STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

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Abstract
The post-truth era has intensified the urgency of equipping students with critical literacy to navigate misinformation and disinformation in digital environments. This study explores students' perceptions of critical literacy, the challenges they face, and their strategies for evaluating information. A qualitative exploratory design was employed with 25 purposively selected students from diverse study programs in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically. Guided by the Critical Media Literacy (CML) framework and the concept of epistemic cognition, the study examined not only students' technical skills in filtering information but also their ideological awareness and reflective reasoning in digital spaces. Findings show that students perceive critical literacy as essential for both academic success and daily decision-making. However, they encounter obstacles such as cognitive bias, limited verification habits, and insufficient institutional support. To address these barriers, students reported strategies including peer discussions, cross-checking sources, and selective engagement with credible platforms. They also expressed expectations for universities to provide structured training, active facilitation from lecturers, and spaces for open dialogue. The study contributes to the literature by integrating CML and epistemic cognition to highlight how affective, ideological, and cognitive dimensions intersect in shaping critical literacy practices. Practically, the findings underscore the need for higher education policies and curricula to embed critical literacy through structured digital literacy programs, lecturer-led reflective practices, and institutional support systems. Strengthening critical literacy in this way will enable students to become active and responsible participants in the knowledge society amid the challenges of the post-truth era.

Keywords: Critical Literacy; Post-Truth; Student Perceptions; Verification of Information; Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global society has entered a paradoxical information age, where rapid and abundant data flows are accompanied by an increase in misinformation, disinformation, and hoaxes (Barela & Duberry, 2021; Haider & Sundin, 2022; Stephens et al., 2023). This phenomenon is known as the post-truth era, a condition where objective facts hold less influence than emotions and personal beliefs in shaping public opinion (Friedman, 2023; McIntyre, 2018). The Global Risks Report 2024 released by the World Economic Forum even ranks the spread of digital misinformation as one of the highest global risks that could threaten social stability and public trust (World Economic Forum, 2024). In Indonesia, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology recorded 12,547 pieces of hoax content circulating in 2023, most of them spread through social media and widely consumed by students.

This situation calls for strengthening critical literacy, understood as the ability to evaluate and interpret information reflectively, analyze context, and distinguish facts from opinions (Potter, 2022; Tommasi et al., 2023). As active users of digital platforms, students play a strategic role in breaking the chain of misleading information (Damasceno, 2021; Lan & Tung, 2024). Yet, studies in Indonesia have largely emphasized the technical dimensions of digital literacy, while the affective, ideological, and epistemological aspects remain underexplored (Abdussalam & Alamsyah, 2021; Bustomi et al., 2023; Ikhsan et al., 2021; Khairunisa & Damayanti, 2024; Nafisah, 2022).

Critical Media Literacy (CML) offers a more comprehensive approach by positioning individuals not only as consumers but also as producers and interpreters of information who must understand the power structures, ideologies, and socio-political contexts shaping media messages (Kellner & Share, 2007). This approach is enriched by the concept of epistemic cognition, which explains how individuals form, justify, and revise beliefs about knowledge (McIntyre, 2018). While studies in developed countries (Friedman, 2023; Oliphant, 2021) highlight the role of epistemic cognition in secondary education or political issues, their applicability to Indonesian higher education remains limited (Legroux, 2025; Youvan, 2024).

Isnaini et al. (2025), Lewandowsky et al. (2017), and Zakiyah et al. (2024) has also emphasized fact-checking and debunking strategies, as well as the role of media literacy in countering hoaxes and polarization (Grodzicka & Harambam, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2023). However, these studies tend to prioritize technical competencies while neglecting the psychological and affective dimensions of students' perceptions, attitudes, and readiness in dealing with post-truth narratives.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating the CML framework with epistemic cognition to analyze students' perceptions of critical literacy in the Indonesian higher education context. By focusing on cognitive, ideological, and affective dimensions simultaneously, this research provides new insights into how students negotiate truth, belief, and emotion in a post-truth environment. Therefore, this study aims to: (1) examine students' perceptions of critical literacy in the post-truth era; (2) identify the challenges they encounter in applying critical literacy; (3) explore the strategies they employ to filter and verify information; and (4) analyze their expectations for higher education's role in strengthening critical literacy.

 discuss the role of media literacy in countering hoaxes but have not extensively examined the affective dimensions and contextual perceptions of students in the Indonesian higher education context. Therefore, this study offers a novel approach by integrating the Critical Media Literacy framework and epistemic cognition, enabling a more holistic analysis of

students' thinking structures, ideological attitudes, and emotions in their responses to digital information flows. By focusing on students' perceptions as the primary focus, this study aims to strengthen the foundation for developing curriculum and learning strategies for critical literacy that are more relevant to the challenges of the post-truth era in the Indonesian higher education context.

