

Digital Literacy in Visual Content: English Literature Students' Perspective of Universitas Negeri Medan towards Instagram Posts in @rappersrelated Account

Rosenna Siahaan^{1*}, Anisa Jimina Sinaga², Rita Hartati³

¹⁻³ State University of Medan, Indonesia

Korespondensi Penulis: rsnnasiahaan@gmail.com

Abstract: This research explores English Literature students' perspectives on digital literacy through visual content on the @rappersrelated Instagram account. The main focus is how this platform facilitates digital literacy skills by using design composition analysis, supporting critical thinking, and enriching aesthetic appreciation and cultural trends. This research used qualitative methods with the participation of 10 UNIMED English Literature 7th semester students to gain in-depth insights into their experiences. Thematic analysis showed that Instagram enhances visual literacy, but also faces challenges such as ambiguous interpretation and limited cultural context. The findings provide valuable insights into the role of social media in supporting digital literacy in the digital age.

Keywords: Instagram, Literacy, Digital, Visual.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi perspektif mahasiswa Sastra Inggris tentang literasi digital melalui konten visual pada akun Instagram @rappersrelated. Fokus utamanya adalah bagaimana platform ini memfasilitasi keterampilan literasi digital dengan menggunakan analisis komposisi desain, mendukung pemikiran kritis, dan memperkaya apresiasi estetika dan tren budaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan partisipasi 10 mahasiswa Sastra Inggris UNIMED semester 7 untuk mendapatkan wawasan mendalam tentang pengalaman mereka. Analisis tematik menunjukkan bahwa Instagram meningkatkan literasi visual, tetapi juga menghadapi tantangan seperti interpretasi yang ambigu dan konteks budaya yang terbatas. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan berharga tentang peran media sosial dalam mendukung literasi digital di era digital.

Kata kunci: Instagram, Literasi, Digital, Visual.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern digital landscape, digital literacy is a concept that leads to mediation between technology and users to practice digital technology productively (Nugroho, 2020). The internet allows people to upload information easily and quickly, leading to an information explosion where both accurate and inaccurate information can reach the public quickly. This has given rise to fake news, hoaxes, and disinformation (Nurfauziyah, 2023). This is why digital literacy is needed so that people can read, sort and understand information when searching for information. Visual literacy has become increasingly crucial as individuals navigate an information-saturated environment (Meyers et al., 2013). The concept of “visual literacy” encompasses the ability to interpret, analyze, and create visual content, which is essential for effective communication and understanding in the digital realm. At the heart of this discourse lies the cognitive perspective which emphasizes the mental processes involved in perceiving, remembering, and comprehending visual

information (Albakry & Daimin, 2014). While Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), as defines visual literacy as the ability to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, utilize, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy is not a novel concept, as it has roots dating back to the early days of human communication. However, the rise of digital technologies and the proliferation of visual media have amplified its significance, with students and content creators alike needing to develop sophisticated visual skills to thrive in the digital age. The ability to critically engage with visual content, understand its underlying meaning, and utilize visual modes of expression has become a fundamental component of digital literacy (Flynt & Brozo, 2010).

The cognitive emphasises mental processes such as perception, memory, and visual comprehension (Arnheim, 1969) and provides a framework for understanding the intricate relationship between visual perception and human cognition. Arnheim identified visual perception as the basis of thinking. Perception allows humans to recognise and process information from the environment directly. Elements such as shape, colour, composition and pattern are identified through perception, which is then translated into meaning. Visual memories serve as mental storage for information acquired through perception. This memory allows us to compare visual elements over time, identify recurring patterns, or understand differences in various visual contexts. Meanwhile, visual comprehension is the ability to connect visual elements into meaningful concepts. It includes the ability to interpret spatial relations, structure, and composition, as well as the meaning attached to visual representations. This approach recognizes that visual processing is not a passive act, but rather an active engagement of the mind, involving the integration of various sensory experiences, the formation of mental representations, and the construction of meaning (Lu, 2010).

