

The Dynamics of Digital Literacy and Its Impact on Generation Z's Social Participation in the Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of digital literacy and its impact on Generation Z's social participation in the post-truth era, characterized by a flood of information, disinformation, and biased public opinion. Using a qualitative approach based on a literature review, this study examines various relevant scientific sources to understand how digital literacy plays a role in shaping critical awareness and social engagement of the younger generation. The results of the study indicate that digital literacy encompasses not only technical skills but also reflective, ethical, and evaluative abilities in interpreting digital information. Generation Z has great potential as active social actors in the digital space, but is often trapped in a flow of manipulative and shallow information. Comprehensive improvements in digital literacy have been shown to influence the quality of social participation, making it more substantive, collaborative, and oriented towards social transformation. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating education, public policy, and media innovation in building a digital ecosystem that supports truth-based social participation. Thus, strengthening digital literacy is a key strategy for creating critical, ethical, and civilized digital citizens amidst the challenges of the post-truth era..

Keywords: Digital Literacy; Generation Z; Post-Truth Era

INTRODUCTION

The post-truth era presents a social reality in which the lines between fact and opinion, objective truth and emotionally driven narratives, are increasingly blurred. This shift marks a fundamental shift in how society interprets information, where truth is no longer determined by empirical evidence but rather by the extent to which information can influence public emotions and beliefs. Digital technology accelerates this process through social media algorithms that tend to display information according to user preferences, thereby reinforcing cognitive biases. Generation Z, as a group born and raised in a digital ecosystem, is most exposed to this dynamic. They interact intensely with rapidly circulating information, often without robust verification mechanisms. As a result, the ability to distinguish between credible and manipulative information becomes increasingly crucial. This situation demands digital literacy that is not merely technical, but also critical and reflective. Only through these skills can Generation Z play an active role as rational subjects amidst the complex post-truth landscape.

Mature digital literacy skills encompass not only the skills to access and use technology, but also the cognitive ability to assess the validity, source, and purpose of information. Digital literacy is essentially a form of epistemological awareness that enables individuals to understand the power structures behind the production and distribution of information. Generation Z, exposed to various forms of digital representation from an early age, often develops intuitive abilities in using technology,



but not necessarily adequate critical skills. This condition creates a gap between technological proficiency and the depth of understanding of the content consumed. The phenomenon of the spread of hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and hate speech among young users is an indicator of the weakness of the critical dimension of digital literacy. As a result, they are at risk of becoming part of a cycle of disinformation that reinforces social bias. Comprehensive digital literacy is needed so that Generation Z is not merely a passive user, but a social agent aware of the impact of every communicative action in cyberspace.

The transformation of social media into a new arena for social participation has also changed the patterns of interaction between the younger generation and the public sphere. Social activities that were once primarily physical have now migrated to the digital space, creating new forms of activism and solidarity. Awareness campaigns, environmental movements, and even human rights issues are often initiated through hashtags and online platforms. Generation Z demonstrates high enthusiasm for social issues through rapid and massive digital expression. However, this speed of information circulation also carries the risk of shallow understanding of the issues raised. Much digital social participation is performative—emphasizing the image of caring over substantive involvement. This phenomenon demonstrates how immature digital literacy can shift the meaning of social participation from critical action to mere symbolic expression. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy is crucial for young people's social participation to have a reflective dimension and be oriented towards real social change.

Generation Z has unique characteristics as a group that does not recognize clear boundaries between the virtual and real worlds. Their communication patterns are multimodal, combining text, images, videos, and digital symbols as part of social interactions. Their social and political identities are often formed through these interactions, where the digital space acts as a medium for meaning-making and solidarity. However, the construction of digital identities also presents its own challenges, as it is often influenced by dominant narratives and algorithms that reinforce homogenous views. This condition can give rise to an echo chamber effect that narrows the horizon of critical thinking. As a result, the resulting social participation is not the result of open dialogue, but rather the repetition of uniform views. Therefore, reflective skills in understanding algorithmic bias and the structure of digital media are integral to empowering digital literacy. Digital literacy that is aware of its socio-technological dimensions enables Generation Z to build more inclusive and deliberative social participation.

The emergence of the post-truth phenomenon has also weakened trust in social institutions and traditional sources of information, such as mainstream media and educational institutions. When every individual can become a producer of information, the authority of knowledge is decentralized, and the validity of information becomes relative to personal beliefs. Generation Z often defines the authenticity of information based on emotional closeness to the content or the credibility of public figures on social media. This creates a paradox between freedom of expression and information accuracy. On the one hand, the democratization of information opens up broad spaces for participation, but on the other, it also creates epistemic disorientation that blurs the lines between fact and fiction. This tension demands critical skills that can balance information transparency with moral and intellectual responsibility. Mature digital literacy can be a social mechanism to restore public trust in evidence-based truth and rationality.