The development of critical literacy and the post-truth phenomenon

A review of the literature on critical literacy in the digital age shows that this skill is no longer merely related to the ability to read, write, and understand texts but also the ability to assess, analyze, and interpret complex information flows in the digital space (Potter, 2022; Tommasi et al., 2023). Critical literacy requires individuals to distinguish between facts and opinions, understand the motives behind the production of information, and reflectively question the validity and credibility of information sources (Damasceno, 2021; Kellner & Share, 2007). In the context of higher education, critical literacy is viewed as a crucial competency for developing the character of students who are independent, adaptable, and resilient in navigating complex information challenges (Lan & Tung, 2024).

However, the rapid development of information technology has brought new challenges in the form of the post-truth phenomenon, a condition where objective facts are no longer the primary basis for shaping public opinion but rather emotions, beliefs, and group identities (Friedman, 2023; McIntyre, 2018). This phenomenon is reinforced by the existence of social media algorithms that create echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are more often exposed to information that aligns with their personal views or preferences (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Oliphant, 2021). As a result, young people—including students—are increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation that reinforce their cognitive and affective biases (Haider & Sundin, 2022; Stephens et al., 2023).

Key findings of previous studies and gaps

Previous studies can generally be grouped into several main areas of focus. First, research by Friedman (2023) and Oliphant (2021) emphasizes the importance of epistemic cognition, namely how individuals form, maintain, and reflect on their beliefs about the truth of information. However, these studies were mostly conducted in developed countries with high school students as respondents. Hence, their relevance to the context of higher education in Indonesia needs to be further tested.

Second, several studies have examined the effectiveness of debunking strategies or hoax prevention, either through improving digital literacy or fact-checking training (Isnaini et al., 2025; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Zakiyah et al., 2024). These studies generally focus on the development of digital literacy instruments, the influence of mass media, and news consumption patterns among teenagers and university students. However, the dimensions of students' perceptions and personal reflections on critical literacy—particularly in relation to affective and ideological aspects—are still relatively rare.

Third, literature on Critical Media Literacy (CML) has emerged as a response to the challenges of the post-truth era. CML positions individuals not only as consumers but also as producers and distributors of information who must understand the dynamics of power, ideology, and the socio-political context behind the production of digital information (Damasceno, 2021; Kellner & Share, 2007). Studies such as those by Grodzicka and Harambam (2021) and Roozenbeek et al. (2023) also emphasize that strengthening critical media literacy

