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Gen Z Media Literacy: Trust And News Verification On Social Media

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Abstract. This study analyzes Gen Z media literacy in building trust and verifying news on social media, particularly TikTok, among students of the Communication Science Study Program at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu. The problem addressed in this study is the high use of social media as a daily news source that is not always followed by adequate critical literacy and verification practices. This research used an exploratory qualitative approach based on W. James Potter's media literacy theory, focusing on analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and literature review involving five purposively selected student informants. The findings show that students actively use TikTok to obtain news, but their understanding of news content tends to be brief and visual-oriented. Trust is often influenced by virality, number of likes, comments, and the popularity of influencers rather than source credibility. Verification is conducted only when information is considered important or doubtful. Therefore, students' media literacy is sufficient but still needs strengthening, especially in evaluation and synthesis skills.

Keywords: *Media Literacy, Generation Z, Trust, News Verification, Social Media, TikTok.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the digital era has created major changes in how people access, produce, and distribute news. Internet-based media and social media platforms allow information to circulate quickly, widely, and without the limitations of time and place. This condition has encouraged media convergence, in which conventional media adapt to digital platforms to maintain their existence and reach audiences more effectively (Fela & Masi, 2022). As a result, modern society increasingly depends on digital media as a daily source of news and public information.

Although digital media provides speed and convenience, it also creates serious communication problems. One of the most important problems is the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hoaxes. News that is shared through social media is often distributed before it has been checked through journalistic verification. Social media algorithms also support the rapid spread of viral content, making inaccurate information appear credible when it receives many views, likes, comments, and shares (Sahputra et al., 2023). In this situation, audiences need critical media literacy skills so that they do not easily believe or share unverified information. The issue of hoaxes is highly relevant in Indonesia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misleading health information circulated widely through social media and messaging applications. The thesis background notes that the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatics recorded thousands of hoaxes related to health issues during the period 2018-2021, including misinformation about COVID-19, vaccines, and treatment. This phenomenon shows that misinformation can influence public understanding and decision-making, especially when audiences do not have the habit of checking information through official or credible sources (Kominfo, 2021).

Generation Z is one of the groups most closely connected to digital media. This generation grew up with smartphones, internet access, and social networking platforms, so social media has become a natural part of their daily communication. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms are not only used for entertainment, but also for obtaining news, following public issues, and observing social discussions. However, high technical ability in using digital platforms does not automatically mean that young people have strong media literacy. Many users can access information quickly, but still experience difficulty in evaluating source credibility and verifying whether the information is true (Mustari & Sari, 2025).

TikTok is especially important in this study because it presents information through short videos that are visually attractive, fast, and easy to consume. Its For You Page algorithm exposes users to various topics without requiring them to search actively. For students, this creates a habit of receiving information passively while scrolling. News is often understood through short captions, visual elements, sound, and the creator's style of delivery. This pattern can make news easier to notice, but it can also reduce deeper analysis because users tend to focus on attractive presentation rather than the accuracy and context of the information. Another important issue is the shift of trust from formal media institutions to influencers, content creators, and viral accounts. News delivered by popular accounts is often considered credible because the accounts have many followers or strong public visibility. In the thesis findings, several students stated that they tend to trust information when the video has many viewers, likes, comments, or is posted by a well-known influencer. This condition indicates that the credibility of news in social media is often measured by popularity rather than by journalistic standards, official data, or source verification. Media literacy is therefore needed as a critical ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. Potter (2005) explains that media literacy involves a set of perspectives that individuals actively use to interpret media messages. In this study, media literacy is focused on three skills: analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Analysis refers to the ability to understand the content and meaning of news; evaluation refers to the ability to assess the credibility and quality of information; and synthesis refers to the ability to compare information from different sources as part of the verification process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Literacy

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in various forms. In the digital context, media literacy is not limited to the technical ability to use media, but also includes critical understanding of message content, media purpose, and source credibility (Zulkarnain & Ansarullah, 2023).

Generation Z as Digital Users

Generation Z is a digital generation that actively uses technology and social media. Although Gen Z is familiar with digital platforms, this familiarity does not always produce critical information behavior. Young users may be fast in accessing news, but still need stronger skills to distinguish factual news from opinions, viral content, and misleading information (Lingga Sekar et al., 2023).

News in Social Media

News in the digital era can be distributed by professional media, organizations, influencers, and ordinary users. This open distribution system makes news circulation faster, but also increases the possibility of inaccurate information. Therefore, users need to evaluate whether the information has a clear source, reliable evidence, and relevance to the context (Pratama et al., 2023).

Trust and Verification

Trust is an audience belief that information is true and reliable. In social media, trust can be affected by the source, the presentation style, the number of viewers, comments, likes, and the perceived popularity of the account. Verification is the process of checking information by comparing it with credible sources before believing or sharing it (Ramandhika et al., 2025).

Potter's Media Literacy Theory

Potter's media literacy theory explains that audiences need skills to process media messages critically. This study focuses on three skills: analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. These skills are relevant because the research examines how students understand news, how they assess credibility, and how they compare information with other sources before accepting it as true (Potter, 2005).

