
Digital Literacy and Social Media Awareness among Adolescents: A Case Study on Adolescents in Serang City

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has encouraged teenagers to become active users of social media in their daily lives. However, the high intensity of use is not always accompanied by adequate awareness of ethics, information security, and the social impact of digital activities. This study aims to analyze the level of awareness of teenagers in using social media and how digital literacy affects their mindset and behavior in the digital space. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method in Serang City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 teenagers aged 15–18 years from various educational backgrounds, as well as observations of their social media usage habits. Data analysis was carried out thematically to identify patterns of awareness, understanding of digital risks, and reflective abilities in interacting on social media. The results of the study show that most teenagers have a functional understanding of social media, but have not shown critical awareness of its impact, both on themselves and their social environment. The digital literacy they have tends to be technical and comes from personal experience or peer environment, while support from family and formal education is still minimal. This study recommends the importance of integrating digital literacy education into the school curriculum and strengthening the role of the family in forming a healthy and responsible social media culture

Keywords: *Digital Literacy, Social Media Awareness, Teenagers, Case Study.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought about a major transformation in social life, especially among the younger generation. Social media has become an inseparable part of adolescent life, functioning not only as a means of communication and entertainment, but also as a space for self-expression and identity formation (Boyd, 2014; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). In Indonesia, increasing internet penetration has encouraged adolescents to be more active in accessing various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp. The latest data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2023) shows that the 13–18 age group is the largest social media user nationally. This phenomenon is also reflected in Serang City, Banten, as a city with quite rapid digital growth among students.

The high access and involvement of adolescents in social media is not necessarily accompanied by critical awareness of the risks and impacts of these digital activities. Many adolescents do not yet have an adequate understanding of the security of personal information, digital communication ethics, and the ability to filter the content they consume and distribute (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Nuraeni & Nuraeni, 2020; Martínez & Olsson, 2019). This unpreparedness increases vulnerability to the spread of hoaxes, cyberbullying, misuse of personal data, and exposure to other negative content (Damayanti et al., 2022; Rasyid et al., 2021). Therefore, the aspect of awareness in the use of social media is important to study, especially within the framework of digital literacy.

Digital literacy does not only refer to technical skills in using digital devices, but also includes critical, ethical, and reflective thinking skills in accessing, understanding, and producing information responsibly (Aufderheide, 1993; Potter, 2013; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In the context of adolescents, digital literacy plays an important role in shaping their awareness of the reality of cyberspace and its influence on real life (Hobbs, 2011; Kurnia & Astuti, 2017).

Unfortunately, many educational institutions in Indonesia are still not optimal in integrating digital literacy education into the curriculum, so that the formation of adolescent digital awareness is often informal and depends on individual experiences and peer influences (Fitriyani et al., 2023; Setiawan & Munir, 2020).

Several previous studies have discussed the relationship between digital literacy and social media usage behavior. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) emphasized that digital literacy can protect adolescents from online risks and help them navigate the digital space more wisely. Research by Kurnia and Astuti (2017) shows that adolescents in Indonesia generally have good technical skills, but are weak in evaluative and ethical aspects. On the other hand, research by Jenkins et al. (2016) and Buckingham (2003) emphasize that participatory media literacy education can increase critical awareness of digital content. In the local context, a study by Pratama and Setiawan (2021) shows that the school curriculum has not explicitly encouraged ethical reflection in the use of social media.

Although the contribution of these studies is quite significant, there is a gap that has not been widely explored, namely the lack of studies that explore adolescent social media awareness in depth through a qualitative approach in certain areas such as Serang City. The majority of studies are still quantitative and national in scale, so they do not capture the complexity of adolescent experiences in the local socio-cultural context (Siregar & Yusuf, 2022). In addition, there are still limited studies that link awareness of social media use with digital literacy from a reflective and ethical perspective. Therefore, this study tries to fill this gap through a qualitative case study approach to adolescents in Serang City.