Social media is a place where people can exchange stories, participate, and form networks. Through social media, individuals can search for information from various sources and dialogue with other users through message forums (Nugroho, 2020). In the contemporary era, social media has become an indispensable aspect of modern society. It plays a pivotal role in fulfilling a multitude of human needs, including entertainment, education, health, self-expression, communication, and more (Manampiring, 2015). The most widely used social media platform in the present era is Instagram. Instagram is the second most prevalent social media platform, as evidenced by survey results indicating that 59% of online users in the 18-29 age range utilize Instagram. The existence of social media has resulted in the merging of one's private and public spheres. Furthermore, contemporary

activities are inextricably linked to the concept of social media (Sakti & Yulianto, 2013). The advancement of communication and information technology is effecting profound changes in how individuals interact with one another. For example, in recent times have considerable shifts in how communities utilise the Internet for their personal needs.

A study by Krejci (2020) “Visual Literacy Intervention for Improving Undergraduate Student Critical Thinking of Global Sustainability Issues” finds that visual literacy intervention had a notable impact on student’s critical thinking abilities, particularly within the context of face-to-face (FTF) learning environments. Students who received the FTF intervention demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in their average examination score (78.9%) compared to the control group (60.5%). The other study by Schraw (2022) “Using visual displays to improve classroom thinking. Educational Research: Theory and Practice” finds that VDs help students understand complex information better through graphical representations such as concept maps, causal diagrams and charts. Visual literacy, which involves the ability to read, understand and create visual messages, plays a key role in supporting cognitive processes such as reasoning, problem-solving and argumentation.

The objective of this research is to analyse the @rappwer-related account as a digital literacy medium. It is anticipated that this research will make a contribution to the field of visual literacy, particularly in relation to the recent controversy involving P. Diddy, which has attracted significant attention online and is linked to baby oil products. This research is of practical importance insofar as it is expected to contribute to our understanding of the use of Instagram posts as digital literacy media for social media users.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital literacy is a critical skill in the modern digital landscape, serving as a bridge between technology and its users to enhance productive engagement with digital tools (Nugroho, 2020). Among its dimensions, visual literacy has gained significant importance, particularly as individuals encounter an environment saturated with visual information (Meyers et al., 2013). Visual literacy involves the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and create visual content effectively, and it is increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of digital literacy in today’s image-driven digital culture (Flynt & Brozo, 2010). The theoretical foundation of visual literacy integrates cognitive psychology, emphasizing mental processes such as perception, memory, and comprehension (Arnheim, 1969). Perception enables recognition of visual elements such as shape, color, and composition,

translating them into meaningful concepts. Memory facilitates the storage and retrieval of these visual cues, while comprehension allows users to derive meaning from visual contexts (Lu, 2010). Visual literacy extends beyond passive recognition, involving active engagement with visual content to understand and communicate complex ideas effectively (Albakry & Daimin, 2014).

Social media platforms like Instagram exemplify the growing significance of visual communication. Instagram's format prioritizes visual content, fostering both opportunities and challenges in interpreting visual media. Research indicates that visuals are processed faster and elicit stronger emotional responses than text-based content (Digital Marketing Institute, 2017). However, misinterpretations often arise from visual ambiguity, lack of contextual captions, cultural differences, and personal biases (Clark, 2017; Highfield, 2016). These issues underscore the need for enhanced visual literacy to navigate and critically evaluate the visual-dominated content of social platforms.

Existing studies highlight the intersection of digital and visual literacy in fostering critical thinking and effective interpretation of media. For instance, interventions focusing on visual displays have been shown to enhance students' critical thinking and understanding of complex topics (Schraw, 2022). Similarly, Krejci's (2020) study emphasizes the role of visual literacy in improving academic performance by enabling students to analyze and synthesize visual information. The proliferation of visual content on social platforms has also amplified the role of visual literacy in addressing misinformation and misinterpretation. Studies on Instagram reveal how the platform's emphasis on images over text can lead to ambiguities, especially when cultural and contextual nuances are overlooked (Mena, 2020). Therefore, fostering visual literacy is vital for users to discern the authenticity, intent, and implications of visual messages in a globalized digital environment.

