

The Meaning of Digital Literacy in the Life of Teenagers (Case Study of Adolescents in RT 021 RW 006 Talang Kemang Gandus Palembang)

Annisatul Mardiah¹, Sila Nurmala²

¹²Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Candradimuka, Indonesia

Correspondent: annisasantoso05@gmail.com¹

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the meaning of digital literacy in adolescents living in RT 021 RW 006 Talang Kemang Gandus, Palembang. Qualitative case study designs were applied to explore how adolescents build, practice, and experience digital literacy in their daily lives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation, then analyzed thematically using the Braun & Clarke approach. The findings show that adolescents are actively using digital media, especially WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, to meet communication, entertainment, and academic needs. Digital literacy practices are influenced by social environment, family, access to technology, gender, and type of school. Although adolescents are categorized as digital natives, their critical literacy skills are still underdeveloped, making them vulnerable to misinformation. Theoretically, this research refers to critical digital literacy, use and satisfaction, and digital capital. Practically, there study recommends strengthening family involvement, integrating essential digital literacy into school curricula, and designing government policies that are responsive to the needs of youth in urban areas.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Youth, Social Communication, Misinformation, Digital Capital.



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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the last decade has brought significant changes in almost all aspects of human life, ranging from social, cultural, political, economic, to educational. This digital transformation has made internet-based media the primary platform in the daily activities of the global community. For the younger generation, especially teenagers, digital technology has become an inherent part of their identity and lifestyle. Prensky (2001) refers to this generation as *digital natives*, namely individuals who have been exposed to digital technology since birth so that they have the ability to adapt quickly to new devices and internet-based applications.

However, digital literacy cannot be understood only as technical skills in operating digital devices. Digital literacy is actually a complex social practice that includes the ability to access, select, evaluate, and interpret information circulating in the digital space (Livingstone, 2008). Ribble (2015) even emphasized that digital literacy must be viewed in the framework of *digital citizenship* which includes aspects of ethics, responsibility, and critical awareness of the risks and opportunities offered by cyberspace. In other words, digital literacy demands a balance between technical skills, critical awareness, and ethical behavior.

The Indonesian context shows interesting cultural. The (Kominfo, 2024) through the Indonesian Digital Society Index (IMDI) indicates an increase in people's digital literacy in general, especially in the digital *skills dimension*. However, the dimensions of digital ethics and digital safety are still in the medium category. This shows that although Indonesians, including teenagers, are increasingly accustomed to using digital technology, their ability to use it responsibly and safely is not fully optimal (Muhasim, 2017).

In addition, the phenomenon of *misinformation* and *disinformation* that is rampant on social media also further emphasizes the urgency of critical digital literacy. Research by McGrew & Kohnen (2024) shows that adolescents in various countries, including Indonesia, still have difficulty verifying information online. They tend to take information circulating on social media for granted without confirming credible sources. This tendency results in teenagers being the most vulnerable group to the influence of hoaxes, hate speech, and other negative content that circulates massively in the digital world.

The study of digital literacy in Indonesia generally focuses on students or large urban communities (Nugraha, 2020; Park, 2019). In fact, adolescents in suburban or semi-urban areas also face similar challenges, perhaps even more complex due to limited educational facilities, access to technology, and social environmental support. Talang Kemang Gandus, one of the areas in Palembang City, is an interesting example of how teenagers in semi-peripheral environments face social changes due to the rapid flow of digitalization.

Therefore, this research is here to fill the literature gap by exploring in depth the meaning of digital literacy in the lives of adolescents in RT 021 RW 006 Talang Kemang Gandus (Abd Rahi et al., n.d.). The objectives of this study are to:

1. Describe adolescents' digital literacy practices in daily life.
2. Exploring the meaning of digital literacy in academic, social, and organizational contexts.
3. Analyze the factors that affect the construction of the meaning of digital literacy in adolescents in the environment.

Thus, this research is expected to make an empirical contribution in enriching the academic discourse on digital literacy while offering practical recommendations for families, schools, and policymakers in formulating digital literacy programs that are more contextual and inclusive (V. Braun et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Digital Literacy Concept

Digital literacy is a concept that continues to develop along with the advancement of information and communication technology (J.I.S.C., 2014). Gilster (1997) as one of the pioneers introduced the term *digital literacy* as the ability to understand, evaluate, and utilize information in digital format. This definition emphasizes the importance of cognitive skills, not just the technical skills of operating a device. Over time, the understanding of digital literacy has expanded to include technical, cognitive, social, and ethical aspects.