Based on the description above, the formulation of the problem in this study is: (1) What is the level of awareness of teenagers in Serang City in using social media? (2) How does digital literacy influence the mindset and behavior of teenagers in social media activities? (3) What factors shape teenagers' social media awareness in a local context?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, which aims to deeply understand the dynamics of awareness of social media use among adolescents in the local context of Serang City. This approach was chosen because it is able to comprehensively explore the meaning, perception, and subjective experiences of informants (Creswell, 2013). The focus of this study is on how adolescents understand, respond to, and reflect on their activities on social media, and how digital literacy shapes this level of awareness. The subjects of the study were adolescents aged 15–18 years who live and attend school in Serang City. The selection of informants was carried out purposively, taking into account variations in educational background, gender, and intensity of social media use. The number of main informants in this study was 12 people, which was considered to have met the principle of saturation in data collection (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). In addition, two Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers and one parent were also involved as supporting informants to enrich the perspective.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and documentation of public social media activities. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed based on digital literacy indicators (Hobbs, 2011) and a digital awareness framework (Potter, 2013). Data analysis was carried out thematically using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation techniques, member checks, and discussions with colleagues. Data validity was strengthened through audit trails and systematically documented field notes.

With this approach, it is hoped that the research will be able to fully describe the social reality of Serang City teenagers in using social media, as well as identify digital literacy factors that shape their awareness of ethics and responsibility in daily digital activities

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine in depth the awareness of social media among teenagers in Serang City from a digital literacy perspective. The results of the study produced three main themes: (1) the level of awareness of teenagers in using social media, (2) the influence of digital literacy on the mindset and behavior of teenagers, and (3) social factors that shape the digital awareness of teenagers. Each theme is built from in-depth interview data, participant observation, and documentation of informants' online activities.

Level of Awareness of Teenagers in Using Social Media

Most teenagers in Serang City use social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp as part of their daily routine. When asked about the reasons for using social media, most respondents mentioned entertainment, following trends, and communicating. However, their understanding of the risks of social media such as hoaxes, data hacking, cyberbullying, or digital addiction is still relatively low and tends not to be a major concern.

"I play TikTok and Instagram just for fun. I rarely think about the impact, the important thing is that it's fun." (R1, 17 years old, public high school student)

From this statement, it can be seen that their awareness is surface-level and has not touched on critical or ethical aspects. This finding is in line with the research of Nuraeni & Nuraeni (2020) which states that Indonesian teenagers generally have the ability to access and operate social media, but do not yet have the skills to evaluate the social impact of their digital activities. This is also supported by the study of Livingstone and Helsper (2007), which revealed that the digital divide is not only in access to technology, but also in the ability to think reflectively in using it. However, there are a small number of informants who show higher awareness of the use of social media, especially those who have access to training or coaching at school:

"For me, I usually find out first if there is strange content. I'm afraid it's a hoax or it could spread slander." (R4, 16 years old, MA student)

From this comparison, it can be seen that the level of awareness of teenagers varies greatly, depending on personal experience, access to information, and the influence of formal and informal education. The tendency to use social media is high among teenagers in Serang City, indicating an emotional attachment to digital media. This is not only related to entertainment or communication functions, but also closely related to self-identity, social image, and the need to be recognized in the online community.

Some informants revealed that they felt "not existing" if they did not upload activities on social media in a day:

"If I don't update my story, I feel like something is missing. It's like I don't look active." (R5, 17 years old, public high school student)

This shows that there is an awareness that is formed not from a critical side, but from an existential need to appear in the digital space. This awareness is pragmatic and does not yet reflect an understanding of how digital footprints have long-term consequences. As stated by

Boyd (2014), teenagers are often involved in the process of "networked publics" where their online activities are an effort to form a socially acceptable self-image.

Others feel that they do not yet understand the limits of digital privacy and security. When asked about the privacy settings of their social media accounts, many answered that their accounts were public so that they could be seen by more people, including people they did not know.

"I just leave the account public, who knows, many people will follow it." (R9, 16 years old, vocational high school student)

This kind of attitude shows a low understanding of the potential risks of digital identity misuse. This is relevant to the findings of Rasyid et al. (2021) that many teenagers still do not fully understand the concept of cybersecurity and are not aware that the content they upload can be used by irresponsible parties.