This research situates itself within this broader discourse, examining Instagram's potential as a medium for fostering digital and visual literacy. By analyzing the @rappersrelated account, it aims to explore how Instagram posts can be utilized as an educational tool to enhance students' critical engagement with visual media. This inquiry contributes to understanding the practical applications of visual literacy in addressing contemporary challenges in digital communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

1. *Research Design*

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, using the survey to explore students' perceptions of how content on Instagram influences digital literacy skills at the 7th semester of the English Literature Department at UNIMED specifically in the 2021 C class that consists of 34 students. A qualitative methodology is chosen to gain insight into students' individual experiences, this method offers rich, detailed insights that may be less accessible through quantitative approaches

The theoretical framework of this study integrates perspectives from educational psychology and language learning theories. From an educational psychology standpoint, the research draws on theories that examine the role of digital tools in enhancing cognitive engagement and autonomy in language learning (Jones, 2018). It will investigate how the contents in Instagram contributes to students' digital literacy skills.

2. *Participants*

The participants in this study consist of a purposively selected group of 10 7th-semester students English Literature students C '21 at UNIMED. This focused sample is chosen to represent a diverse range of experiences with Instagram in their daily life. A small sample size is ideal for an in-depth qualitative study, enabling a thorough exploration of each student's experiences and perspectives while keeping data analysis manageable. The participants' backgrounds in language learning offer valuable insights into the academic context of using Instagram as an application that almost reached 2.4 billion by August 2024 worldwide.

3. *Data Collection*

The data collection for this study primarily involves conducting a semi-structured survey with the twenty-three 7th-semester English Literature students in the C class that participating in the research. The semi-structured format was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the interviewer to explore specific themes while also giving participants the freedom to share their experiences and perceptions openly. This approach aligns well with the study's qualitative nature, facilitating an in-depth exploration of each participant's personal and nuanced experiences with using Instagram to increase their digital literacy skill.

4. Data analysis

The data collected from the survey with the twenty-three UNIMED English Literature students are analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun et al., 2023). This approach is chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide a rich, detailed, yet nuanced account of students' perceptions.

Thematic analysis is conducted in six key phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In the first phase, the researchers immerse themselves in the data by transcribing interviews, reading, and re-reading the content, and noting initial impressions. This immersion is essential for developing a deep understanding of the content and context of the data, setting a solid foundation for subsequent phases. The second phase involves generating initial codes, which is central to organizing the data into meaningful groups. Coding is conducted systematically across the entire data set, without attempting to fit the data into pre-existing frameworks, allowing for the emergence of unexpected insights. The researchers code for as many potential themes and patterns as possible, aiming to capture the diversity of students' experiences with content in Instagram.

Once the initial coding is complete, the researchers search for themes by collating codes into potential themes, and grouping all data relevant to each theme. This process is interpretative, focusing on making sense of the data rather than merely summarizing it. The fourth phase, reviewing themes, involves ensuring the themes align well with the coded data and the overall data set. This iterative process refines each theme's specifics and the overarching narrative that the analysis constructs. Following the review, the researchers proceed to define and name themes. This involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, capturing the essence of what each theme represents regarding students' perceptions of Instagram's contents. Themes are named to clearly convey their focus, allowing readers to quickly grasp the central ideas.

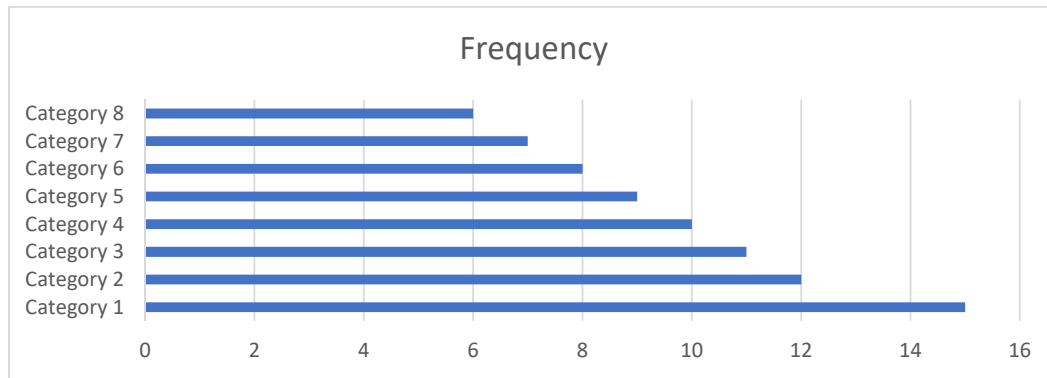
Finally, the report is produced, weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, contextualizing the findings within the research question and relevant literature. This final report presents a coherent and structured narrative that reflects the themes and the overall story that emerges from the data.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the thematic analysis, the various themes that emerged reflect the positive aspects and challenges of using visual analytics platforms for educational purposes. The use of visual analysis as a learning tool showed significant benefits, especially in visual literacy and critical thinking. The main theme identified is "Facilitating visual literacy through composition and design analysis" (65.22%), which emphasizes how this approach helps students understand visual elements in depth. This is followed by its contribution in "Encouraging critical thinking in image interpretation" (52.17%), which proves that students are encouraged to explore the meaning behind visuals independently. However, some challenges arise in the use of this platform. Themes such as "Emphasizing storytelling through visuals without textual support" (47.82%) suggest that this method may be inadequate in explaining complex meanings that require additional narrative context. In addition, "Encouraging subjective interpretation based on personal context" (39.13%) suggests that there are limitations in achieving uniform interpretive consensus among students. The platform also contributes to the understanding of cultural and artistic trends (43.48%) and encourages aesthetic appreciation and creativity (34.78%). However, some respondents reported that the "Awareness of societal norms and cultural influences" (30.43%) fostered by the platform may be too limited by the platform's design, which may lead to "Surface-level interpretations" (26.09%). Nonetheless, the use of this platform provides a solid foundation for developing students' analytical skills. Students still need to complement this experience with a deep understanding of the cultural context and artistic values to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

