Students Perceptions and Behavior in Responding to the Hoaxes of North Sumatra Election on TikTok

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Abstract. This research uses a qualitative method motivated by the rampant spread of political hoaxes through social media, especially TikTok, which is a popular platform for novice voters. The purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions and behaviors of Medan State University students towards the North Sumatra Election hoax on TikTok. Data were obtained through an online survey using Google Form, observation, and thematic analysis. The data collected was then analyzed using the New Media Literacy theory by Jenkins et al. (2009). The results revealed that although students are quite adept at using digital media, they still have difficulty verifying political information. Their low political literacy makes them vulnerable to being exposed to and contributing to the spread of hoaxes.

Keywords: Students perceptions, hoaxes, media digital literacy, and political literacy.

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang dilatarbelakangi oleh maraknya penyebaran berita bohong politik melalui media sosial khususnya TikTok yang merupakan platform yang digemari oleh para pemilih pemula. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis persepsi dan perilaku mahasiswa Universitas Negeri Medan terhadap berita bohong Pilkada Sumatera Utara di TikTok. Data diperoleh melalui survei daring menggunakan Google Form, observasi, dan analisis tematik. Data yang terkumpul kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teori New Media Literacy oleh Jenkins et al. (2009). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun mahasiswa cukup mahir menggunakan media digital, mereka masih kesulitan dalam memverifikasi informasi politik. Literasi politik yang rendah membuat mereka rentan terpapar dan berkontribusi terhadap penyebaran berita bohong.

Kata Kunci: Persepsi mahasiswa, berita bohong, literasi digital media, dan literasi politik.

1. INTRODUCTION

General elections are an important democratic process in Indonesia's political system and serve as a means to pursue political interests through a selection mechanism that produces representatives and leaders to realize democracy. Elections function to establish a system of state power based on people's sovereignty and representative deliberation as mandated by the 1945 Constitution. According to Nasir (2020), elections are a significant concept and an essential implementation of democracy, where every citizen has the right to choose their leaders. In a democratic country, political literacy is a critical aspect of elections because the higher the political literacy of its citizens, the better the quality of democracy implementation. Generally, political literacy is often associated with the level of public participation in elections, even though it has a broader meaning. Political literacy requires citizens to understand their position within the political and constitutional system, including national awareness, the balance between rights and responsibilities, and individual accountability in ensuring the survival of the nation and state.

Ridha & Riwanda (2020) state that political literacy encompasses knowledge and understanding of political processes and issues, enabling individuals to actively and effectively fulfill their roles as citizens, such as voluntarily participating in elections and being involved—directly or indirectly—in the formulation of public policies. Political literacy plays a crucial role in creating a politically aware society. Conversely, low political literacy can lead to a society that is easily influenced by irresponsible opinions. Therefore, political literacy is an essential topic to be communicated to the public. Sutisna (2017) explains that the quality of elections is determined not only by high participation rates but also by the quality of that participation. To achieve high-quality elections with meaningful participation, certain prerequisites are needed, including the presence of politically literate, intelligent, and critical voters. Rational voters—those who are intelligent and critical—are described as individuals who have electoral knowledge and awareness, are free from intimidation, and can resist transactional practices like vote-buying.

They also fully understand the importance of their votes and the political consequences of their choices for the future. On the other hand, irrational or "politically blind" voters tend to contribute to poorly executed and low-quality elections, which are often characterized by transactional practices and result in the election of candidates lacking integrity and competence. First-time voters, aged 17–21 years, often fall into this category due to their low levels of political literacy. Rosadi (2020) adds that first-time voters are a new generation of voters with different traits, backgrounds, experiences, and challenges compared to previous voters. With low political literacy, they are more likely to be apathetic, indifferent, and easily mobilized for specific interests. Based on legal provisions, voters are citizens who are at least 17 years old or married, with elections in Indonesia held every five years.

According to Ardiani et al. (2019), first-time voters are often characterized by the following traits: (1) instability; (2) relatively low political knowledge; (3) susceptibility to group influence; (4) decision-making based on the popularity of parties or candidates; and (5) voting merely to fulfill their civic duty. Therefore, first-time voters require continuous political education to become intelligent and rational voters. This is important because first-time voters hold significant potential and influence over the number of votes gained by political parties or candidates in elections. It is estimated that first-time voters account for 30–35% of the total voter population.