It can be concluded that in general, the level of awareness of teenagers in Serang City in using social media is still driven more by social and emotional motivations, and does not fully reflect reflective awareness that is able to consider ethical aspects, privacy, and the long-term consequences of their online activities.

The Influence of Digital Literacy on Mindset and Social Media Behavior

Adolescents' awareness in using social media is greatly influenced by their level of digital literacy. Digital literacy does not only include the ability to use technology, but also the ability to understand, evaluate, and produce information ethically (Hobbs, 2011; Potter, 2013). In this study, it was found that adolescents with a better understanding of digital literacy tend to be more selective and responsible in interacting on social media.

"When I took part in OSIS training, we were taught about digital ethics. So now I am more careful when I want to post." (R8, 17 years old, high school student)

This shows that structured informal education such as OSIS training can increase adolescents' critical awareness of social media. On the other hand, the majority of adolescents who learn to use social media autodidactically or through peer influence tend to show impulsive behavior. They emphasize more on pleasure and self-actualization than social responsibility.

"When I'm emotional, I immediately make a story. Sometimes I make a sarcasm too. I only regret it later." (R6, 18 years old, vocational high school student)

This pattern indicates that without a strong foundation of digital literacy, teenagers tend to be passive and reactive media users. Jenkins et al. (2016) stated that to become an active and ethical digital citizen, a participatory approach is needed in media learning—which involves experience, discussion, and reflection.

As previously explained, digital literacy has a significant influence on how teenagers behave in the digital space. Informants who have access to digital literacy training tend to have a higher awareness of the impact of uploads, understand the importance of the validity of information, and are more careful in responding to provocation or hate speech.

However, of the 12 main informants, only 4 had ever participated in formal digital literacy training or learning activities. The majority of others relied on information from friends, social media itself, or personal experience. This made their understanding of digital ethics and information skills partial.

"Sometimes I get confused, which information is true and which is a hoax. But because everyone shares, I also share it." (R10, 17 years old, private high school student)

This phenomenon shows that teenagers are vulnerable to being part of the disinformation cycle due to the lack of ability to verify information. In this context, digital literacy is not only related to technical skills, but also to critical thinking. Potter (2013) stated that media literacy should include the ability to filter information, understand the purpose of communication, and be aware of the long-term effects of messages being disseminated. Impulsive behavior in uploading or distributing content is also an indicator of weak digital self-regulation, which should be part of digital awareness. One of the students who manages his school class account admitted:

"I used to post a joke that turned out to be a dig at my classmates. In the end, the teacher got angry and the account was confiscated." (R11, 18 years old, vocational high school student)

This experience shows that digital literacy is not only an individual need, but also has a social dimension that is closely related to values, school culture, and educational institution policies.

It can be concluded that digital literacy has a significant influence on the quality of social media use by teenagers. However, in the context of Serang City, this literacy has not been fully integrated into the formal curriculum and is highly dependent on individual initiatives or non-formal institutions.

Factors That Shape Teenagers' Digital Awareness

This study also found that adolescents' digital awareness is not formed in a vacuum, but is influenced by various external factors, including: peer environment, family, school, and online communities.

a. Peers as Dominant Source

The majority of informants said that they learned more about social media from their peers than from teachers or parents. They use friends as their main reference in choosing content, determining communication style, and forming social values.

"I learn more from friends, for example how to make content, video effects, or trending words." (R2, 15 years old, junior high school student)

The influence of friends tends to strengthen consumer behavior and imitate without evaluation, as stated by Buckingham (2003) that adolescents are in the process of searching for identity through social interaction, including in the digital space.

The peer environment is the main space in forming social media habits. Adolescents tend to imitate and follow what is considered popular or cool by their friends, without considering whether the content violates ethics or not.