plays a crucial role in building community resilience against hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and opinion polarization in the digital public sphere. However, the majority of these studies still emphasize the development of competencies, while the psychological and social aspects of students' perceptions, attitudes, and readiness have not been thoroughly explored.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have begun to highlight the importance of digital citizenship and critical literacy as strategies for addressing disinformation and political polarization (Abdussalam & Alamsyah, 2021; Bustomi et al., 2023; Ikhsan et al., 2021; Khairunisa & Damayanti, 2024; Nafisah, 2022). As noted by Zakiyah et al. (2024) and Isnaini et al. (2025). However, these studies remain descriptive and lack discussion on how students interpret, feel, and respond to the post-truth information flow in a reflective manner. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on students' perceptions as the primary focus of analysis, using a combination of the Critical Media Literacy framework and epistemic cognition. Thus, this study is expected to make new contributions, both conceptually and practically, to the development of critical literacy education strategies in Indonesian higher education institutions, particularly in the face of the increasingly complex challenges of the post-truth era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory study design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of critical literacy in the post-truth era. This approach was chosen because it enables the exploration of students' subjective meanings, personal reflections, and concrete experiences in dealing with increasingly complex and often misleading information flows (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The participants consisted of 25 purposively selected students from various study programs in Bone Regency, representing diversity in gender, study discipline, and level of study. The sample size was justified because it provided sufficient heterogeneity while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis. Data collection was continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated when no new categories or insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. Interviews explored students' definitions of critical literacy, challenges in applying it, strategies for verification, and expectations toward higher education. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with researcher field notes.
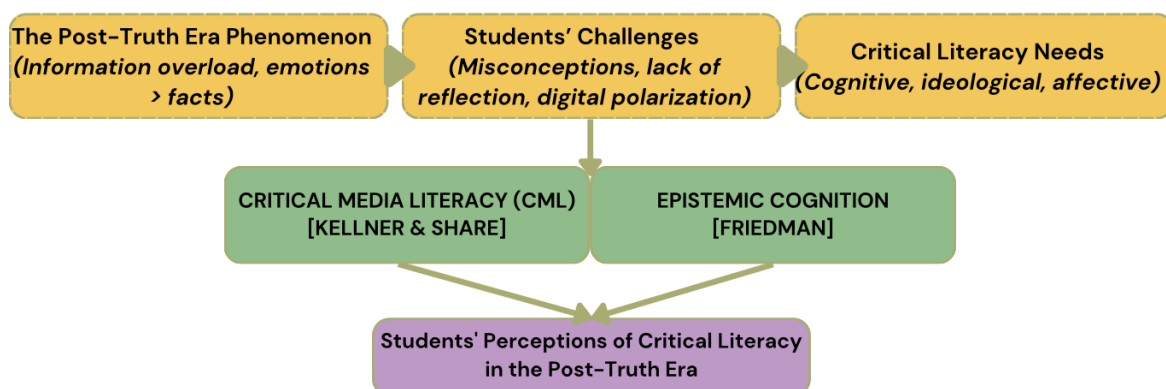
Figure 1. Problem-Solving Approach

Data analysis employed a thematic approachData analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques based on the procedure developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) consisting of coding, categorization, and theme refinement. To enhance reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts, followed by intercoder comparison and discussion until consensus was reached. Discrepancies were resolved through peer debriefing with the wider research team, ensuring consistency and credibility of coding. NVivo was used to organize data systematically. The representative thematic coding and the corresponding themes that emerged from the data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Codes and Themes Found

Code Found	Theme
– Analyzing and evaluating information – Filtering information before believing it – Not taking information at face value, comparing sources – Students must be critical to avoid easily believing/misinformation – Critical literacy is important for academics and daily life	Meaning and Importance of Critical Literacy
– Very often encountering misleading information/hoaxes on social media – Responses: seeking other sources, ignoring, or filtering – Have doubted emotional information without data	Exposure and Response to Information
– People easily believe because they are too lazy to find the truth – Lack of literacy as a cause of bias – Only believing information that matches one's views (confirmation bias) – Environment does not support critical thinking/toxic environment	Factors Causing Bias & Gullibility
– Information overload, buzzers, or too many false facts – Laziness to seek the truth and lack of references – Not all campuses/lecturers encourage a critical attitude	Obstacles to Practicing Critical Literacy
– Filtering by seeking trusted sources/checking publishers – Comparing facts, browsing the internet, checking data accuracy – Admitting that social media algorithms influence information consumption patterns	Strategies & Practices for Verifying Information
– Reading more often and critical literacy training is needed – Experience, discussions, and lecturer roles are important in habituating critical attitudes – Critical literacy must be built from an early age and not take information at face value – Message to be open-minded and continuously improve one's literacy	Solutions & Hopes for Enhancing Critical Literacy

To maintain the validity and credibility of the findings, this study applied several strategies, including triangulation of techniques by comparing interview data with observations of students' digital interactions and researchers' reflective notes, member checking by asking informants to review the initial interpretation results, and peer debriefing by involving fellow researchers in discussions of the analysis results to reduce subjective bias. Additionally, the entire analysis process is systematically documented through an audit trail, enabling it to be traced and replicated by other researchers. All stages of the research were conducted in accordance with research ethics, respecting the rights, confidentiality, and comfort of the informants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning and Importance of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is viewed as a fundamental skill that students and the public must possess in the information age. The majority of respondents understand critical literacy as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and critically assess information before accepting it as accurate or true. They emphasize that a critical attitude is essential so that one is not easily misled by misinformation, can make informed decisions, and remains an open-minded individual. Critical literacy is considered not only vital for academic activities but also plays a major role in everyday life. This is reflected in the following statements:

> *"Critical literacy is the ability to not only accept information but also analyze and evaluate it." (SIF)*
> *"So that we don't take information at face value and are not easily influenced by fake news." (AG)*
> *"Yes, students are intellectuals who must be able to filter information." (AF)*
> *"Being critical is not just about knowing what is right, but also having the courage to ask questions and compare sources." (NAZ)*
> *"Critical literacy tests the ability to read, understand, and critique information." (AZN)*
> *"Critical literacy is the ability not just to trust one source, but to compare it with other sources." (AA)*
> *"In my opinion, all students must have critical literacy so they don't easily believe hoaxes." (SI)*
> *"Critical literacy is important not only for college, but also so we don't easily fall for opinions that may not be true." (RH)*
> *"Reading and analyzing information is a must before concluding." (NF)*

These findings suggest that critical literacy has become a collective awareness among students and is recognized as a key asset in navigating the current information overload. A critical attitude is believed to protect individuals from exposure to misinformation and manipulation of public opinion. With the ability to analyze and evaluate information, students are not merely passive recipients but active participants in building valid and relevant knowledge. Beyond academic needs, a critical mindset is also an essential tool in daily life, enabling one to maintain objectivity, openness, and resistance to being influenced by opinions or news whose veracity is unclear.

Exposure to and Responses to Misleading Information

In today's digital age, almost all students admit to frequently encountering false or misleading information on social media. Various responses emerge, ranging from filtering and searching for other sources, not immediately believing, to ignoring information deemed unimportant. Most respondents also admitted to having doubted information that was emotionally convincing but lacked clear data support. This is evident in the following quotes:

> *"Very often, many people believe news that is unclear." (AD)*
> *"Often, and I just ignore it if it's not important." (AG)*
> *"I usually look for the source of the news before believing it." (NR)*
> *"Yes, without clear data, we cannot fully believe it." (AF)*
> *"Almost every day on social media, especially WhatsApp." (NM)*

"If there is information whose truth is unclear, I look for the source of the information." *(AF)*
"I first look at who shared it, then search for other information as a comparison." *(AD)*
"Yes, if I want to post a video on Instagram, I make sure the information is accurate first." *(NR)*
"Very often, especially in the digital age now, there is a lot of false news." *(NAZ)*

These findings confirm that exposure to misleading information has become part of students' daily lives, but most have developed more cautious and selective response strategies. This vigilant attitude reflects an increased awareness of the importance of critical literacy, although challenges related to misinformation and fake news remain prevalent in their digital interactions.

Factors Causing Bias and Gullibility

One of the main factors that cause people to fall prey to false information easily is the tendency to seek justification for their own opinions, a lack of effort in seeking the truth, and low critical literacy. In addition, an unsupportive environment and information overload are also cited as contributing factors to students being easily influenced by biased or false information. This is clearly expressed in the following quotes:

"Because of a lack of literacy and laziness in seeking the truth." *(AD)*
"People tend to believe information that agrees with their own thoughts." *(SI)*
"Laziness in seeking the truth." *(AA)*
"A toxic environment that does not support critical thinking." *(RH)*
"Most people believe information that aligns with their beliefs." *(NAZ)*
"Not receiving a competent education also affects one's critical thinking skills." *(IRH)*
"Because some people only want to read information that they want to hear." *(FA)*
"The abundance of facts and false facts can be confusing and ultimately lead to believing what aligns with one's desires." *(IS)*
"There is too much false information on social media." *(AQ)*

These findings suggest that cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and a lack of motivation to verify the truth, continue to pose significant challenges in the development of critical literacy. In addition, environmental factors and the rapid flow of information further reinforce the tendency to accept information without critical thinking; therefore, efforts to improve literacy must include strengthening motivation, education, and promoting a healthier environment.

Obstacles in Implementing Critical Literacy

In practice, students face various obstacles in developing and maintaining critical literacy attitudes.