Eshet-Alkalai (2017) developed a digital literacy framework that places critical thinking, communication, and socio-emotional skills as dimensions that must be mastered by individuals in order to survive in the digital era. This is in line with Ribble (2015) who emphasizes nine elements of *digital citizenship*, including awareness of privacy, security, ethics, and responsibility in digital interactions. Thus, digital literacy is not just a skill, but also a cultural and social practice that demands active participation, critical awareness, and ethical responsibility (Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2024).

In the context of education, U.N.E.S.C.O. (2023) introduced the *Global Framework for Digital Literacy* which emphasizes the integration of digital literacy as part of 21st century competencies. This framework links digital literacy with critical thinking skills, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving, thus making it a basic skill that must be possessed by the younger generation in the era of globalization.

Critical Digital Literacy Theory

Buckingham (2020) emphasized that digital literacy must be understood in a critical framework. Digital literacy includes not only technical and informative skills, but also awareness of how digital media shapes power relations, ideology, and social representation. This perspective is important because digital media is often used by certain actors to spread biased discourse, misinformation, and even propaganda.

A study by Estellés et al. (2025) shows that digital literacy among adolescents is still dominated by technical and protective approaches, while critical and participatory dimensions have not been widely developed. In fact, *critical digital literacy* is very important to equip the young generation to be able to understand the political, social, and economic context behind the flow of information they consume (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019). Thus, the application of digital literacy at the education and family levels should be directed at strengthening critical awareness, not just mastery of technology.

Theory Uses and Gratifications

Theories of *Uses and Gratifications* (Katz et al., 1974; McQuail & D., 1981) provides a theoretical basis for understanding the motivation of individuals in using digital media. This theory

emphasizes that media users are not passive parties, but active actors who choose media to meet certain needs, both cognitive, affective, integrative, and entertainment needs (Ruliana, 2019).

In the context of adolescents, digital media is used for various purposes: as a means of finding academic information, strengthening one's identity through social media, building a network of friends, and looking for entertainment (Nugraha, 2020). In other words, digital literacy cannot be separated from individual personal and social motivations. This theory is relevant to analyze how adolescents in Talang Kemang Gandus utilize digital media according to their needs, as well as how gender differences and school backgrounds affect their usage patterns.

The Concept of Digital Natives and Its Criticisms

Prensky (2001) introduced the term *digital natives* to describe a generation that has been accustomed to digital technology since birth. This generation is considered to have better skills in adapting to technology than the previous generation (*digital immigrants*). However, this claim is not entirely acceptable without criticism.

Kirschner & Bruyckere (2017) refute the notion that all young people are automatically proficient in using technology. They emphasized that digital skills are greatly influenced by educational factors, the social environment, and the quality of access to technology (Fitri & P., 2025). In other words, even though teenagers are among the *digital native generation*, it does not mean that they have mature critical digital literacy. Instead, many studies have found that adolescents tend to be technically proficient but weak in evaluative and critical skills (McGrew & Kohnen, 2024).

Previous Research

Several relevant studies have examined the phenomenon of digital literacy in the younger generation. Nugraha (2020) found that Indonesian students are able to recognize political hoaxes, but still have difficulty verifying information. Park (2019) through the concept of *digital capital* highlights that digital literacy is influenced by the social, cultural, and economic capital owned by individuals. This shows that digital literacy cannot be separated from the socio-economic context of society.

Recent research also underscores the challenges of digital literacy (Rahmawati & Prasetyo, 2024). Lan et al. (2024) found that adolescents' awareness of fake news is still low, making it easy for them to get caught up in disinformation. McCashin et al. (2022) highlight the phenomenon of TikTok use in mental health issues, where many adolescents receive information without questioning its credibility. Meanwhile, Estellés et al. (2025) propose the need to strengthen *critical digital citizenship* as a solution to equip the young generation to face the complexity of the digital world.

These studies provide an overview that digital literacy is a multidimensional phenomenon that needs to be studied from various aspects. However, most studies are still focused on adolescents

in large urban areas or college students. Research on digital literacy among semi-peripheral adolescents, such as in Talang Kemang Gandus, is still minimal. Therefore, this study is here to fill this gap by exploring the meaning of digital literacy in depth in a more specific social context.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. According to Yin (2018), case studies are a research strategy that is suitable for researching contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and their context are not clearly visible. The case study was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth adolescents' experiences in interpreting digital literacy in daily life, both in the academic, social, and personal realms. The research was conducted at RT 021 RW 006 Talang Kemang Gandus, Palembang, South Sumatra. This location was chosen because it represents an urban semi-peripheral area that is still minimal as an object of digital literacy research. The study participants were nine adolescents aged 15–17 years, who were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria:

- a. Adolescents who actively use digital media (minimum 3 hours per day).
- b. Adolescents who are pursuing secondary education (Public or Private High School).
- c. Be willing to become a research participant by giving consent through informed consent (either from oneself or from parents/guardians).