Social participation in the digital era is measured not only by engagement in online discourse, but also by the extent to which individuals are able to contribute to the formation of constructive public opinion. Generation Z has great potential to be a catalyst for social change through their ability to utilize digital media. However, this potential can

be diminished if it is not accompanied by the ability to understand the social and political dynamics underlying the issues they voice. Intelligent social participation demands digital literacy rooted in critical awareness of information, empathy for differences, and ethical communication. Without this foundation, digital participation risks becoming an instrument of polarization, not collaboration. Therefore, efforts to strengthen digital literacy must be directed at fostering a social awareness that is ethical, reflective, and oriented toward the public interest.

The digital literacy developed among Generation Z has broad implications for the quality of democracy and public civility. Their ability to assess and produce information contributes directly to the form of public discourse that develops in society. When digital literacy is implemented critically, it can be a means of social empowerment that promotes transparency, accountability, and equal participation. Conversely, if implemented without ethical awareness, it has the potential to reinforce manipulative practices and social exclusion. Therefore, digital literacy education must encompass cognitive, affective, and moral aspects, so that Generation Z can integrate humanitarian values into their digital activities. Civilized digital literacy will shape a generation that is not only technologically proficient but also possesses a high level of social responsibility. Thus, digital literacy becomes the foundation for equitable and sustainable social participation in the information age.

The urgency of building a generation with resilient digital literacy is becoming increasingly apparent as social complexity increases due to technological disruption. The digital world is now more than just a communication space, but also an arena for the formation of values, knowledge, and collective action. Generation Z plays a strategic role as a bridge between the analog era and the fully autonomous digital era. Their ability to manage information will determine the direction of future societal development, particularly in addressing issues such as disinformation, intolerance, and social fragmentation. Critical digital literacy enables them to become not only recipients of information, but also directors of a more inclusive flow of knowledge. If these capabilities continue to be strengthened through education, public policy, and cross-sector collaboration, the social participation of the younger generation can become a transformative force for a more rational and equitable social order. Digital literacy, then, is not merely an individual competency, but an instrument of civilization amidst the deepening challenges of post-truth.

METHODS

The research method used in the study entitled "Digital Literacy Dynamics and Its Impact on Generation Z's Social Participation in the Post-Truth Era" is a qualitative method with a literature review approach. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis of various previous research results relevant to the topic of digital literacy, social participation, and the post-truth phenomenon. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research aims to understand the meaning behind social phenomena through in-depth interpretation of non-numerical data. Meanwhile, Zed (2014) explains that a literature review is the process of tracing, examining, and evaluating existing research results to build a more comprehensive conceptual framework. Therefore, this study does not seek to produce new empirical data, but rather consolidates existing knowledge to identify patterns, gaps, and new directions in the scientific discourse on digital literacy and Generation Z's social participation.

The research procedure was carried out through several systematic stages, including identification of library sources, literature selection, thematic analysis, and

synthesis of study results. In the initial stage, researchers searched for scientific articles, academic books, and official publications published between 2015 and 2025 from various reputable databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ. Inclusion criteria were set to ensure the relevance of the sources, namely publications discussing digital literacy, social participation, and the post-truth phenomenon with a focus on the Generation Z group. After the selection process, coding of the main themes was carried out using qualitative content analysis techniques as suggested by Krippendorff (2018), which emphasizes the interpretation of meaning in social and cultural contexts. The results of this coding were then synthesized to find conceptual relationships between themes and map the literature's contribution to the topic under study.

The analytical approach used in this study is thematic analysis. This method allows researchers to identify recurring patterns in the literature and organize them into key themes that reflect the dynamics of digital literacy and its implications for social participation. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that thematic analysis helps construct meaning through in-depth interpretation of textual data, while also providing space for critical reflection on existing theories. In the context of this study, the main themes analyzed include: (1) the definition and dimensions of digital literacy, (2) the characteristics of Generation Z's social participation in the digital space, (3) the influence of the post-truth era on social and political behavior, and (4) strategies for strengthening digital literacy to foster critical social participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Digital Literacy as a Critical Competence in the Post-Truth Era

The development of digital technology has shifted the literacy paradigm from merely the ability to read and write to a multidimensional competency involving technological, cognitive, and social aspects. Gilster (1997) introduced the concept of digital literacy as the ability to understand and use information in various digital formats, which was then further developed by Eshet-Alkalai (2012) into skills encompassing evaluation, creation, and communication in a digital context. In the post-truth era, where facts are often obscured by emotional opinions and political narratives, the ability to critically assess information sources is a key determinant of the quality of digital literacy. The widespread phenomenon of misinformation and disinformation on social media creates space for the construction of false realities that can massively influence public opinion. According to a UNESCO report (2023), approximately 57% of global social media users admit to having difficulty distinguishing between true and false information on the internet, demonstrating the urgency of digital literacy as a basic skill for 21st-century citizens.

