



Hoaxes in the Digital Era: An Analysis of Social Media Users' Perceptions and Attitudes

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Article Info:

Abstract

Keywords:

digital literacy, hoax mitigation, media manipulation, misinformation, social media perception

Article History:

Received : 27-04-2024

Revised : 25-10-2024

Accepted : 30-12-2024

Article DOI :

10.55960/jlri.v12i4.944

Purpose: This study examines the impact of hoaxes on public perception and social stability in Indonesia, particularly within the context of digital media consumption. It also explores the role of digital literacy in mitigating the spread of misinformation and evaluates strategies for strengthening resilience against hoaxes.

Study Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative survey approach was adopted to assess the perceptions and behaviours of social media users regarding hoaxes. The study collected data from respondents with diverse demographic backgrounds through an online questionnaire. Statistical analysis was conducted to evaluate hoax exposure, media literacy levels, and hoax dissemination patterns across different user groups.

Findings: The results indicate that hoaxes are predominantly spread through social media platforms, with certain age groups and education levels being more susceptible to misinformation. Low digital literacy and algorithmic bias, such as filter bubbles, contribute to the rapid dissemination of false information. While government and private-sector initiatives in digital literacy programmes have made progress, challenges remain in ensuring widespread adoption of fact-checking habits among users.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the understanding of hoaxes as a security threat by linking misinformation to social instability and potential geopolitical risks. It underscores the need for enhanced digital resilience strategies, including improved regulations, community-driven digital literacy initiatives, and collaboration between stakeholders to combat misinformation effectively.

How to cite : Anggraini, N. R., Juwita, M. R., Ulum, M. S., Prananta, M. D., Hidayat, M. F., & Purnama, N. A. (2024). Hoaxes in the Digital Era: An Analysis of Social Media Users' Perceptions and Attitudes. *Jurnal Lemhannas RI*, 12(4), 567-580. <https://doi.org/10.55960/jlri.v12i4.944>.



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Published by Lemhannas Press.

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in digital technology have significantly transformed how media users' access and distribute information. Originally designed for communication, digital devices have evolved into essential tools across multiple sectors, including commerce, entertainment, and information consumption. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have become the primary sources for obtaining and sharing information. Their accessibility and interactive nature enable users to disseminate content rapidly and widely. However, this advancement has also amplified the dissemination of unverified information, including hoaxes and fake news, which can shape public perception, fuel social polarisation, and threaten national stability (Annisa et al., 2021).

In the current digital landscape, hoaxes extend beyond misinformation and disinformation; they have become instruments of proxy warfare and asymmetric information warfare, strategically utilised to manipulate public opinion, erode trust in state institutions, and destabilise political and social structures (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998). In the political sphere, hoaxes are widely deployed as propaganda tools to influence public sentiment during elections, as seen in various disinformation campaigns that spread across social media platforms in multiple countries, including Indonesia (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Data from the Ministry of Communication and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia (Kominfo) indicate a sharp increase in election-related hoaxes between 2022 and 2023. In 2022, only ten election-related hoaxes were identified, whereas in 2023, this number surged to 98, with a total of 2,623 hoax-related posts disseminated across multiple social media platforms (Kementerian Kominfo, 2024). These findings illustrate that hoaxes not only jeopardise democratic integrity but also serve as instruments for political actors and external forces to destabilise national security through information warfare.

Beyond electoral manipulation, hoaxes function as geopolitical instruments within cyber warfare strategies. Specific state and non-state actors employ misinformation campaigns to destabilise targeted nations, incite social fragmentation, undermine governance, and impede strategic national policies (Herman & Chomsky, 2021). Such tactics are characteristic of hybrid warfare, where disinformation heightens uncertainty and geopolitical tensions at both national and international levels.