This characteristic of first-time voters makes them particularly vulnerable to the spread of political hoaxes, especially on platforms like TikTok. As a popular social media platform among younger generations, TikTok has become a significant channel for information consumption and dissemination. Unfortunately, it is also a space where misinformation and hoaxes, including politically charged content, spread rapidly due to its algorithm-driven system that amplifies viral content without verifying its accuracy.First-time voters, who often lack sufficient political knowledge and critical thinking skills, are more likely to consume and believe in misleading information they encounter on TikTok. Their susceptibility to group influence further exacerbates this issue, as peer-shared or widely liked content may be accepted uncritically. Moreover, their tendency to base decisions on the popularity of candidates or parties aligns with TikTok's trend-centric culture, where catchy or appealing content can overshadow substantive political discourse.

Without adequate political literacy and media awareness, these voters may unintentionally perpetuate the spread of hoaxes by sharing such content, further amplifying its reach. This can have a significant impact on the electoral process, as misinformation could shape their perceptions, influence their voting decisions, and potentially undermine the democratic process. To address this issue, targeted political education for first-time voters is crucial. Educational efforts should focus on fostering critical thinking, media literacy, and an understanding of the electoral process. Encouraging young voters to verify information, identify reliable sources, and resist emotional or impulsive responses to viral content can help mitigate the influence of political hoaxes on platforms like TikTok. By empowering first-time voters with these skills, they can transition into more intelligent and rational participants in the democratic process, reducing the detrimental effects of misinformation in elections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Zamroni & Sukiratnasari (2011:89), literacy levels are generally associated with education levels and critical thinking skills. The higher a person's education and critical thinking ability, the higher their literacy level tends to be. However, in the study Community-Based Media Literacy" (Wiratmo, 2011), it was found that several communities, including student communities, were still not media literate.

Wiratmo's research highlights the experience of media literacy movements carried out by LESPI Semarang within several communities. Relying on the strategic position of communities as the vanguard of disseminating media literacy issues, Wiratmo adopts Sonia

Livingstone's (2004) definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in various contexts. Livingstone's model, according to Wiratmo, can be applied to both traditional and new media. However, in the case study presented by Wiratmo, where the movement targets diverse communities, certain challenges remain unaddressed by Livingstone's framework, such as socio-demographic disparities, access to social and symbolic resources, and gaps in knowledge acquisition, communication, and online participation. The evaluation of LESPI's initiative revealed that their efforts had not fully achieved the access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation competencies as defined by Livingstone. On the other hand, Livingstone's theory of media literacy provides a concise and comprehensive framework that accommodates the dynamics of new media.

Therefore, this study aims to examine new media literacy among students. Unlike previous studies that assessed literacy across various types of media, this research focuses specifically on the social media platform TikTok. Exploring new media literacy in relation to the dissemination of hoaxes and hate speech, this study seeks to understand the behavioral communication awareness of students—an area that, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been extensively explored in Indonesia.

The new media literacy theory proposed by Jenkins was chosen for this research because it aligns well with the phenomenon being studied, namely the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. This theory is considered highly effective in explaining the intricate characteristics of new media and is practical for assessing the level of media literacy among lecturers, particularly in the context of disseminating hoaxes and hate speech. Jenkins, along with Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robinson, introduced the concept of new media literacy in 2009, formulating it around twelve core competencies. These competencies offer a practical framework for understanding and navigating the complexities of new media. Jenkins and his colleagues recognized that the digital era introduced sophisticated and multifaceted media ecosystems, requiring a comprehensive yet actionable set of skills. To address this, they categorized new media literacy into twelve essential abilities: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation, and visualization. These skills were designed to be technically oriented, specifically tailored to the unique demands of new media environments.

Below is a detailed explanation of each of the twelve core competencies outlined in Jenkins' theory (Jenkins et al., 2009):

A. Play: This refers to the ability to utilize media interactively, going beyond mere access. It involves actively exploring and experimenting with the functionalities and capabilities of new media platforms.

B. Simulation: This entails the skill of interpreting and creatively manipulating media messages, allowing users to reinterpret content and derive alternative meanings from media information.

C. Performance: This ability focuses on role-playing or adopting alternative identities as a way to improvise and explore different approaches to learning and problem-solving.

D. Appropriation: This involves the process of borrowing and integrating elements of culture into various media content, creating a blend of traditional and contemporary influences.

E. Multitasking: This refers to the capacity to scan the surrounding environment and shift focus between different elements of a message or multiple media platforms simultaneously.

