particularly in today's digital age. Media literacy interventions have been proven effective in enhancing resistance to false information, reducing belief in fake news, and decreasing the tendency to share such content, especially when delivered across multiple sessions and within high uncertainty cultures (Huang et al., 2024). In Indonesia, short video interventions have successfully reduced users' intentions to spread fake news (Ford et al., 2023), and school-based campaigns have improved students' ability to detect hoaxes (Pradekso et al., 2018). Visual strategies, such as reverse image searches, have also proven effective (Aljalabneh, 2024), including combating health misinformation during the pandemic (Hung et al., 2021).

However, efforts to improve media literacy face cultural and regional challenges, as most existing approaches are rooted in Western media contexts, which may not be effective in other regions such as the Global South (Nanjundaiah, 2024). Therefore, interventions must be adapted to local media ecosystems. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to misinformation as active digital media users, requiring literacy initiatives tailored to their specific needs and contexts (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022; Gaultney et al., 2022). Fact-checking organisations in South America recognise media literacy as a key component in combating disinformation, primarily through training and online resources (Abuín-Penas et al., 2024). A multidisciplinary approach, including public policy, is also essential, particularly during times of crisis (Antunes et al., 2025; Calò et al., 2023).

This study examines how Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program (KPI) students, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, State Islamic University of North Sumatra (class of 2021) apply media literacy when filtering information on TikTok. The study explores students' ability to understand, analyse, and verify information, particularly in efforts to prevent the spread of hoaxes. A lack of media literacy may cause students to be easily misled by deceptive content, especially considering TikTok's algorithm, which tends to promote viral content regardless of its accuracy. This research focuses on three main aspects: students' media literacy level, ability to verify hoaxes, and the influence of TikTok's algorithm on information dissemination among students.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to portray students' media literacy skills in evaluating the validity of information circulating on the social media platform TikTok. The primary focus is directed toward students of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Study Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, class of 2021, selected based on specific criteria related to their application of media literacy in using TikTok as an information source. This approach was chosen as it aligns with the narrative nature of the data and requires an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. Data collection techniques involved in-depth interviews and participant observation to accurately depict the informants' behaviour in filtering information on TikTok. Sources of data included interview transcripts, field notes, and relevant personal documents. Five Communication and Broadcasting Study Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication students from the 2021 cohort participated in this study. While all were active TikTok users, they were not required to have a large following or be active content creators.

The data analysis technique followed a qualitative method consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved sorting, selecting, and simplifying raw data from interviews and observations. The processed data were then presented in narrative form or simple tables to facilitate understanding and to identify emerging patterns or themes. The final stage, conclusion drawing, involved interpreting the data to formulate meaningful insights that comprehensively address the research questions and objectives. The study employed triangulation techniques to ensure data validity by comparing and confirming data from multiple sources and methods. The researcher verified the consistency and accuracy of information derived from interviews, observations, and supporting documents. In addition, time and subject triangulation were used to assess the reliability of the data across different contexts.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Student Media Literacy in Verifying News

Media literacy is an active perspective individuals possess in interpreting messages conveyed by media when accessing a platform (Sulthan & Istiyanto, 2019). Media literacy is not merely a technical skill but a set of competencies encompassing critical and responsible access, analysis, evaluation, and creation of media content (Salsabila et al., 2024). In this context, media literacy refers to an individual's ability to access, comprehend, evaluate, and utilise various forms of media, particularly internet-based media such as social media. The goal is to prevent individuals from being passive consumers and instead enable them to be selective, reflective, and aware of the content they consume and disseminate.

Students of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, cohort 2021, exhibit varying levels of media literacy. Interviews with five informants revealed that some students demonstrate critical attitudes by verifying information before trusting it. However, others are easily influenced by hoaxes spreading on TikTok without fact-checking. Informants agreed that the spread of hoaxes on TikTok is driven by algorithms prioritising viral and sensational content, reinforced by the influence of public figures and peers. Common hoax types include baseless health claims,

conspiracy theories, and distorted political information. The integration of media literacy education shows significant development across various regions. The Online Media Literacy Strategy (OMLS) in the UK critiques the limited role of schools and negative perceptions of social media (Gibson & Connolly, 2023). The European Union mandates regular reporting on media literacy through the Directive for Audiovisual Media Services (Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024). Moreover, media literacy is a key to addressing challenges related to democracy, social justice, and public health (Bulger et al., 2023).

Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, 2021 students engage in media literacy stages, including accessing, understanding, and distributing information. However, practices differ regarding information dissemination. Some informants choose to share relevant information, while one informant stated that information should not be shared indiscriminately, given differing individual informational needs. Students' media literacy skills can be categorised into three levels: basic, medium, and advanced. Basic-level informants judge information based on visual content, view counts, or account popularity without verification. Only two informants were at the advanced level, consistently rechecking sensational or controversial information. Media literacy practices thus reflect diverse and contextual applications. Web-based programs like Media Aware have proven effective in enhancing adolescents' critical thinking about media messages and sexual health knowledge (Scull et al., 2022). Comparative studies in Iran, Belgium, and India highlight disparities in media literacy abilities, indicating a need for more effective approaches (Moghaddam & Asghari, 2015). Conceptually, media literacy encompasses critically analysing, understanding, and creating media messages (Akcaoglu & Daggol, 2019).

This phenomenon can be analysed through Uses and Gratifications theory, which explains individuals' use of media to fulfil various needs such as entertainment, personal identity, social interaction, and information seeking. On TikTok, users focus more on affective and aesthetic needs through visually appealing content than on cognitive needs for deep understanding. This suggests that comfort and visual pleasure preferences often overshadow motivations to obtain valid and reliable information. Theoretical analyses of media literacy, referencing Rousseau and Mill, emphasise educational goals beyond formal school curricula (Neag, 2016). However, challenges arise in distinguishing information from misinformation due to the fluid interface between social media and mainstream media (Nanjundaiah, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed limitations in teacher preparedness and digital infrastructure gaps, underscoring the importance of ongoing professional development (Ivanov et al., 2025).

Therefore, media literacy involves technical skills to access and understand content and demands understanding of source credibility, social media algorithm mechanisms, and the ability to compare information across sources. Unfortunately, most students remain at limited literacy levels, where verification practices are not yet habitual. This underscores the importance of comprehensive media literacy education to foster more critical, reflective, and responsible attitudes in consuming and sharing information. Future directions for media literacy indicate a shift toward innovative and community-oriented approaches. Methods such as video podcast production have proven effective in enhancing students' digital competencies (Brega & Kruglyakova, 2025), while gamification techniques are proposed for

media literacy campaigns to counter online gambling propaganda (Siricharoen, 2023). Globally, integrating digital skills into curricula, including health sciences, advances through digital clinical simulations and problem-based projects (Jiménez Pérez, 2022).

2. Students' Ability to Verify Hoax News on TikTok

In information verification, students of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, cohort 2021, tend to verify only information that attracts attention or is widely discussed on social media platforms, particularly TikTok. Information perceived as unimportant or personally irrelevant is often disregarded without undergoing fact-checking. This finding indicates that the habit of consistent information verification has not yet been established among students. Verification is typically conducted only when the content directly relates to significant issues such as health, religion, or academic matters on campus. Content-based fake news detection methods involve analysing textual features, user tendencies, and Graph Neural Networks (Liu, 2024). Although promising, these approaches often face challenges in accuracy because fake news is deliberately crafted to appear authentic. Early detection difficulties also arise due to limited initial context. However, self-attention mechanisms show promising results (Jamshidi et al., 2024), as does forensic linguistic analysis of specific language traits (Sousa-Silva, 2022).

Verification methods employed by the Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, 2021 students remain relatively simple, such as reading other users' comments, performing quick Google searches, or consulting peers. While this reflects a basic awareness of the importance of verification, its implementation is uneven among informants. Some students even perceive the verification process as complicated, time-consuming, and irrelevant for entertainment content. This reflects that students' media literacy is still at a fundamental stage, particularly in critical evaluation skills. Fact-checking methods include expert validation, which is effective but slow in responding to news dissemination (Fayaz et al., 2022), as well as automated checks using AI models such as BERT and LSTM to enhance speed and accuracy (Aju et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2021). Social context-based detection analyses news dissemination patterns and user behaviour. Cross-domain approaches like CFGE perform better (Liu et al., 2023).