Extensive research has documented the profound impact of hoaxes on public behaviour. Bahri (2022) found that adolescents are particularly susceptible to accepting and spreading hoaxes without verification. Similarly, Susanti (2024) highlighted that low digital literacy is a major factor contributing to the widespread acceptance of unverified information. On a global scale, Tomczyk and Fedeli (2021) demonstrated that long-term exposure to fake news reinforces cognitive biases, ultimately impairing individuals' ability to engage in critical thinking regarding specific issues.

To mitigate these threats, national resilience against hoaxes is crucial for safeguarding social stability and national security (Sarjito, 2024). Resilience, in this context, refers to the ability of individuals and societies to identify, filter, and counter misleading information to prevent its negative impact on decision-making and governance (Easton, 1971). Buana (2024) further emphasises the need for strengthening non-military defence mechanisms through cross-institutional collaboration, enhanced digital capabilities, and community-driven initiatives.

In response to these concerns, various digital literacy initiatives have been introduced to mitigate misinformation. One of the notable efforts in Indonesia is the "Lambe Hoaks" program, launched by Kominfo, which serves as a social media-based fact-checking initiative on Instagram (Putra, Samad, & Mulyadi, 2024). Despite its potential to enhance digital literacy, research indicates that its effectiveness remains limited due to low audience engagement, inconsistent content quality, and inadequate promotional strategies. As a result, scholars argue that digital literacy campaigns must not only focus on providing fact-checking resources but also enhance user participation and accessibility to strengthen public resistance against misinformation (Putra et al., 2024).

In light of these challenges, this study aims to examine social media users' perceptions and attitudes toward hoaxes in Indonesia and identify the factors influencing their acceptance and dissemination patterns in the digital era. To address these issues, the research investigates the following key questions: 1) How do social media users perceive hoaxes?; 2) What factors influence users' attitudes towards accepting and spreading hoaxes?; and 3) To what extent does digital literacy shape information consumption patterns on social media?.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Studies

Hoaxes refer to deliberately fabricated and disseminated information intended to mislead, provoke, or manipulate public perception (Riwukore, 2023). Initially factual content may undergo narrative distortion or opinion-based modifications, leading to misinformation or disinformation (Hayati, Loviantary, & Iswandy, 2023). The rapid circulation of such content on social media platforms exacerbates cognitive biases and reinforces misinformation cycles.

Berger and Luckmann (2016), in their Social Construction of Reality Theory, argue that social reality is shaped not only by objective facts but also through social interactions and information dissemination. Social media platforms accelerate this construction process by employing algorithmic mechanisms that selectively expose users to content reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs. This results in confirmation bias, where individuals are less likely to seek alternative or opposing perspectives, limiting exposure to more objective viewpoints.

Herman and Chomsky (2021), in the Media and Propaganda Model, assert that media not only functions as an information conduit but also serves as a propaganda tool that influences public opinion in alignment with political or economic interests. In both political and commercial contexts, hoaxes are frequently utilised as black campaign strategies aimed at undermining opponents by spreading misleading or manipulative narratives (Herlina, 2019).

McCombs and Shaw (1972), in the Media Effects and Agenda-Setting Theory, emphasise that repeated media exposure influences public perceptions. False narratives—despite lacking credible evidence—gain traction when continuously circulated within social and digital media ecosystems. This phenomenon aligns with confirmation bias, wherein individuals are more inclined to accept information reinforcing their established viewpoints rather than seeking factual verification from reliable sources.

Although Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde (1998) do not explicitly categorise hoaxes as non-traditional threats, their securitisation theory provides a framework for

understanding how hoaxes contribute to socio-political instability. When misinformation is securitised, especially in political and governance domains, it can erode public trust, deepen societal divisions, and fuel polarisation. Furthermore, the systematic and intentional dissemination of hoaxes often forms part of information warfare strategies designed to undermine governmental legitimacy and escalate social conflicts.

Easton (1971) highlights the necessity of regulatory policies that curb the spread of false information while preserving freedom of expression. In Indonesia, the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) has been introduced to counter hoaxes. However, concerns persist regarding its enforcement, particularly allegations of selective application and regulatory inconsistencies (Siregar et al., 2024).