F. Distributed Cognition: This highlights the ability to interact meaningfully with technological tools or media that enhance human cognitive capacities, enabling more efficient processing of information.

G. Collective Intelligence: This competency involves pooling knowledge and engaging in collaborative decision-making by comparing perspectives and working towards shared goals.

H. Judgment: This skill emphasizes the ability to critically evaluate the reliability and credibility of various sources of information, helping users discern trustworthy content.

I. Transmedia Navigation: This refers to the ability to follow and engage with narratives and information that span across multiple media platforms and formats, enabling users to track stories and ideas cohesively.

J. Networking: This involves the ability to locate, synthesize, and disseminate information effectively within mediaecosystems.

K. Negotiation:This competency is about navigating diverse communities, understanding and appreciating differing perspectives, and adhering to the norms and expectations of each community.

L. Visualization: This refers to the ability to create and comprehend visual representations of information, which facilitates the expression of ideas, identification of patterns, and recognition of emerging trends.

The framework introduced by Jenkins et al. provides a groundbreaking perspective on media literacy by emphasizing these twelve core competencies. It highlights the technical

and adaptive skills required to thrive in the rapidly evolving digital landscape, offering practical tools for understanding and engaging with the complexities of new media. This theory not only addresses the technical aspects of media use but also fosters critical and collaborative abilities that are essential for navigating contemporary media environments effectively.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research methods as a research design. According to Creswell (2013) qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meaning derived from individual or group experiences related to a social or human problem. A total of 20 English Literature students from Medan State University will be selected as research participants through random sampling related to the rampant hoax news about the 2024 North Sumatra general election on TikTok. Data collection will be carried out by distributing Google Form questionnaires via WhatsApp. The researcher has formulated 12 questions in accordance with the New Media Literacy theory by Jenkins et al. (2009) to answer the research questions. The data collected will be anonymized to protect the identity of the participants. then the data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data (Braun and Clarke; 2006). The researcher will classify the themes of each response, ensuring a thorough understanding of the students' perspectives. The findings of this study aim to highlight media literacy gaps that make students vulnerable to misinformation and propose strategies to improve their critical engagement with digital media.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 1. Displays the identified themes, their frequencies, and the corresponding percentages:

Category	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Play	Using social media for political information but rarely verifying it	13	65%
Simulation	Learning from case studies of political hoaxes	15	75%
Performance	Difficulty understanding the perspectives of other groups	8	40%

Appropriation	Considering cultural sensitivity before sharing information	14	70%
Multitasking	Difficulty in fact-checking while participating in discussions	9	45%
Distributed Cognition	Using fact-checking tools to support verification processes	15	75%
Collective Intelligence	Lack of involvement in communities that verify hoaxes	11	55%
Judgment	Ensuring the accuracy of information before sharing it	17	85%
Transmedia Navigation	Struggling to filter information from various sources	14	70%
Networking	Avoiding conflicts when countering hoaxes on social media	11	55%
Negotiation	Adjusting communication to avoid conflicts	15	75%
Visualization	Rarely using infographics due to limited skills	10	50%

Based on the table, it can be seen that many individuals are quite active in using social media to share political information. Approximately 65% of respondents stated that they frequently use social media to find and share political information, although not all of them verify the truth of the information before sharing it. As one respondent mentioned, *"Sometimes I just share if the information supports my political views,"* which indicates a tendency to share information without verifying it first. This reflects that while social media is a primary platform for sharing political information, awareness of the importance of verification still needs to be improved.

In terms of understanding the impact of political hoaxes, 75% of respondents acknowledged that they became more aware of the dangers of hoaxes after seeing relevant case studies or simulations. One respondent noted, *"I became more aware after seeing the fake news case that went viral and affected many people,"* indicating that understanding the impact of hoax dissemination can be heightened through concrete examples. However, only 40% of respondents felt capable of understanding the perspective of a particular group in political discussions on social media, with one respondent stating, *"It's really difficult to pretend to support another group. I'm afraid it will lead to conflict."* This shows that many people feel uncomfortable trying to understand a differing political viewpoint, which can hinder the process of identifying hoaxes.

Around 70% of respondents recognized the importance of considering cultural sensitivity before sharing political information. One respondent explained, *"I always make sure the information I share doesn't offend certain cultures,"* showing awareness of the social impact of the information shared. However, despite this awareness, only 55% of respondents actively engage in online communities focused on verifying hoaxes. This was highlighted by a respondent who said, *"I prefer checking by myself because I'm not sure who can be trusted in the community."* This suggests that uncertainty in choosing trustworthy communities may hinder collective efforts to combat hoaxes.