The composition of participants included differences in gender (male and female) as well as school type (public and private) to obtain richer data variety.

To obtain comprehensive data, this study uses three main techniques, namely:

1. In-depth interview

It is conducted in a semi-structured format, using flexible interview guidelines to allow for a broader exploration of answers. The questions focus on their experience of using digital media, understanding digital literacy, and how they respond to information received from the internet.

2. Participatory observation

The researcher conducted direct observations of adolescents' digital activities, such as the use of WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube applications. These observations were made to identify digital behavior patterns that may not have been revealed in the interview.

3. Documentation

Supporting data was obtained through screenshots of study group conversations, social media posts, and daily digital activity records shared by participants.

The combination of these three techniques aims to strengthen data triangulation so that the research results are more valid.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using *thematic analysis* developed by V. , Braun & Clarke (2006). The stages include:

- a. Data familiarization – re-reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents.
- b. Initial coding – coding pieces of data that are relevant to the focus of the research.
- c. Identify themes – group the code into categories and find the main theme patterns.
- d. Theme review – checks the theme's consistency with the overall data.
- e. Theme definition – describe the meaning behind each theme.
- f. Outcome reporting – presents findings with a narrative supported by direct quotes from participants.

To support the analysis, NVivo 12 software is used to make the coding process more systematic and organized (Tinmaz & Lee, 2022).

Data Validity Test

The validity of the data is guaranteed by several strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- A. Triangulation method: comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation.
- B. Member check: provides the results of the transcript and initial interpretation to the participant to ensure accuracy.
- C. Peer debriefing: discussing the results of the analysis with fellow researchers/academics to get input.
- D. Trail audit: records the entire research process so that it is transparent and traceable.

Research Ethics

Research ethics is a major concern, considering that the subjects of the study are adolescents who belong to vulnerable groups. Therefore:

- a. The researcher obtained written consent (*informed consent*) from participants and parents.
- b. The identity of the participant is kept confidential by using an anonymous code (e.g. R1, R2, R3).
- c. The digital data obtained is only used for research purposes and is stored securely.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile

The study involved nine adolescents aged 15–17 with different educational backgrounds: five

from public high schools and four from private high schools. In terms of gender, it consists of four males and five females. The intensity of digital media use averages between 4–6 hours per day, with the most dominant applications being WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

- A. WhatsApp is used as the main means of communication, both with family and in academic contexts (study groups).
- B. Instagram is more widely used by female participants as a space for self-expression and digital identity formation.
- C. TikTok is used by almost all participants as a means of quick and interactive entertainment.
- D. YouTube is more predominantly used by male participants to search for academic materials and tutorials on specific skills.

Gender Differences in Digital Literacy

The analysis of the findings shows that there is a striking difference between men and women in interpreting digital literacy.

- a. Adolescent boys use digital media more for informative and educational activities (Husna, 2017). For example, R3 participants (male, 16 years old) stated:

"If I have a school assignment, I immediately look for the video on YouTube, usually easier to understand than reading a book." That is why

- b. Adolescent girls, on the other hand, use digital media more intensively for self-expression and social communication. Participant R7 (female, 17 years old) said:

"I like to upload photos or reels on Instagram. I feel more confident if I have a lot of likes and comments."

This is in line with the theory of *Uses and Gratifications* (McQuail & D., 1981) which states that media is chosen according to the psychological needs of each individual: men tend towards information and knowledge, while women tend more towards identity and social interaction.

Differences in School Types

In addition to gender, the type of school also influences digital literacy practices.

- a. State high school students tend to use digital media more freely, with a dominance for entertainment. For example, R5 participants (male, 16 years old) stated:

"If I'm bored, I can scroll TikTok for up to 2-3 hours, sometimes I forget the time."

- b. Private high school students are more directed to the use of digital media for academic purposes because of stricter supervision from parents. Participant R9 (female, 16 years old) said:

"My parents always check my cellphone, so if you open YouTube, you have to look for something related

to lessons."

This indicates that family factors and the educational environment play an important role in directing adolescents' digital literacy patterns, in accordance with the concept of *digital capital* Park (2019).

Similarities in Digital Literacy Practices

Despite differences in gender and school type, all participants showed similarities in several aspects:

- A. WhatsApp as a medium of academic communication – class groups are the main means of sharing school information.
- B. Limited critical literacy – most adolescents still have difficulty distinguishing between valid and hoax information.
- C. Entertainment dominance – almost all participants make social media the main means of entertainment. R2 participant (female, 15 years old) even admitted:

"If there is news on TikTok, I usually just believe it. It's rare to check whether it's true or not, because many friends also share."