Factors Influencing the Spread of Hoaxes

The proliferation of hoaxes on social media is not solely attributed to low digital literacy but is driven by an interplay of social, technological, and psychological factors. One of the key contributors to hoax dissemination is the lack of verification habits among the public. Many individuals accept and share information without scrutinising its authenticity, particularly when it originates from sources they perceive as credible (Hayati et al., 2023). The reliance on social circles for news consumption further amplifies misinformation, as individuals tend to trust peer-shared content over official sources.

Educational attainment and prior exposure to hoaxes significantly influence an individual's susceptibility to misinformation. Young people and adolescents, particularly those with low digital literacy, are among the most vulnerable demographics, as they lack fact-checking habits and are more inclined to trust viral content (Susanti, 2024). From a technological standpoint, social media algorithms exacerbate the filter bubble effect, wherein users are predominantly exposed to content aligned with their preferences. This reinforces misinformation cycles, hinders access to objective sources, and solidifies belief in misleading narratives (Siregar et al., 2024).

Conversely, government and private-sector initiatives aimed at enhancing digital literacy play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of hoaxes. By May 2023, the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo) had identified 11,642 hoax-related posts, the majority of which circulated through digital platforms (Husna, 2023). Although government-led digital literacy programs have increased public awareness of misinformation, scaling up these initiatives remains imperative to achieve broader societal impact.

Social Impact of Hoaxes

Hoaxes exert far-reaching consequences on individual perceptions, social cohesion, and national resilience. The widespread dissemination of false narratives has been shown to reshape public discourse, influencing social and political behaviours (Rahmawati et al., 2023). The most significant consequence of hoaxes is societal polarisation. False narratives frequently incite intergroup tensions, exacerbate political conflicts, and weaken social solidarity (Vosoughi et al., 2018). As a result, society becomes divided into ideological factions, making reconciliation efforts increasingly complex.

Hoaxes also diminish public trust in governmental institutions. False narratives that undermine government credibility can distort public opinion and impede the implementation of strategic policies (Hayati et al., 2023). The economic ramifications of hoaxes are equally substantial. Misinformation in financial markets can trigger panic selling, causing market volatility and economic uncertainty. Fan et al. (2024) found that

hoax-induced financial misinformation significantly influences investment decisions and capital flows.

Mitigation Strategies and Hoax Countermeasure Policies

Mitigating hoaxes necessitates a multifaceted approach that integrates digital literacy enhancement, legal frameworks, and stakeholder collaboration. Digital literacy programmes play a fundamental role in fostering public resilience against misinformation. In Indonesia, the 'Lambe Hoaks' programme, launched by Kominfo, serves as a fact-checking initiative on Instagram aimed at countering misinformation (Putra, Samad, & Mulyadi, 2024). However, research indicates that this initiative has yet to fully achieve its objectives, primarily due to low engagement rates, limited outreach, and ineffective promotional strategies. Scholars contend that enhancing content quality and fostering greater audience interaction are essential for optimising digital literacy interventions (Putra et al., 2024).

At the regulatory level, significant challenges persist in formulating coherent national and international policies. The United Nations Resolution No. 74 of 2019 proposed an international convention on cybercrime; however, its implementation has encountered considerable obstacles (United Nations, 2024). Regionally, the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy has developed frameworks aimed at strengthening information security and mitigating hoaxes (ASEAN, 2023). Furthermore, Indonesia has collaborated with Interpol to address transnational cybercrime, including coordinated efforts to combat hoaxes (Interpol, 2023). A comprehensive strategy must, therefore, balance misinformation control with the protection of freedom of expression, ensuring a robust digital ecosystem that fosters the dissemination of credible information while upholding democratic values.

METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative survey-based approach to analyse social media users' perceptions and attitudes towards hoaxes. Creswell (2014) asserts that quantitative methods enable the numerical measurement of research variables, facilitating an empirical understanding of social behaviour patterns.