The main challenges most frequently mentioned are laziness in verifying information, the overwhelming amount of information making it difficult to distinguish what is valid, and the lack of credible references or sources. Additionally, not all campus-based learning practically teaches or encourages critical literacy, so the encouragement from instructors and the academic environment is perceived differently by each student. The following statements from respondents illustrate this situation:

"Laziness and lack of relevant information." (GA)
"Too many buzzers on social media." (AN)
"Lecturers and the academic environment in my department encourage critical thinking." (SAI)
"Not really, lecturers sometimes don't encourage it much." (HR)
"The environment is already toxic." (RH)
"The willingness to be critical exists but is hindered by an unsupportive environment." (NAZ)
"It's difficult to find accurate information amid so much fake news." (NR)
"I try to provide information as accurately as possible, but access is sometimes difficult." (AZN)
"Sometimes professors don't provide concrete examples of how to be critical." (SI)

These findings indicate that in addition to individual factors such as motivation and laziness, academic environment, learning patterns, and challenges in the digital ecosystem also influence the extent to which students can apply critical literacy. Consistent support from the campus, access to credible references, and an environment that encourages open discussion are key factors in overcoming these obstacles.

Strategies & Practices in Assessing the Truth of Information

Students employ various strategies and practices to assess the truth of the information they receive, whether through social media or other digital platforms. Generally, they filter information by looking for other sources, checking who created or disseminated the information, and comparing the data found with other more credible facts.

In addition, many are aware that social media algorithms influence their information consumption patterns and, ultimately, their trust in the truth of a news story. The following statements represent some of these practices:

"Look for information from reliable sources." (AG)
"See who shared it, then look for comparisons." (AD)
"Social media algorithms can influence how we assess the truth of information." (NAZ)
"Of course, with accurate data and facts." (SI)
"I look at when the information was created or posted, then check the source." (NF)
"Browsing the internet to compare information from several media outlets." (NR)
"Trusted sources of information and, of course, there must be real evidence." (RH)
"Verify the truth first before believing." (AB)
"By paying attention to who is conveying the information, whether it is official media or not." (SIT)

These findings suggest that students are aware of the importance of critically evaluating the information they encounter. The practices of verification, checking sources, and comparing facts have become habits that are being established. However, the challenges of social media algorithms and easy access to unfiltered information continue to be a major concern. This attitude is a valuable asset in navigating the rapid flow of information in the digital age.

Solutions and Hopes for Improving Critical Literacy

Students offer several solutions and hope to enhance critical literacy, both for themselves and the campus environment as a whole. The proposed efforts include developing the habit of reading and analyzing information, participating in critical literacy training and

workshops, and receiving encouragement from lecturers and the academic environment. They also assess the need for broader discussion and practice spaces from the beginning of their studies to strengthen critical attitudes. The main recurring message is the importance of not accepting information at face value, continuing to increase literacy, and maintaining an open mind in the face of the rapid flow of information. This is clearly illustrated in the following quotes:

"Read and analyze more often." (AT)
"Increased awareness, critical literacy training, and experience." (SIC)
"Seek out information that is factually accurate." (AG)
"Being critical of information is very important in today's world." (AF)
"It would be good if we were taught to be critical from an early age." (AD)
"Increase literacy and don't take information at face value." (NF)
"Classroom discussions are very helpful in developing critical thinking." (SI)
"We need lecturers who frequently provide concrete examples of critical literacy practices." (RH)
"Being open-minded is important; don't just believe one source." (AM)

These findings indicate that strengthening critical literacy requires systematic support. Through personal habits, curriculum, and an open and active academic culture that encourages students to think reflectively and rationally and always question the truth of every piece of information.

Discussion

This study reveals the landscape of critical literacy understanding and practices among students in the post-truth era, emphasizing the importance of a reflective and multidimensional approach to addressing today's digital information challenges. The following discussion explores six main themes of the findings, reinforcing and critiquing them with literature reviews and offering implications for policy and higher education in Indonesia.

The first theme that emerges is the meaning and importance of critical literacy. Students view critical literacy as a key skill for surviving the increasingly complex and often unreliable flow of digital information. The majority of respondents understand critical literacy as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and filter information before trusting it, in line with the framework proposed by Kellner & Share (2007), Lathrop (2025), and Silvhiany (2019) in critical media literacy. This attitude is not only important for academic needs but also for building resilience against exposure to misinformation in daily life. Students emphasized the need for the ability to compare various sources, think openly, and question the truth behind every piece of information. These findings support the views of Cooke (2018) and Lathrop (2025), who argue that critical literacy should be understood as an active process—not merely accepting and memorizing facts but also testing and reflecting on information through critical reasoning.