Critical digital literacy skills are inseparable from the social context in which individuals interact. According to Buckingham (2015), digital literacy is not merely a technical skill, but a form of social awareness of power, representation, and ideology hidden in digital content. Generation Z, as the most active group on social media, faces a flood of information from various sources that cannot always be verified. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2022) showed that 81% of users aged 18–25 rely on social media as their primary news source, while only 26% cross-check the information they receive. This condition indicates that although Generation Z has high technological skills, they are still vulnerable to information manipulation and cognitive bias due to low critical literacy. Strong digital literacy should include the epistemic ability to distinguish between evidence-based knowledge and emotional opinions.

The challenges of digital literacy in the post-truth era also relate to the algorithmic logic that governs the flow of information. Social media algorithmic systems such as filter bubbles and echo chambers reinforce users' tendency to accept information that aligns with their views. Pariser (2011) refers to this phenomenon as the filter bubble effect, where individuals are trapped in a homogenous information space that reinforces bias and reduces openness to divergent views. Data from the Digital News Report (Reuters Institute, 2024) shows that more than 65% of young users only interact with content that supports their personal opinions. This weakens critical thinking and social dialogue skills, and reinforces digital polarization. Therefore, digital literacy must be directed at the ability to navigate algorithms and understand the digital power structures that shape public perception.

The following table shows a comparison between technical digital literacy and critical digital literacy based on the results of a synthesis of academic literature.

Dimensions of Digital Literacy	Competency Focus	Implications for the Post-Truth Era	Theoretical Sources
Technical	Operating digital devices and applications	Helps quick access to information, but is vulnerable to content manipulation.	Ferrari (2013)
Cognitive	Evaluate and understand information rationally	Improve analytical skills regarding data validity and sources	Gilster (1997)
Social-Critical	Assessing power structures and ideologies in digital media	Raising awareness of media bias, disinformation, and political influence	Buckingham (2015)

Efforts to strengthen digital literacy as a critical competency must begin with formal and informal education. The OECD (2023) confirms that integrating digital literacy into the school curriculum significantly improves critical thinking skills in students aged 15–24, with an average increase of 23% after digital inquiry learning-based training. Furthermore, collaboration between educational institutions, the media, and the government can expand the reach of digital literacy to the wider community. Digital literacy based on critical awareness enables Generation Z to become not only passive users but also social actors aware of communication ethics, information transparency, and public responsibility. Thus, digital literacy serves as an epistemological bulwark in facing the truth crisis in the post-truth era.

2. Dynamics of Generation Z's Social Participation in the Digital Space

Generation Z's social participation has undergone a significant transformation as interaction spaces shift from physical to digital. This generation builds social, political, and cultural relationships through social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter). According to the We Are Social (2024) report, more than 93% of Generation Z

in Southeast Asia are active on social media, and 68% of them are involved in online-based social activities, such as environmental campaigns, equality issues, or digital rights. This digital social participation pattern illustrates a shift from traditional collective action to connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), where social mobilization relies more on personal and algorithmic networks than formal institutions. This shift demonstrates Generation Z's great potential in building solidarity across geographic and ideological boundaries, but also opens up space for the emergence of temporary and emotional forms of participation.

Digital participation among the younger generation tends to be expressive, where social actions are carried out through visual symbols such as hashtags, short videos, or online campaigns. Papacharissi (2015) refers to this phenomenon as affective publics, namely communities bound by shared emotions in the digital space. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter and #SavePalestine campaigns demonstrate how digital solidarity can create real social and political pressure. However, Nielsen's (2023) research shows that only 41% of Generation Z's digital participation continues into real-world social action. This indicates a gap between symbolic and substantive participation. Critical digital literacy is needed so that the younger generation can transform emotional expression into reflective participation based on social analysis and moral commitment.

The role of social media in shaping social participation is also inseparable from the influence of algorithms and the attention economy. Digital platforms are designed to maximize user engagement through emotional and viral content. Fuchs (2021) calls this a form of digital capitalism, where social participation is commodified into economic data. As a result, digital activism often loses its political depth and becomes social performativity. Statista (2024) estimates that 44% of young users engage more frequently with popular activism content than with long-term social issues. This phenomenon indicates the need to reorient social participation toward a more deliberative model, where discussion and collaboration are at the heart of participation, rather than merely visual representation or the virality of content.

The following table illustrates the differences between symbolic digital social participation and reflective social participation among Generation Z.