Research Instruments and Data Analysis Techniques

Data were collected through an online questionnaire, structured into the following key sections: (a) Respondents' Demographic Characteristics, including age, education level, gender, and frequency of social media use; (b) Exposure to Hoaxes, measuring the frequency of encountering fake news, sources of information, and trust in online news; (c) Digital Literacy, assessing the ability to identify hoaxes, fact-checking habits, and attitudes towards information shared on social media; (d) Hoax Dissemination Patterns, examining the tendency to share unverified content and motivations behind sharing news; (e) Attitudes Towards Hoaxes, exploring awareness of hoax-related impacts and respondents' information consumption behaviour.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, applying the following techniques:

1. Frequency and percentage analysis to determine data distribution across research variables.

- 2. Comparative analysis across age groups and education levels to examine exposure patterns and responses to hoaxes among different respondent categories.
- 3. Thematic analysis of expert interviews with media and information security specialists to enhance the interpretation of quantitative data and highlight strategic perspectives on hoax mitigation. The following table presents the research variables along with their operational definitions, see table 1.

Table 1. Operational Definitions

Research Variables	Operational Definition	Indicators	Research Process
Hoax Exposure	The degree to which individuals are exposed to false or misleading information on social media platforms	Frequency of encountering hoaxes, sources of information, level of trust in online news	Surveying respondents on hoax exposure and sources of information they rely on.
Media Literacy	Users' ability to assess, verify, and filter information to distinguish hoaxes from factual news.	Fact-checking habits, level of digital awareness, ability to identify misinformation.	Evaluating digital literacy through a Likert-scale questionnaire.
Public Perception of Hoax	How individuals assess the credibility of news on social media.	Level of trust in online news, tendency to verify information.	Measuring perceptions through Likert-scale questions on trust and verification habits.
Social Media Usage Behavior	Habits related to consuming and sharing information on digital platforms.	Time spent on social media, most frequently used platforms, sources of news consumption.	Collecting data on social media usage duration and preferred platforms.
Hoax Dissemination Patterns	Frequency and patterns of hoax dissemination, whether intentional or unintentional.	Rate of sharing false news, users' motivations for sharing information, fact-checking behaviour before dissemination.	Assessing respondents' information-sharing behaviour and factors influencing hoax dissemination.

Source: Author (2024)

The research approach follows a conceptual framework consisting of three main stages:

The first stage focuses on mapping the level of social media users' exposure to hoaxes. This phase identifies the platforms most frequently associated with hoax dissemination, the age groups and education levels most vulnerable to misinformation, and the key factors contributing to the spread of false information on social media. This exposure analysis serves as the foundation for understanding how hoaxes propagate and which demographics are most affected within the digital ecosystem.

The second stage involves analysing the barriers and enablers of hoax mitigation. This phase identifies the primary factors driving hoax dissemination, such as low digital literacy, which hinders users' ability to differentiate between facts and misinformation, and social media algorithms, which create filter bubble effects, restricting access to alternative perspectives and reinforcing information bias. Additionally, the high level of trust in unverified, emotionally charged content accelerates hoax circulation. As part of the mitigation strategy, this study examines the role of digital literacy initiatives and fact-

checking platforms, such as TurnbackHoax, in enabling the public to verify information before sharing it.

The final stage evaluates the social and economic impacts of hoaxes and explores mitigation strategies. This evaluation covers collaborative efforts between the government, social media platforms, and the public to enhance digital resilience, strengthen regulatory frameworks to curb hoax dissemination, and promote community-based digital literacy programmes to foster collective awareness against misinformation. Consequently, this study not only outlines the patterns of hoax dissemination but also proposes strategic measures for more effective mitigation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Using data from 22 respondents collected through an online questionnaire, this study found that respondents represent diverse age groups, educational backgrounds, and social media usage habits. Table 2 presents a comparison of age, education level, frequently used social media platforms, ability to identify hoaxes, and engagement in hoax dissemination.