Within the Uses and Gratifications theory framework, the verification behaviour of Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, 2021 students can be explained by utilitarian value, i.e., the perception of information usefulness. Students only verify information when it is deemed valuable or directly relevant to their lives. Conversely, if the information is considered personally insignificant, verification is often skipped as it is perceived to lack practical benefits. The lack of systematic digital literacy education also influences the low verification level. Salsabila et al. (2024) emphasise that verification skills should be taught through direct practice, such as source analysis training and fact-checking websites like turnbackhoax.id or cekfakta.com. However, interviews revealed that none of the five informants in this study had ever participated in such training (Harfani, 2024). New techniques such as multimodal fusion, which combines eye-tracking and physiological responses with machine learning, have proven to improve fake news detection accuracy (Filippi et al., 2025). Key challenges like

domain shift hinder model generalisation, but targeted approaches have improved performance (Li et al., 2025). Furthermore, enhancing media literacy and public critical thinking is crucial in confronting the spread of misinformation (Negi & Bedi, 2024).

Students' trust in sources perceived as credible, such as public figures or influencers, without conducting verification, creates major vulnerabilities for misinformation infiltration. Additionally, social pressure from peers influences information-sharing behaviour. Social validation often becomes the primary reason for sharing content, even when students doubt its truthfulness. The low awareness of the dangers of hoax dissemination and minimal critical attitudes toward information exacerbate the situation. Many students consider verification a burdensome and non-urgent process, choosing instead to trust and share information they consume directly. This attitude endangers individuals as information receivers and has broader societal impacts. The spread of false information can cause public misunderstandings, trigger social conflicts, and result in economic losses and diminished public trust in the media. Training programs and integrated fact-checking tools within media platforms can help reduce the spread of fake news (Wake et al., 2024). Research indicates the need for multifaceted approaches combining advanced computational methods, public education, and policy interventions to effectively address this issue (Badran et al., 2025). Future research should integrate demographic factors, psychological vulnerabilities, and interdisciplinary strategies to enhance the reliability and adaptability of fake news detection models (Dwivedi & Sen, 2025).

3. TikTok Algorithm in the Spread of Hoax News

In the increasingly advanced digital era, social media algorithm systems play a crucial role in determining the types of content that appear on users' screens. Algorithms record and analyse user behaviour such as search history, comments, likes, and watch duration to present personalised content based on each individual's preferences (Andini & Yahfizham, 2023). Technically, an algorithm is a series of logical instructions that process input data, such as demographics, interests, and consumed content types, into output as relevant content recommendations. The primary objective of this mechanism is to maintain user engagement on the platform for as long as possible. One of the most prominent examples of algorithm application is TikTok. Through the *For You Page* (FYP) feature, TikTok automatically displays videos corresponding to the user's interaction patterns, including hashtags, background music, visual effects, and trending topics. TikTok is also a platform that allows anyone to go viral regardless of follower count or account popularity. This system creates opportunities and challenges, particularly in disseminating unverified information.

The understanding of the Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Stambuk 2021 students regarding how the algorithm works remains limited. Most students tend to trust information frequently appearing on the FYP because they assume that viral and widely shared content has a high level of validity. This indicates that their trust in information is not based on content verification but on how often the information appears and how broadly it is disseminated. This phenomenon is influenced not only by the algorithmic system itself but also by the digital culture of students as active users. Students not only act as consumers of information but also as producers and distributors of content. In some cases, they are more inclined to share visually or emotionally appealing content to gain social validation without considering the accuracy of

the information. Within the Uses and Gratifications theory framework, this behaviour reflects a need for social identity, namely the desire to be recognised and accepted within their digital environment. Thus, the spread of unverified information is not merely the result of system operations but also a consequence of user motivations that prioritise social gratification over cognitive evaluation. Therefore, understanding how social media algorithms work and improving digital literacy are crucial so that users, especially students, can be more critical and responsible in consuming and disseminating information in digital spaces.

Some examples of social media algorithm mechanisms are explained as follows: first, one way to understand TikTok's algorithmic mechanism is by observing the accounts followed by users. Content posted by these accounts is automatically shown on the *For You Page* (FYP), which serves as the primary recommendation page in the application. Based on the author's user experience, the accounts covered various categories, such as clothing sellers, makeup tutorials, personal acquaintances, and accounts sharing information about campus life. When accessing the FYP, the system only displays videos from followed accounts and suggests content with similar themes or presentation styles. This indicates that TikTok's algorithm identifies user preference patterns and expands the recommendation scope based on interaction data, aiming to create an increasingly relevant and personalised user experience.