The ability to verify information before sharing political content (Judgment) showed a very positive result, with 85% of respondents ensuring the accuracy of information before sharing it. *"I always check the source of the news before deciding to share it,"* said one respondent, reflecting a cautious approach to sharing information. However, most respondents felt challenged in linking information from various sources (Transmedia Navigation), with 70% expressing difficulty in verifying the truth of information coming from multiple media channels. One respondent shared, *"Sometimes information from different sources contradicts each other, so it's hard to know which one is true."*

In terms of networking to expose hoaxes (Networking), 55% of respondents stated that they often collaborate with others to spread clarifications or address hoaxes. However, some prefer to handle such matters individually. *"I prefer to refute it privately so I don't offend too many people,"* shared one respondent, reflecting a tendency to avoid open conflict on social media. Regarding communication skills to avoid conflict (Negotiation), 75% of respondents adjusted their communication style to prevent conflicts when refuting hoaxes. *"I try to speak politely so people don't feel offended when I correct hoaxes,"* said one respondent, showing a diplomatic approach to online interactions.

However, in terms of using data visualization to counter hoaxes (Visualization), only 50% of respondents actively use infographics or data visualizations, even though they understand the importance of doing so. One respondent commented, *"I know infographics are important, but I don't know how to create them."* This highlights a gap in skills related to using visualization tools effectively to clarify and verify political information on social media.

Discussion

In the current digital age, social media has transformed the way political information is consumed and disseminated. Jenkins et al. (2009) highlight that the complexities of new media require individuals to possess various literacy skills, categorized into 12 abilities.

These include play (the ability to use media), simulation (the ability to interpret), performance (the ability to role-play), appropriation (the ability to consider culture), multitasking (the ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously), distributed cognition (the ability to interact consciously), collective intelligence (the ability to consolidate shared knowledge), judgment (the ability to evaluate), transmedia navigation (the ability to follow information flow), networking (the ability to network), negotiation (the ability to negotiate), and visualization (the ability to visualize). The findings of this study demonstrate how these skills manifest among social media users when engaging with political information.

1. Media usage ability (play)

Unimed students show considerable proficiency in accessing and exploring digital media, including social media platforms they use daily. Most of them understand how the applications work and utilize them to interact with online communities and expand their knowledge. Digital media has become an integral part of their daily activities, fostering improved digital literacy. According to Jenkins (2009), consuming media is a learning process that shapes knowledge structures and helps individuals solve various life problems. In this context, the use of digital media allows students to understand the functions, advantages, and disadvantages of the platforms they use, while also increasing critical awareness. For example, TikTok has become a common tool for disseminating information. However, even though nearly all Unimed students are proficient in using TikTok, there is evidence that the frequency of using the application is not always accompanied by critical efforts to verify the information received, especially in sharing political information. This highlights the need for greater awareness of the importance of responsible media use.

2. The ability to interpret and transform media messages (simulation)

Most Unimed students have limited understanding of how news is constructed. They are unaware that news in both conventional and digital media is a social reality constructed by the media or writers, becoming media reality. Only a few understand that media reality often differs from empirical reality. Reading or accessing news from mainstream media has not become a daily habit for most students. However, a different trend is observed when they use social media like TikTok. With its interactive nature, users are not only consumers but also producers of information. This encourages users to simulate media messages. According to Jenkins et al. (2009), awareness of this simulation experience is an advanced stage of media literacy that begins with the ability to "play" or use media. The more frequently someone engages in simulations on apps like TikTok,

the more literate they become regarding the variety of information it contains. Through a process of trial and error, users can gain firsthand experience, enabling them to distinguish between true and false information and identify information that is truly relevant and needed.

3. Role-playing ability (performance)

In general, students lack interest in reading, resulting in limited knowledge and a lack of ability to role-play as others or adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and exploration in learning. Jenkins states that the ability to adopt diverse identities allows individuals to understand others' perspectives, roles, nations, times (contexts), social interactions, and social positions, both in real and virtual worlds. Therefore, mastering this ability enhances media literacy.