Table 2. Comparison of Respondents' Age and Ability to Identify Hoaxes

Age	Highest Education Level	Most frequently used social media	Ability to Identify Hoaxes	Engagement in Hoax Dissemination
<18	Senior High School	X	Able	Never
18-25	Senior High School	WhatsApp	Uncertain	Unsure
26-35	Senior High School	Instagram	Uncertain	Occasionally
> 45	Primary School	WhatsApp	Unable	Never

Source: Author (2024)

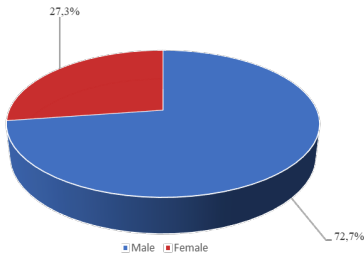


Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents' Age and Education

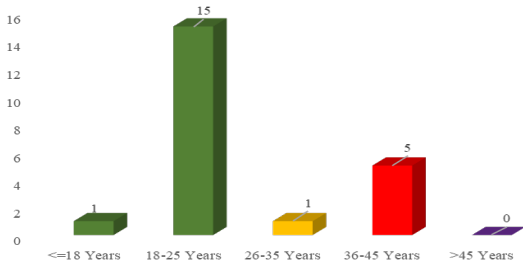


Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents' Age and Education

Table 2 indicates that respondents under the age of 18 demonstrate a higher ability to identify hoaxes compared to other age groups. Conversely, individuals aged 18-35 remain uncertain, while those above 45 years struggle to distinguish between accurate and false information. These differences align with Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs

& Shaw, 1972), which emphasises how media exposure shapes individual perceptions. Younger generations, with greater technological literacy, have access to diverse information sources, whereas older generations are more vulnerable to misinformation due to limited digital literacy (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Beyond age, gender also influences information consumption patterns. Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of respondents (72.7%) are female, while 27.3% are male. This disparity may affect exposure levels and hoax dissemination patterns on social media.

The age and education distribution presented in Figure 2 indicates that the majority of respondents fall within the 18–25 age group (68.1%), followed by those over 45 years old (22.7%). These findings suggest that most respondents are active consumers of social media content. This aligns with the study by Vosoughi et al. (2018), which found that younger individuals are more inclined to engage with online information—whether by sharing, commenting, or seeking clarification on received news.

The respondents' highest level of education also varies, as shown in Figure 3. The majority hold a senior high school qualification (63.6%), followed by undergraduate degrees (22.7%), while only 9.1% have primary-level education. No respondents reported a junior high school or postgraduate education (Master's/PhD). Social Construction of Reality Theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2016) explains that individuals with higher education levels tend to be more critical in filtering information, whereas those with lower educational backgrounds are more likely to accept information without verification.

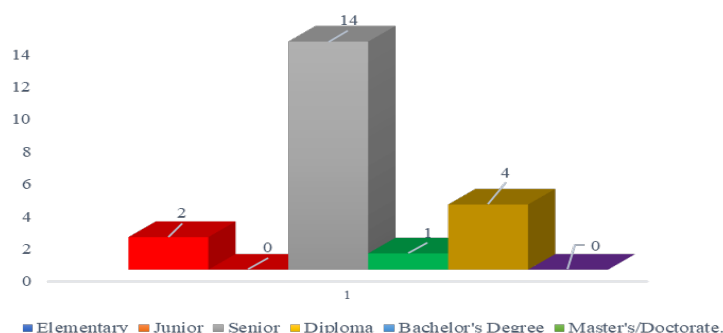


Figure 3. Respondents' Highest Level of Education

Frequency of Social Media Use and Exposure to Hoaxes

Another factor influencing individuals' exposure to hoaxes is the duration of social media use. Figure 4 illustrates that most respondents spend over four hours per day on social media, with 36.4% accessing it for more than six hours daily. Media and Propaganda Theory (Herman & Chomsky, 2021) asserts that greater exposure to media increases the likelihood of accepting and disseminating unverified information. Frequent encounters with hoaxes may reinforce cognitive biases, especially among individuals who consume social media extensively.