METHODS

This study used an exploratory qualitative approach. The approach was selected because the study aims to understand the experiences, perceptions, and habits of students when they receive, trust, and verify news from TikTok. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring meaning and behavior in a social context, especially when the researcher needs to understand the reasons behind students' information practices.

The informants consisted of five Communication Science students of Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu who were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria included students aged 18-25 years, active TikTok users, individuals who access news through TikTok, and students who were willing to share their experiences openly during interviews. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and literature review. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Interview and observation data were grouped according to Potter's media literacy skills: analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. To strengthen data validity, the study used source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing answers among informants and comparing interview data with observation and documentation.

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Informant	Status		Reason for Selection
1	Tiara Anggraini	Communication student, semester 4	Science	Active TikTok user and has experience consuming news from social media.
2	Yusvita Sari	Communication student, semester 8	Science	Follows influencers and digital news accounts as daily information sources.
3	Prisilia Oktaviani	Communication student, semester 8	Science	Interacts with and shares information in student social media groups.
4	Eni Novita	Communication student, semester 8	Science	Uses TikTok for more than three hours per day and is frequently exposed to news.
5	Arini Pansilian	Putri Communication student, semester 8	Science	Has experience with news that later turned out to be inaccurate.

Table 2. Data Collection Matrix

Technique	Data Collected	Purpose
Interview	Students' experiences in trusting and verifying TikTok news	To explore perceptions and reasons behind media behavior.
Observation	Students' news consumption habits on TikTok	To observe scrolling behavior, attention to content, and verification practice.
Documentation	Research photos, screenshots, and supporting documents	To support interview and observation findings.
Literature review	Books and journal articles about media literacy and social media	To strengthen theoretical interpretation.

RESULTS

The results section was revised to present the findings more clearly according to the focus of the study. The findings are organized into three main aspects of media literacy based on W. James Potter, namely analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. The data were obtained from interviews with five Communication Science students, observation of their TikTok news consumption behavior, documentation, and supporting literature. The findings show that students are active social media users, but their ability to evaluate and verify news is still inconsistent.

Table 3. Main Findings of Gen Z Media Literacy on TikTok

Aspect	Research Finding	Meaning for Media Literacy
Analysis	Students can understand the general message of TikTok news videos, but they usually focus only on short explanations, captions, visuals, and the main point of the video.	Students already have basic analytical ability, yet their understanding is still surface-level because they rarely examine the full context, source, and purpose of the news.
Evaluation	Students tend to trust news that is viral, has many likes, comments, viewers, or is delivered by influencers and popular accounts.	Credibility is often judged from popularity rather than source accuracy. This shows that the evaluation skill of students still needs to be strengthened.
Synthesis / Verification	Some students check information through Google, online news portals, or official accounts, but this is usually done only when the news feels doubtful or important.	Students have begun to recognize the importance of verification, but checking news has not yet become a consistent habit before believing or sharing information.

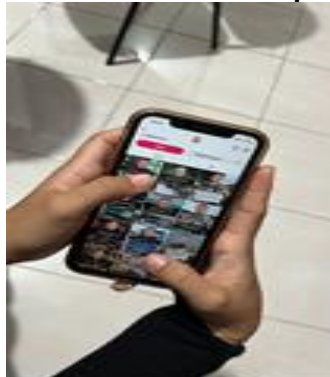
Analysis of TikTok News Content

In the analysis aspect, students were able to identify the main message of news content that appeared on TikTok. They could understand what the video was talking about, especially

when the information was delivered in a simple, short, and visually attractive format. However, the findings show that this understanding was not always followed by deeper analysis. Students rarely examined who produced the content, what source was used, and whether the video provided complete information.

Observation also showed that students often consumed news passively through the For You Page. They did not always search for news intentionally, but received information while scrolling. As a result, their attention was often determined by the attractiveness of the video, the opening sentence, the music, and the comment section. This indicates that the short-video format influences how students analyze news: they can understand quickly, but not always critically.

Figure 2. Passive TikTok news consumption among students



Source: Research documentation from the thesis manuscript, 2026.

Evaluation of News Credibility

The evaluation aspect became the most important finding in this study. Students did not always evaluate news based on official sources or factual evidence. Instead, their trust was often influenced by the popularity of the content. Videos with many viewers, likes, shares, and comments were considered more convincing. In addition, influencers and popular content creators were often seen as credible sources because they already had many followers and were familiar to students. This pattern shows a shift in the way students build trust in digital news. In traditional media, credibility is usually related to journalistic institutions, editorial standards, and official sources. On TikTok, however, credibility is often formed through social proof, such as public reactions, virality, and account popularity. This condition creates a risk because viral content is not always accurate. News that is widely discussed may still contain incomplete, biased, or false information.