The fact that students have developed a collective awareness of the importance of critical literacy indicates a more progressive internalization of literacy values compared to a decade ago (Damasceno, 2021; Lan & Tung, 2024). On the other hand, the position of students as an intellectual group that is an active subject in constructing knowledge affirms the role of higher education in shaping a resilient digital generation that is not easily manipulated by public opinion. In this context, the findings also underscore the importance of fostering autonomous learning as part of strengthening critical literacy on campus (Parker & Smith, 2022).

The second theme focuses on students' exposure to and responses to misleading information. Almost all respondents admitted to frequently encountering fake news or unclear information, especially through social media. Students' responses varied, ranging from seeking comparative sources to not immediately trusting information and choosing to ignore content deemed unimportant. Students also admitted to doubting information that was emotionally convincing but lacked concrete data support. This cautious attitude indicates that students have developed a kind of "critical detector" toward digital content, consistent with the findings of McIntyre (2018) and Stephens et al. (2023), which show that critical literacy strengthens resistance to misinformation and disinformation in the post-truth era.

However, challenges remain. Exposure to misleading information has become part of students' daily lives. Research by Abdussalam & Alamsyah (2021), Bustomi et al. (2023), and Nafisah (2022) highlights that, although students are aware of the threat of hoaxes, their resilience remains vulnerable when the information received is highly emotional or originates from a trusted social environment. This concept is closely related to epistemic cognition, which emphasizes that the process of evaluating information is not merely a technical or logical matter but also involves aspects of emotion, social identity, and group trust (Friedman, 2023; McIntyre, 2018). This phenomenon is also supported by the findings of Bawden & Robinson (2022), who state that in the digital ecosystem, filter bubbles and echo chamber mechanisms reinforce people's tendency to believe information that aligns with their views, regardless of its validity.

The third theme highlights the factors that cause bias and the tendency to easily believe information, which is often dominated by confirmation bias, laziness in seeking the truth, and low critical literacy. Students mentioned that the tendency to seek justification for their own opinions, an unsupportive environment, and the flood of digital information are the main factors that make them or their friends easily fall prey to biased or false information. These findings align with Lewandowsky et al.'s (2017) explanation of cognitive bias effects in the post-truth era, where individuals are more likely to accept information that reinforces their beliefs. When motivation to verify is low or when social environments pressure individuals to "go with the flow," critical literacy skills do not develop optimally (Isnaini et al., 2025).

Studies by Grodzicka and Harambam (2021) and Roozenbeek et al. (2023) also reinforce the notion that the tendency to believe information one wants to hear (motivated reasoning) is often more dominant than the rational urge to seek the truth. In the Indonesian context, Khairunisa and Damayanti (2024) and Zakiyah et al. (2024) found that critical literacy is often hindered by a collective culture that tends to avoid confrontation and open debate, making students more comfortable with accepting information that has already been accepted in their social environment. This poses a significant challenge for higher education in building a learning ecosystem that not only teaches cognitive skills but also fosters courage and openness in critical discussions.

The fourth theme discusses obstacles in implementing critical literacy. Students face internal barriers, such as a lack of motivation to verify information and difficulty accessing credible sources, as well as external challenges, including a lack of support from the academic environment and campus learning that does not fully encourage critical literacy practices. This finding is consistent with Potter's (2022) research, which emphasizes that critical literacy is not only a matter of individual competence but is also influenced by the educational environment and institutional culture. Some students mentioned the inadequate role of lecturers in encouraging critical discussion in class, the lack of concrete examples in literacy practices, and the uneven access to quality information sources. This aligns with the criticism of McDougall et

al. (2021) and McDougall & Fowler-Watt (2022), who highlight the weak role of educational institutions in fostering a vibrant culture of critical literacy on campus.

Research by Tommasi et al. (2023) also emphasizes that the digital ecosystem, which is filled with influencers, hoaxes, and disinformation, requires active involvement from educational institutions to equip students with verification tools, access to credible references, and conducive discussion spaces. Without systemic support, critical literacy efforts will remain individual initiatives with limited impact and are likely to falter when faced with environmental pressures or academic burdens.

The fifth theme examines students' strategies and practices in evaluating the credibility of information. Various verification strategies have become commonplace among most students, including seeking credible sources of information, comparing information from multiple media outlets, tracing the origin of the information, checking the publication date, and examining the digital footprint of news disseminators. Many students are also beginning to recognize the role of social media algorithms in shaping their consumption patterns and influencing their trust in information. These practices align with recent literature that emphasizes the importance of data verification, cross-checking, and enhancing digital media literacy (Palomo & Sedano, 2021; Youvan, 2024).