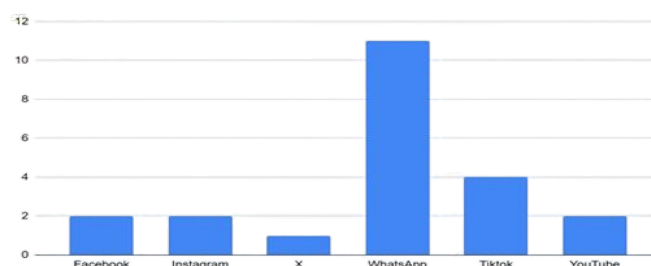


Figure 4. Social Media Usage per Day

A total of 63.6% of respondents reported frequent encounters with hoaxes on social media, while 27.2% stated they occasionally come across such content. These findings indicate that hoaxes have become an integral part of digital information consumption, necessitating enhanced digital literacy to strengthen resistance to misinformation.

Impact of Hoaxes on Public Perception

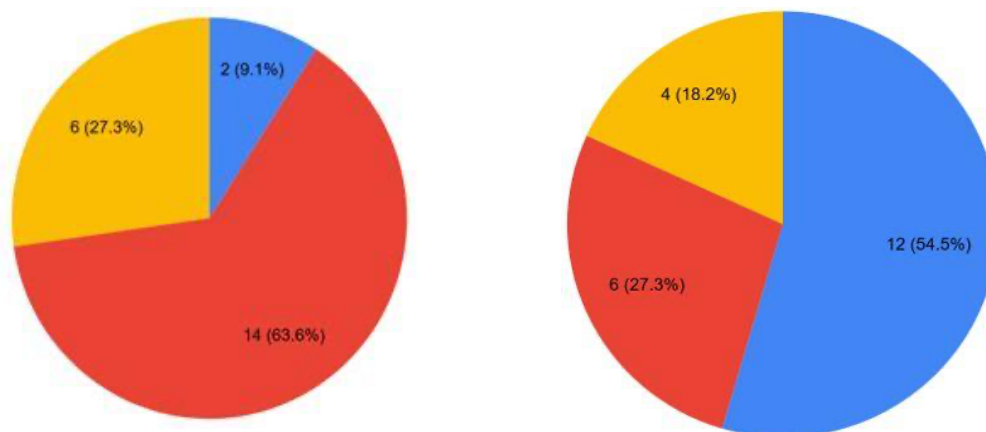


Figure 5. Frequency of Exposure to Hoaxes and Their Impact on Social Media

As shown in Figure 5, 54.5% of respondents believe that hoaxes significantly impact society. This finding is consistent with the study by Rama et al. (2022), which demonstrated that hoaxes contribute to social polarisation and declining public trust in institutions. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains that media exposure influences public opinion, including reinforcing false beliefs due to repeated exposure to misinformation.

A key question in this study concerns whether respondents believe hoaxes influence public attitudes. The results indicate that 45.5% of respondents remain uncertain about identifying hoaxes, while 9.1% lack confidence in their ability to distinguish between accurate and false information. These findings support the concept of confirmation bias, which suggests that individuals tend to believe information aligning with their pre-existing beliefs without conducting further verification.

Respondents' Actions in Addressing Hoaxes

Additionally, 63.6% of respondents strongly agreed that hoaxes shape public attitudes, reinforcing Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral's (2018) study, which found that false news spreads faster than factual news, making it more effective in shaping public perceptions.