Digital Literacy as a Social Construct

The results of this study show that adolescent digital literacy is not just a technical skill, but a social construct that is influenced by internal (gender, personal motivation) and external factors (family, school, access to technology, and social environment). This is in accordance with the view of (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016) that digital literacy must be understood as a social practice that develops in a certain context.

Dimensi Uses and Gratifications

The findings show a differentiation of needs based on gender. Men use digital media more for information and academics, while women use digital media for self-expression and social interaction. (Katz et al., 1974; McQuail & D., 1981) which emphasizes the active role of the audience in choosing media according to psychological and social needs.

Limitations of Critical Digital Literacy

Although adolescents are classified as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), their critical skills are still weak. They tend to take information from social media for granted without verification. These findings are in line with research by McGrew & Kohnen (2024) which shows the low ability of adolescents to verify online information. These limitations put them in a render them vulnerable

position to hoaxes, disinformation, and manipulation of public opinion.

Digital Capital and the Social Environment

The difference between Public and Private High School students shows the important role of social and economic capital in shaping digital literacy. This strengthens the idea of Park (2019) that digital literacy is part of *digital capital*, which is a resource related to an individual's ability to utilize technology according to their socio-economic background. A supportive family environment can be a determining factor in shaping digital literacy that is more critical and directed.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of adolescent digital literacy in the framework of *critical digital literacy* by adding a local socio-economic dimension. In practical terms, these findings provide recommendations that:

- a. Schools need to integrate critical digital literacy into the curriculum.
- b. Parents need to be more involved, not only supervising, but also being digital discussion partners.
- c. The government needs to expand digital literacy programs to semi-peripheral areas so that there is no digital divide.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the meaning of digital literacy among adolescents in RT 021 RW 006 Talang Kemang Gandus, Palembang. Based on the qualitative analysis conducted through a case study approach, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, adolescents perceive digital literacy not merely as a technical ability to operate devices and applications but also as a medium for communication, self-expression, entertainment, and informal learning (Daryanto, 2015). This indicates that digital literacy is multidimensional and shaped by psychological, social, and academic needs (Retnowati, 2015). Second, although these adolescents can be categorized as digital natives Prensky (2001), their critical competencies remain limited. Most participants tend to accept information circulating on social media without verification, revealing weaknesses in critical digital literacy that make them vulnerable to hoaxes, disinformation, and manipulation of public opinion.

Third, gender and school type also influence digital literacy practices. Male adolescents tend to engage more with digital media for informational and academic purposes, whereas female adolescents are more active in self-expression and social interaction. Additionally, school type contributes to differences in usage patterns: students in private schools are more academically oriented due to stronger family control, while students in public schools use digital media more freely for entertainment. Fourth, the social environment and digital capital play a substantial role

in shaping the quality of adolescents' digital literacy (Helsper & Deursen, 2017). These findings support Park (2019) notion that digital literacy is not solely an individual skill but is also shaped by social, cultural, and economic capital.

Finally, this study has both academic and social implications. Academically, it underscores the importance of viewing digital literacy through a critical lens, emphasizing ethical awareness, responsibility, and sensitivity to media bias. Socially, the findings highlight the need for active guidance from families and schools to help adolescents engage with digital media in more reflective, responsible, and productive ways.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and the conclusions outlined above, several recommendations can be directed to various stakeholders. For adolescents, it is important to strengthen critical thinking skills by verifying information before sharing it, to use digital media not only for entertainment but also for personal development and meaningful learning, and to cultivate ethical awareness in online communication, including respecting privacy and avoiding hate speech. For parents, their role should extend beyond supervision to becoming discussion partners who understand the applications used by their children and guide them in identifying credible information. Parents are also encouraged to integrate ethical values and a sense of responsibility in everyday conversations about digital media use.

For schools, integrating critical digital literacy into the curriculum—such as through Indonesian, Sociology, or ICT subjects—is essential, particularly by emphasizing evaluative skills and digital ethics (Ilomäki et al., 2023). Schools are encouraged to organize digital literacy workshops focusing on hoax identification, digital safety, and communication ethics on social media, as well as to foster collaboration among teachers, parents, and students in designing programs that align with adolescents' needs. At the government level, expanding national digital literacy initiatives to semi-peripheral and suburban areas is necessary so that the program does not concentrate solely on major urban populations. The development of contextually relevant, locally based digital literacy modules tailored to regional cultural characteristics is also recommended, alongside the creation of a policy ecosystem that supports safe and productive digital media use, including the protection of adolescents from harmful content and online exploitation (Eyal et al., 2024).

For future research, comparative studies across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings are recommended to capture variations in digital literacy practices among Indonesian adolescents. Further investigation is also needed to examine the relationship between digital literacy and mental health, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of digital loneliness among teenagers. Employing mixed-methods approaches is suggested to enhance the validity and robustness of future research through the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data.

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