Table 4. Indicators Influencing Student Trust in TikTok News

Indicator	Student Tendency	Research Interpretation
Influencer popularity	Students are more likely to trust news delivered by well-known influencers or creators.	Popularity becomes an informal substitute for source credibility.
Number of likes and views	Videos with high engagement are considered more convincing.	Students associate high engagement with truth, although engagement does not guarantee accuracy.
Comment section	Students often read comments to see whether many users agree with the content.	Comments influence confidence, but they can also spread bias and unverified opinions.

Personal experience hoaxes	with	Students who have previously believed incorrect news tend to become more careful.	Direct experience can encourage more critical evaluation.
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Synthesis and News Verification

In the synthesis aspect, the findings show that some students had started to compare information from TikTok with other sources, such as Google, online news portals, or official accounts. This behavior appeared especially when students felt unsure about the content or when the news was related to important issues. Students who had experienced mistakes in believing or sharing inaccurate news also became more careful and tried to verify information before accepting it as true.

However, the verification process was still not consistent. Many students only verified news when the information seemed controversial, doubtful, or personally relevant. For ordinary news videos, students often continued scrolling without checking the source. This shows that synthesis or verification skills have begun to develop, but they have not yet become a stable habit in daily media use.

Figure 3. Student activity related to news verification



Source: Research documentation from the thesis manuscript, 2026.

Overall, the results indicate that the media literacy of Gen Z students is present but not yet optimal. Students are familiar with TikTok as a news source and can understand general information from short videos. Nevertheless, their trust is still strongly shaped by virality, influencer popularity, and audience reactions. Verification practices exist, but they remain situational and inconsistent. Therefore, the main finding of this study is that students need stronger media literacy education, particularly in evaluating source credibility and verifying information before believing or sharing news on social media.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that TikTok has become an important source of daily news for Communication Science students. Students do not always search for news intentionally; instead, information often appears automatically through the For You Page. This supports the idea that social media changes news consumption from active searching to algorithmic exposure. In this context, media literacy is needed so that students do not become passive recipients of information.

From Potter's perspective, the analysis skill is visible when students try to understand the main content of a video. However, this skill remains limited because students often focus only on the surface message. The short-video format encourages fast consumption, while critical

analysis requires time to examine source, purpose, context, and completeness of information. This gap shows that access to news is not the same as critical understanding.

The evaluation skill is the weakest aspect in the findings. Students often trust content because it is viral, widely discussed, or delivered by a well-known influencer. This indicates a shift in credibility standards from institutional authority to platform popularity. Such a shift can be risky because viral content is not always accurate. Likes and comments can show engagement, but they cannot replace verification through credible sources.

The synthesis skill appears when students compare information from TikTok with Google, online news portals, or official accounts. However, this behavior is still inconsistent. Verification is mostly conducted when students feel doubtful or when the issue is considered important. This means that verification is not yet a daily habit. To improve media literacy, students need to develop a routine of checking source identity, comparing information across media, and avoiding immediate sharing.

The study also shows that students' experiences with hoaxes can increase caution. When students realize that viral information can be wrong, they become more aware of the importance of verification. This finding is important for media literacy education because real examples of misinformation can help students understand the consequences of uncritical media use. Therefore, media literacy programs should combine theory, practical verification exercises, and discussion of real cases.

Overall, the results show that the media literacy of students is sufficient but not yet optimal. Students can access and understand news quickly, but still need to improve evaluation and synthesis skills. In the context of communication studies, this condition is important because students are expected to become critical communicators who can help reduce the spread of hoaxes and promote responsible digital behavior.

Table 4. Recommended Media Literacy Strengthening Plan

Program	Activity	Expected Result
Critical news analysis	Discuss TikTok news videos by identifying facts, opinions, source, and purpose.	Students become more careful in understanding news content.
Source credibility training	Compare influencer content with official media and government sources.	Students learn to evaluate credibility beyond popularity.
Verification practice	Use Google, news portals, official websites, and fact-checking sites before sharing information.	Verification becomes a regular media habit.
Ethical digital behavior	Reflect on the impact of sharing unverified information.	Students become more responsible social media users.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Gen Z media literacy among Communication Science students of Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu in trusting and verifying news on TikTok is present but still needs strengthening. In the analysis aspect, students can understand the general meaning of news, but their understanding often remains brief and is strongly influenced by the visual appeal of short videos.

In the evaluation aspect, students' trust is often influenced by the popularity of content, number of likes, comments, shares, and the reputation of influencers. This indicates that students do not always evaluate news based on source credibility or factual evidence. In the

synthesis aspect, some students have started to verify information through Google, online news portals, or official accounts, but this habit is not yet consistent.

The findings indicate that improving media literacy is necessary so that students become more critical, selective, and responsible social media users. Students should be encouraged to check information before believing and sharing it, while educational institutions can strengthen media literacy through learning activities, discussions, and practical verification training.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. First, the research focused only on five informants from the Communication Science Study Program at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Gen Z users. Second, the study focused mainly on TikTok and did not compare verification practices across other social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, X, or Facebook.

Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and use mixed methods to measure the level of media literacy more broadly. Future studies can also compare different platforms to identify how each platform's algorithm, format, and interaction features influence trust and news verification behavior..

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