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

No	Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	<i>Facilitates visual literacy through composition and design analysis</i>	15	65,22%
2.	<i>Promotes critical thinking in image interpretation</i>	12	52,17%
3.	<i>Emphasizes storytelling through visuals without textual support</i>	11	47,82 %
4.	<i>Enhances understanding of cultural and artistic trends</i>	10	43,48%
5.	<i>Promotes subjective interpretations based on personal context</i>	9	39,13%
6.	<i>Encourages aesthetic appreciation and creativity</i>	8	34,78%
7.	<i>Fosters awareness of societal norms and cultural influences</i>	7	30,43%
8.	<i>Encourages surface-level interpretations due to platform design</i>	6	26,09%



● Visual Advantages and Insights on Instagram

1. Perception of Image Identity and Meaning

Respondents indicated that Instagram influenced how they understood the identity or message in the images. For example, the use of visual elements such as baby oil in the context of the P. Diddy controversy was interpreted as cultural satire or mockery. Respondents said:

"The image tries to show us not to believe in everything we see. This image shows the conspiracy between the man and the thing he did."
(MS).

This is by Arnheim's theory that visual perception influences mental interpretation. Visuals create a narrative that utilizes the audience's memory experiences and associations.

2. The Effect of Visual Aesthetics on Memory

Some respondents highlighted the importance of aesthetic elements, such as colour or overall style, in attracting attention and reminding them of a particular issue. For example, the use of a minimalist style was considered to strengthen the visual appeal, making it easier for people to associate the image with P. Diddy. As expressed by one respondent:

"The overall aesthetic or style makes me think it's related to P. Diddy's current controversy with baby oil." (YH).

This reflects the importance of visuals in creating deep memories and triggering further understanding.

● Critiques and Limitations of Visual Comprehension

1. Ambiguity of Messages in Images

Some respondents felt that Instagram images could be ambiguous, creating misunderstandings or multiple interpretations. One respondent stated:

"They just try to be funny, but sometimes the humour doesn't land well for everyone." (CV).

This shows the limitations of cognitive processes in understanding the intent of images, especially when the context is too complex or subjective.

2. Social Media's Influence on Visual Interpretation

Respondents also highlighted how Instagram shapes their visual interpretations through algorithms or the popularity of certain content. For example, another respondent noted:

"Instagram amplifies visual storytelling by focusing on viral aspects, making everything seem connected to trends." (WM).

This highlights the risk of simplifying perceptions due to the influence of social media, where visual understanding may not fully reflect reality. Based on Arnheim's theory, this data shows that visuals on Instagram play a big role in the process of perception and cognitive understanding. While effective in attracting attention and creating memories, visual media also faces the challenge of conveying a clear message free from ambiguity.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight the benefits as well as the challenges of using visual analytics platforms such as Instagram in an educational context. Based on thematic analysis, several key themes emerged that reflect how visual media support visual literacy while posing certain challenges in visual interpretation.