"I join in making trending videos that are going viral, even though sometimes I'm a bit embarrassed, but all my friends make them too." (R7, 15 years old, junior high school student)

This condition is in line with Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory which explains that behavior is learned through observation and imitation of social models. In this context, peers act as "digital role models" who form unwritten norms in the online youth community.

b. Limitations of Family Roles

Most of the informants' parents do not have an adequate understanding of the dynamics of social media, so they are unable to provide relevant guidance to their children. Many of them do not even know their children's activities on social media in detail.

"My parents don't know what I play on my cellphone. They just tell me not to post anything strange." (R3, 16 years old, public high school student)

Siregar and Yusuf (2022) emphasized the importance of digital literacy in families to form healthy media interaction patterns. However, in the context of this study, families have not been able to be effective media filters or companions for adolescents. Many informant parents admitted that they only limited the time they used gadgets, but did not understand the content of their children's digital activities. In an interview with the parents of one of the informants, it was stated:

"The important thing is that he doesn't play on his cellphone until late at night. I don't really understand what he opens." (W1, parent of informant R4)

This shows the digital divide between generations. In fact, according to Siregar & Yusuf (2022), the family should be the main basis for digital education because of the intensive and valuable interactions. The lack of parental involvement in the formation of children's digital habits makes the role of digital literacy dull in the home environment.

c. The Role of Schools is Not Optimal

Although some schools have provided general guidance on internet ethics, there is no systematic curriculum that fully integrates digital literacy. The BK teacher who was interviewed said that time constraints and school policies were the main obstacles.

"We only remind. Digital literacy is not yet a routine program in schools." (G1, BK teacher)

Fitriyani et al. (2023) stated that formal education in Indonesia has not placed digital literacy as a top priority, even though its role is crucial in shaping the critical attitudes of the younger generation. Several schools have tried to insert digital literacy materials into extracurricular activities or OSIS socialization, but it has not yet become part of the formal curriculum. In an interview with one of the teachers, it was explained:

"We sometimes invite external speakers to socialize the dangers of hoaxes, but only once or twice a year." (G2, BK teacher)

In fact, based on a study by Fitriyani et al. (2023), effective digital literacy education is one that is continuous, contextual, and involves active student participation. Without reinforcement from educational institutions, adolescents tend to develop digital literacy sporadically and unsystematically.

Discussion

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that the level of awareness of adolescents in Serang City in using social media is still at an early stage, especially in terms of functional understanding. Reflective and ethical awareness is still limited, and is highly dependent on the exposure to digital literacy they receive. This finding supports the findings of Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) which states that without critical media education intervention, adolescents will tend to be passive consumers in the digital space.

In general, digital literacy has a significant influence on how adolescents think and act on social media, but in the local context, access to digital literacy is still uneven. External factors such as peers, family, and schools have an important role, but have not functioned optimally as supporters of the formation of digital awareness. Therefore, more systematic, participatory, and community-based educational interventions are needed to strengthen adolescents' social media awareness and prepare them to become responsible digital citizens in the information era.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the level of awareness of adolescents in Serang City in the use of social media is still in the limited category. Although the majority of adolescents are accustomed to using social media in their daily lives, their awareness is more focused on functional aspects such as entertainment, communication, and self-actualization, rather than on ethical, critical, or reflective dimensions. Their tendency to express themselves impulsively, follow trends without evaluation, and low attention to digital security indicate that understanding of the social consequences of online activities has not been deeply embedded.

The influence of digital literacy on the way adolescents think and act in the digital space is very significant. Adolescents who have access to digital literacy education or training show better abilities in filtering information, managing digital expression, and considering ethical aspects in the use of social media. However, the facts on the ground show that most adolescents have not received structured digital literacy education. Schools are still limited to a momentary socialization approach, families often do not understand the digital ecosystem faced by children, and online communities have not been directed at forming a healthy digital culture. Peers are actually the main reference for adolescents in forming digital habits, which often lead to replication of behavior without considering values or risks.

Building adolescent social media awareness is not just a matter of increasing access to technology, but more than that, it concerns the formation of a sustainable and contextual digital literacy culture. This process requires active involvement from various parties: formal education, families, local communities, and progressive policy support.

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