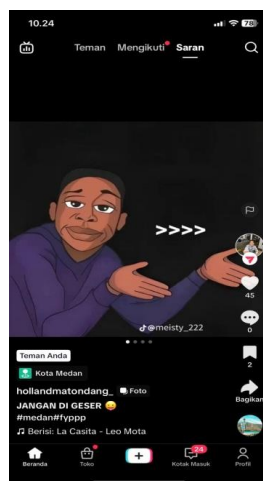


Figure 1. Followed Content

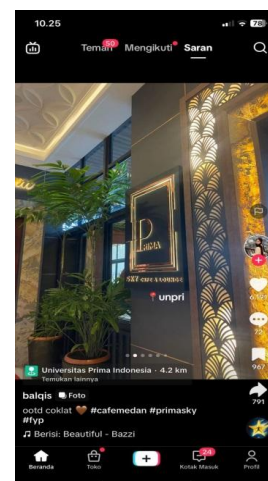


Figure 2. Similar Content

Another aspect in understanding the operational pattern of TikTok's algorithm can be observed through users' search activities. When a user searches for a video using specific keywords and watches it until completion, the system interprets this behaviour as a significant preference signal. For instance, based on the author's experience searching for and watching videos related to the "2024 Election Debate," TikTok's algorithm began recommending more similar content, such as videos with political themes, election coverage, and public opinions on the For You Page (FYP).

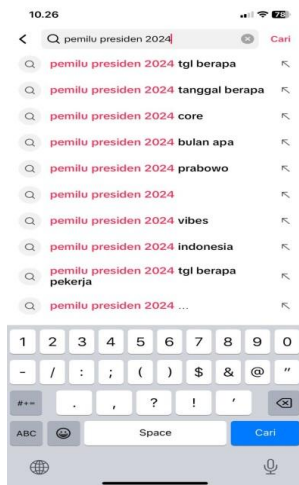


Figure 3. Search Menu



Figure 4. First Content



Figure 5. Second Content

This indicates that search history plays a significant role in shaping recommendation algorithms. Videos that are directly searched for and other content with related themes are more frequently displayed, especially if users engage further by liking, commenting, or sharing the videos. These activities reinforce the preference signals interpreted by the system. Thirdly, TikTok's algorithm generates recommendations based on users' video-watching habits over a certain period. If users consistently consume specific types of content in one or multiple sessions, the system maps these consumption patterns to curate subsequent content recommendations. Factors considered include followed accounts, search history, trending topics, use of popular music or sound effects, and hashtags employed in videos. These elements are automatically processed to create a more relevant and engaging browsing experience. The more frequently users engage with a particular type of content, the higher the likelihood that the system will continue recommending similar content in the future, primarily through the For You Page (FYP).

TikTok's algorithm, designed to maximise user engagement, can create a filter bubble phenomenon where users are only exposed to content that aligns with their prior interests and views. Information dissemination facilitates the spread of unverified information, including hoaxes. As an active group of TikTok users, students from the Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Stambuk 2021 cohort are vulnerable to hoax exposure, especially if they possess low digital literacy skills. Visually appealing and viral content is often accepted uncritically, even before its accuracy is verified. Besides the influence of algorithms, psychological factors such as social proof, peer pressure, and a lack of ability to evaluate source credibility further exacerbate this situation. As a form of mitigation, efforts to improve media literacy through formal education and fact-checking training are necessary. Additionally, social media platforms, including TikTok, bear responsibility for providing hoax-reporting features and curating the information circulated to foster a healthier and more informative digital ecosystem.

D. CONCLUSION

Media literacy among students, particularly those of the Communication and Broadcasting Program, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Stambuk 2021 cohort, exhibits varying levels of ability in verifying information, especially content sourced from the TikTok platform. Media literacy encompasses the skills to access, comprehend, evaluate, and critically disseminate information. Although some students demonstrate selective attitudes toward the information they consume, many are still influenced by viral content without prior verification. This situation is exacerbated by TikTok's algorithm, which prioritises sensational content aligned with user preferences, thereby creating a filter bubble effect. Verification tends to be conducted only on content deemed important or personally relevant. Verification methods, such as reading comments or performing brief Google searches, remain limited. The low level of digital literacy and the lack of training in information verification further aggravate the issue. Students often rely on content popularity or public figures as credibility indicators rather than valid sources. The Uses and Gratifications theory explains that students prioritise affective and social needs over cognitive needs. Therefore, enhancing media literacy is essential so students can adopt a critical and responsible attitude in consuming and disseminating information, particularly in addressing the spread of hoaxes in the digital space.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- Author 1 : Development of research instruments, contextual qualitative methods, and integration of observation and interviews to produce in-depth and relevant data.
- Author 2 : Conducted data analysis using qualitative descriptive methods, categorised findings, and formulated interpretations based on communication and tourism theories to compose a systematic discussion.

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