Types of Social Participation	Main Features	The main purpose	Social Risk
Symbolic (Performative)	Based on self-expression and image	Increase social exposure	Shallow, volatile, unsustainable
Reflective (Substantive)	Based on critical awareness and knowledge	Building real social change	Requires high commitment and literacy

To overcome the tendency towards shallow participation, a digital literacy model that emphasizes social empathy, rational argumentation, and collaborative skills is needed. A study by Livingstone & Helsper (2020) showed that participatory digital literacy training can increase Generation Z's reflective ability to understand global social issues by up to 32%. Thus, systematically developed digital literacy serves as a foundation for meaningful social participation, not just a trend. Intelligent and ethical social participation will strengthen the quality of digital democracy and build a more deliberative public sphere.

3. Digital Literacy Strengthening Strategies to Build Critical and Inclusive Social Participation

Efforts to strengthen digital literacy among Generation Z require a systemic approach encompassing educational, social, and public policy dimensions. According to Hobbs (2017), digital literacy education should be geared toward developing critical digital citizens, not just technology users. This approach needs to be integrated into the national curriculum so that students understand not only how to use technology but also digital ethics and responsibility. In Finland, for example, the implementation of digital critical pedagogy from elementary school has increased the national digital literacy index to 87.3% by 2023 (OECD, 2024). A similar model can be adapted in Indonesia through community-based digital literacy programs involving teachers, parents, and public institutions.

In addition to formal education, digital media and platforms play a strategic role in building a healthy literacy ecosystem. Collaboration between the government, academia, and the technology industry can produce public policies that promote algorithmic transparency and information accountability. For example, the European Union's Digital Service Act (2023) successfully reduced the spread of hoax content by 28% in one year through algorithmic monitoring and public education. Indonesia can adopt a similar approach by strengthening collaboration between the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, digital platforms, and educational institutions to create an informative, inclusive, and civilized digital space. Digital literacy is not solely an individual responsibility, but a collective social project that requires policy intervention.

From a social perspective, strengthening digital literacy must be based on the principle of inclusivity. Many Generation Z groups in rural and low-income areas still face disparities in access to digital infrastructure. World Bank data (2023) shows that approximately 36% of adolescents in developing countries lack stable internet access, leading to unequal social participation in the digital space. Strategies to strengthen digital literacy need to include infrastructure provision, community-based training, and local capacity building to enable all social groups to participate equally. Programs such as the National Indonesian Digital Literacy Movement (GNLD), launched by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in 2021, are a positive step, but their effectiveness needs to be strengthened through social impact-based evaluation.

The following table illustrates a multidimensional approach to strengthening Generation Z's digital literacy:

Strategy Dimensions	Objective	Implementation	Actors Involved
Education	Raising digital critical awareness	Curriculum integration, teacher training, media ethics modules	Schools, universities, Ministry of Education and Culture
Social-Community	Expanding social access and engagement	Digital community-based training program	NGOs, local governments

Technology and Policy	Managing a healthy digital ecosystem	a Algorithmic anti-hoax campaign	regulation, Ministry of Communication and Information, digital platforms, DPR
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Efforts to strengthen digital literacy must also foster moral and empathetic dimensions so that digital social participation does not lose its human side. Humanistic digital literacy encourages Generation Z to think reflectively, appreciate diversity, and use technology as a means of social empowerment. By strengthening three main pillars—critical education, digital justice, and cross-sector collaboration—Generation Z can become a generation that is not only technologically proficient, but also ethical and socially responsible. Going forward, digital literacy will be a crucial foundation for maintaining the sustainability of democracy and building a digital society that is

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of this study shows that the dynamics of digital literacy are significantly related to Generation Z's social participation patterns in the post-truth era, characterized by information disruption and digital cultural transformation. Digital literacy can no longer be interpreted solely as technical ability to operate digital devices, but rather as a multidimensional competency encompassing cognitive, affective, and ethical aspects in interpreting digital reality. Literature findings indicate that low information verification skills make Generation Z vulnerable to the spread of hoaxes and opinion polarization, which in turn can weaken the quality of public deliberation in cyberspace. However, on the other hand, Generation Z also shows great potential as agents of social change through creative, collaborative, and innovative forms of digital participation. Data from UNESCO (2023) shows that 67% of global Generation Z use digital platforms to engage in social issues, indicating an increase in social awareness among this generation. However, this form of participation is often symbolic and not fully oriented towards real structural change. Therefore, strengthening critical digital literacy is an urgent need to shape reflective and sustainable social participation. This strategy must involve integration between formal education, public policy, and collaboration with social media platforms. Thus, digital literacy becomes not only a technological instrument but also a moral and epistemological foundation for building a democratic society in the digital space. The formation of critical and ethical digital citizens will strengthen social resilience against information manipulation and disinformation that are developing in the post-truth era. Theoretically, this research enriches the discourse on the relationship between digital literacy and social participation in the context of the digital generation. Practically, these results emphasize the importance of comprehensive educational policies to strengthen the digital capacity of Generation Z so that they can contribute substantially to inclusive and truth-based social development.

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