One significant benefit of using visual analytics is the improvement of students' visual literacy. The theme 'Facilitating visual literacy through composition and design analysis' emphasises the importance of this approach in helping students understand visual elements in depth. This is in line with the theory described by Belshaw (2014), which states that visual literacy includes the ability to 'read,' understand and make meaning of images and visual symbols. In this context, Instagram becomes a tool that allows students to analyse

visual elements, such as symbolism or design aesthetics, to understand the broader meaning of visual content. In addition, the ability to think critically is also enhanced through image interpretation, as emphasised in 'Encouraging critical thinking in image interpretation'. For example, some respondents underlined that elements such as visual aesthetics can create deep memories that encourage further understanding. This approach is not only relevant in academia but also in digital environments where users are increasingly exposed to various forms of visual communication.

However, the research also revealed some challenges, 'emphasising visual storytelling without text support' suggests limitations in explaining complex meanings that require additional narrative context. For example, images on the Instagram platform are often ambiguous and can lead to different interpretations based on users' backgrounds. As stated, one of the main causes of misunderstanding is the lack of context in image captions, which are often too brief to fully explain the visual intent (Clark, 2017). Furthermore, limitations in visual interpretation are often related to cultural context, as mentioned in 'raising awareness of social norms and cultural influences'. A low level of cultural awareness can lead to superficial interpretations, as in the case of using emojis or certain symbols that have different meanings in each culture (Highfield, 2016). Therefore, it is important to strengthen awareness of cross-cultural symbolism to minimise misunderstandings in the interpretation of visual content.

Overall, despite the challenges, the results of this study show that visual platforms such as Instagram contribute greatly to the development of critical thinking skills and visual literacy. Visual literacy allows users to not only understand the literal meaning of images but also capture deeper emotional and symbolic messages (Belshaw, 2014). By integrating cultural understanding and artistic value in the learning process, educational experiences through visual analysis can produce more optimal results.

6. REFERENCES

- Albakry, N. S., & Daimin, G. (2014). The visual rhetoric in public awareness print advertising toward Malaysia perceptive socioculture design. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 155, 28–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.251>
- American Library Association. ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>
- Arnheim, R. (1969). *Visual thinking*. University of California Press.
- Belshaw, D. (2014). *The essential elements of digital literacies*.
- Cici Rahmayanti, L., & Zulfikar Fauzi, L. (2021). The use of Instagram social media as an interaction media in shaping adolescent lifestyles. *Journal of Basic Science and Technology*. Retrieved from <https://iocscience.org/ejournal/index.php/JBST/article/download/2110/1655>
- Clark, L. S., & Marchi, R. (2017). *Young people and the future of news: Social media and the rise of connective journalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Flynt, E. S., & Brozo, W. (2010). Visual literacy and the content classroom: A question of now, not when. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(6), 526–528. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25615844>
- Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), 47–62.
- Krejci, S. E., Ramroop-Butts, S., Torres, H. N., & Isokpehi, R. D. (2020). Visual literacy intervention for improving undergraduate student critical thinking of global sustainability issues. *Sustainability*, 12(23), 10209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310209>
- Lu, L. Y. (2010). Inner-city children's graphics call for social justice. *English Language Teaching*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v3n3p11>
- Manampiring, R. A. (2015). The role of Instagram social media in social interaction between students of SMA Negeri I Manado (Study in the science department class of 2012). *ACTA DIURNA Communication*, 4(4).
- Mena, P., Barbe, D., & Chan-Olmsted, S. (2020). Misinformation on Instagram: The impact of trusted endorsements on message credibility. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120935102>
- Meyers, E. M., Erickson, I., & Small, R. V. (2013). Digital literacy and informal learning environments: An introduction. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38(4), 355–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2013.783597>
- Nugroho, C. (2020). *Cyber society: Teknologi, media baru, dan disruptsi informasi* (1st ed.). Kencana.

- Nurfauziyah, S., Nursanti, S., & Utamidewi, W. (2023). Using Instagram as a digital literacy media on the @dp3akarawang account. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 9(9), 245–254. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7951736>
- Sakti, B. C., & Yulianto, M. (2013). The use of Instagram social media in the formation of adolescent self-identity. *Interaction-Online*, 6(4), 1–12.
- Schraw, G., & Richmond, A. S. (2022). Using visual displays to improve classroom thinking. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 33(2), 80–102.