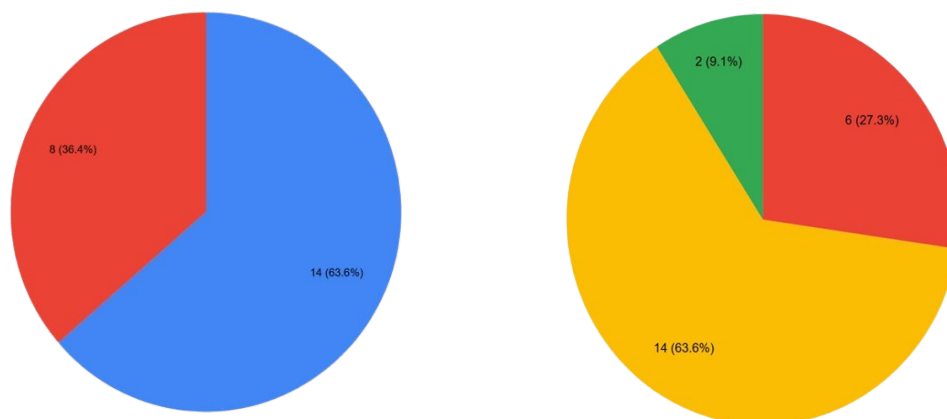


Figure 6. Hoax Dissemination Patterns and Respondents' Perceptions of Information on Social Media

The majority of respondents (63.6%) stated that they seek valid information before sharing news, while 36.4% ignore hoaxes without verifying their accuracy. However, some individuals do not actively verify or report hoaxes to the authorities.

While 45.5% of respondents have never shared a hoax, 18.2% admitted to occasionally disseminating false news, and 36.4% were unsure whether they had ever shared a hoax. These findings align with Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral (2018), who suggested that hoaxes are often spread unintentionally rather than maliciously, mainly due to a lack of awareness regarding verification processes.

Finally, trust in social media information remains a critical challenge. A total of 63.6% of respondents believe that information on social media is as credible as other sources, while 27.3% place greater trust in social media content. Aliya et al. (2024) highlight that excessive trust in unverified information increases the risk of misinformation acceptance, underscoring the importance of fact-checking mechanisms in reducing the spread of false news.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that most respondents frequently encounter hoaxes on social media, yet many struggle to distinguish between accurate and false information. Respondents under the age of 18 demonstrate a higher ability to recognise hoaxes, while those aged 18–35 remain uncertain, and individuals over 45 years face greater difficulty in identifying reliable content. Additionally, education level and social media consumption patterns significantly influence one's ability to identify and disseminate hoaxes. These findings align with the Social Construction of Reality Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, which explain how exposure to specific media shapes public perceptions and reinforces cognitive biases. Furthermore, the results support the Media and Propaganda Model, which asserts that repetitive and systematic information

dissemination manipulates public opinion. The impact of hoaxes extends beyond individual misperceptions, contributing to social polarisation, diminished trust in governmental institutions, and deteriorating social and economic stability. Therefore, enhancing digital literacy is essential to countering hoax dissemination and mitigating its effects on society.

To mitigate these concerns, this study recommends strengthening digital literacy programmes through formal education systems and public awareness campaigns, alongside stricter regulations on social media platforms to limit the spread of misleading content. A multi-stakeholder approach involving government institutions, academics, media practitioners, and civil society organisations is fundamental to ensuring public access to credible information. Future studies should further explore the role of social media algorithms in shaping users' exposure to hoaxes, enabling the development of more comprehensive mitigation strategies.

However, this study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size (22 respondents), which prevents broader generalisation of the findings. Additionally, the research adopts a quantitative approach without qualitative triangulation, limiting insights into the underlying motivations for hoax dissemination. Future studies should employ a mixed-method approach with a larger sample size, integrating psychological and socio-cultural dimensions to gain a deeper understanding of hoax dissemination patterns.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms the relevance of the Social Construction of Reality, Agenda-Setting, and Media and Propaganda Theories. However, further research with a broader scope is necessary to reinforce the applicability of these theories in addressing digital information challenges and media literacy issues in Indonesia.

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