4. Cultural consideration ability (appropriation)

Most Unimed students demonstrate the ability to consider cultural elements when interpreting an object. They can extract certain cultural elements or values and integrate them into various media content, such as music, subtitles, fashion, or creative videos on TikTok. According to Jenkins, the more a person masters this ability, the more media-literate they become, as this process encourages individuals to learn and think deeply about the culture used, including the ethics and legal implications of creating media content.

5. Multitasking ability

As millennials, Unimed students are skilled in multitasking. When accessing the internet, they can use several applications simultaneously, such as creating TikTok videos while studying, watching TV, playing games, chatting, or even eating. This multitasking ability allows them to monitor and respond to various information quickly. The presence of new media like TikTok accelerates the development of this ability by demanding creativity and efficiency within a short time frame.

6. Conscious interaction ability (distributed cognition)

While interacting with social media content, most students, despite appearing highly engaged, maintain an awareness of the boundary between the virtual and real worlds. They can interact meaningfully through platforms like TikTok, which allows users to communicate visually and creatively. Students are aware of the roles of various elements in digital media and are capable of resolving challenges that arise in online

interactions. This ability forms distributed intelligence between the brain, body, and real-life experiences.

7. Collective knowledge consolidation ability

Some students demonstrate the ability to consolidate knowledge and compare opinions with others to achieve common goals. On TikTok, communities often form around shared interests, such as political issues, culture, or the latest trends. Within these communities, users share information and ideas through engaging and interactive short videos. This activity helps expand collective knowledge, although there is a risk of spreading unverified information.

8. Evaluation ability (judgement)

Students still show weaknesses in evaluating the reliability and credibility of information sources, particularly on TikTok. Information often comes from accounts or content that aligns with their interests, but this does not guarantee credibility. Many students tend to accept information without evaluating or verifying its truth, especially when it aligns with their preferences or viewpoints. Jenkins (2009) emphasizes the importance of critically reading all sources of information. Students need to distinguish between facts and fiction, arguments and documentation, as well as truth and falsehood, to improve their digital literacy skills.

9. Transmedia navigation ability

Students' preference for light and entertaining content on TikTok affects their ability to comprehend complex information flows. They often struggle to compare information from various media or assess its validity when faced with contradictory narratives. In the era of media convergence, as Jenkins explains, consumers must be able to hunt and gather information from various sources to create new syntheses. Therefore, students need to enhance their reading and writing skills across various formats, such as text, images, sounds, and simulations, to understand the relationships between different media systems.

10. Networking ability

Some students, particularly those who are socially and academically active, exhibit strong networking skills through social media platforms like TikTok. They frequently build networks across communities, universities, and even cities to share information and collaborate on various initiatives. This networking ability, which involves searching, synthesizing, and disseminating information, becomes an essential sociocultural skill in the digital era. Participation in online communities on TikTok can

serve as an investment in collectively gathering and sharing data. However, trust in such communities remains a challenge to be addressed.

11. Negotiation ability

Some students still face limitations in negotiation skills, such as understanding and appreciating different perspectives and adhering to norms within TikTok's diverse communities. This platform facilitates the formation of culturally heterogeneous communities, which, if not well-managed, can lead to conflicts. Jenkins et al. (2009) stress that negotiation is the ability to understand different perspectives, respect social norms, and reconcile viewpoints to resolve conflicts. Students need to learn how to communicate effectively on platforms like TikTok to identify content that perpetuates stereotypes or misconceptions, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and informative media environment.

12. Visualization ability

In general, students can understand visual information shared on social media, including TikTok. With numerous creative features such as video templates, effects, and design tools available on the platform, it should be easy for students to create engaging and informative visual messages. However, in reality, not many students effectively utilize these features to express their ideas or concepts. This gap highlights a lack of skills in using visual media as an effective communication tool, despite the potential and resources being readily available. Training and guidance in visualization skills can help students enhance their ability to convey information creatively and persuasively.

5. CONCLUSION

This research shows that university students actively use social media such as TikTok to find and share political information. However, many of them still have difficulties in assessing and verifying the truth of the information they find. This is especially true for first-time voters who tend to be more easily influenced by political hoaxes due to their low political literacy and critical thinking skills. Although university students have good skills in using media, considering culture, and multitasking, they still face challenges in managing information from various sources, working together in communities to verify information, and communicating effectively to avoid conflict. Therefore, special education is needed that helps students improve their digital and political literacy, such as training to verify information, use visualization tools, and communicate wisely on social media. With these

skills, students can become more critical voters, less susceptible to hoaxes, and able to contribute positively to the democratic process.

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