However, findings also indicate that these practices are not yet widespread and often situational. Under certain conditions, students are still easily swayed by information if it is presented convincingly or shared by individuals perceived as credible within their social circles. This underscores the importance of critical literacy education that goes beyond skill transfer to foster character development and a skeptical-rational mindset (Kellner & Share, 2007). Studies by Damasceno (2021), McDougall et al. (2021), and McDougall & Fowler-Watt (2022) recommend the systematic integration of verification practices into the curriculum and campus activities, allowing students to gain direct experience in critically examining and testing information claims.

The sixth theme discusses students' solutions and expectations for improving critical literacy. Students emphasize the importance of developing habits of reading and analyzing information, participating in critical literacy training and workshops, and encouraging lecturers and the academic community to be more active in creating healthy and open discussion spaces. A recurring message in their statements is the need for an open-minded attitude, not taking information at face value, and building a culture of sustainable literacy. The implications of these findings reinforce international literature recommendations that strengthening critical literacy requires systematic support—through curriculum policies, academic culture, and the normalization of reflective practices in daily life (Cherland & Harper, 2023; Morgan, 2002; Williams, 2022).

Furthermore, students' expectations that critical literacy be taught as early as possible, trained practically, and fully supported by institutions indicate the need for synergy between students' agency and the commitment of higher education institutions. Studies by Isnaini et al. (2025) and Zakiyah et al. (2024) confirm that strengthening critical literacy on campus is significantly influenced by a combination of students' motivation, lecturers' learning innovations, and broad access to references and essential discussion practices.

Overall, the findings of this study align with the theories of critical media literacy and epistemic cognition, reinforcing previous research on the importance of strengthening skills, attitudes, and a supportive ecosystem to build a digital generation that is resistant to disinformation and public opinion manipulation. This study also emphasizes that strengthening

critical literacy requires multidimensional interventions that focus not only on technical aspects but also on affective, ideological, and reflective aspects.

The findings suggest several concrete strategies for embedding critical literacy in higher education. Lecturers can design classroom activities that require verification of real-world news items, facilitate debates on controversial digital content, and use reflective journals to strengthen epistemic awareness. Curriculum developers can integrate critical literacy modules into general education or communication courses, combining technical fact-checking skills with discussions on ideology and media power structures. Institutions can also provide structured workshops and digital literacy campaigns, ensuring that critical literacy becomes part of the academic culture rather than isolated initiatives.

Overall, the discussion confirms that while students are developing adaptive strategies, sustainable progress in critical literacy requires systemic academic support. By embedding CML and epistemic cognition into pedagogy and curriculum, universities can move from reactive training toward cultivating a resilient academic culture capable of addressing post-truth challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that students in Indonesian higher education perceive critical literacy as an essential competency for both academic and daily life in the post-truth era. Through the combined lens of Critical Media Literacy and epistemic cognition, the findings show that students are aware of the need to filter and evaluate information, yet face persistent challenges related to cognitive bias, limited verification habits, and insufficient institutional support. They also demonstrate resilience by developing informal strategies such as peer discussions and selective engagement with credible sources.

To translate these findings into practice, universities can: (1) develop structured critical literacy modules integrated into general education or communication courses; (2) design training programs that combine fact-checking skills with reflective activities on ideology and media power; (3) encourage lecturers to embed critical literacy tasks into classroom activities, such as news verification exercises and debate sessions; and (4) provide institutional support through workshops, digital campaigns, and student discussion forums. Policymakers can further strengthen this agenda by embedding critical literacy within national higher education standards and allocating resources for curriculum innovation.

This study was limited to one geographic area, a relatively small sample, and reliance on self-reported perceptions, which may not fully capture diverse experiences. These limitations may have influenced the scope and depth of the findings. Future research should expand to multiple regions, employ mixed methods, and explore longitudinal changes to better understand how critical literacy practices evolve over time.

Overall, the study emphasizes that critical literacy development in higher education requires not only individual awareness but also systemic institutional support. By embedding critical literacy into curriculum design, pedagogy, and policy, universities can equip students to navigate the complexities of the post-truth era and foster a more informed, reflective, and resilient academic community.

SUGGESTION

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THANK YOU-NOTE

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