



## Generation Z's critical attitude toward digital misinformation among tiktok

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed social media into a primary source of information, particularly for Generation Z. Among various platforms, TikTok facilitates rapid information dissemination but simultaneously increases users' exposure to hoaxes and misinformation. Although previous studies have widely examined digital literacy and misinformation, limited research has specifically explored how Generation Z develops critical attitudes toward hoaxes on TikTok through everyday information verification practices. Addressing this gap, this study analyzes Generation Z's critical attitudes toward digital hoaxes on TikTok, identifies the verification strategies they employ, and examines the factors influencing their ability to evaluate information. This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach involving five Generation Z informants aged 18–25 years who actively use TikTok. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation and analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings indicate that most informants demonstrate critical attitudes by verifying information before believing or sharing it. Their verification practices include checking the credibility of information sources, comparing content across multiple media platforms, examining user discussions in the comment section, and confirming information through official institutions or trusted news outlets. Critical attitudes are influenced by digital literacy, educational background, social environment, prior social media experience, and TikTok's algorithmic characteristics. This study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of the interaction between digital literacy, platform-specific characteristics, and critical information evaluation among Generation Z. The findings also offer practical insights for developing digital literacy programs aimed at strengthening resilience against online misinformation.

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### 1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has changed the way people interact with each other and share data. Social media has now become a primary source of information for various

groups due to the growth of the internet and digital technology, especially for Generation Z, also known as the digital native generation. TikTok, which allows users to quickly obtain and share information through short videos, is a popular platform among Generation Z. Easy access to information improves communication and learning, but also increases the possibility of spreading hoaxes or misinformation (Aditya et al., 2025).

The rapid dissemination of digital information presents significant challenges for users in distinguishing credible information from false or misleading content. This issue is particularly relevant for Generation Z, whose intensive engagement with social media exposes them to a continuous flow of algorithmically curated information. Consequently, the ability to critically evaluate digital information has become an essential competence for preventing misinformation and promoting responsible online behavior. Hoaxes on social media are a major problem because they can influence public opinion, cause social conflict, and mislead people about information. A study of TikTok's algorithm showed that the website's recommendation system significantly impacts the spread of content and the creation of filter bubbles; algorithms that tailor content to user interests allow content to spread rapidly without adequate verification. Because Generation Z actively uses social media, they are vulnerable to hoaxes and fake news (Nasution et al., 2025).

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze Generation Z's critical attitudes toward digital hoaxes on TikTok, identify the information verification practices they employ, and examine the factors influencing their ability to evaluate online information. The findings are expected to contribute to strengthening digital literacy initiatives and developing evidence-based strategies for mitigating the spread of misinformation among young social media users.

Critical thinking is widely recognized as an essential cognitive skill that enables individuals to evaluate evidence, analyze arguments, verify information, and make reasoned judgments. In the digital environment, critical thinking is closely associated with digital literacy, which encompasses the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, and responsibly communicate digital information. Amidst the rapid flow of digital information, Generation Z must possess critical thinking skills. Critical thinking helps people evaluate information sources, compare facts, verify data, and avoid spreading unproven information. Previous studies have shown that critical thinking is a key skill in addressing cognitive bias, misinformation, and information distortion in the modern era. However, several studies have also found a competency paradox among Generation Z: high digital media use does not necessarily translate to good digital literacy and accurate information (Komala sari, 2024).

The rapid dissemination of information through social media has significantly increased the prevalence of hoaxes and misinformation. TikTok, characterized by its short-video format and algorithm-driven recommendation system, enables information to spread rapidly regardless of its accuracy. Consequently, users are expected to adopt information verification practices such as examining source credibility, comparing information across multiple platforms, consulting official sources, and evaluating public discussions before accepting or sharing online content.

Previous research has typically addressed digital literacy, social media usage behavior, and critical thinking skills among Generation Z. However, few studies have specifically examined Generation Z's critical attitudes toward online misinformation, particularly those related to social media user behavior in Indonesia. Most studies have focused on how TikTok usage impacts social behavior and communist ethics (Maulida et al., 2022).

This study addresses this research gap by investigating the relationship between Generation Z's critical attitudes, information verification behaviors, and the platform-specific characteristics of TikTok. Unlike previous research that focuses mainly on digital literacy or social media usage, this study provides a qualitative understanding of how Generation Z evaluates the credibility of information before believing or sharing it. Therefore, this research contributes to extending the literature on digital literacy, critical thinking, and misinformation prevention in contemporary social media environments.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore Generation Z's critical attitudes toward digital misinformation on TikTok. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding information verification practices in their daily use of social media.

### 2.1. Research Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the informants possessed characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were: (1) belonging to Generation Z (18–25 years old); (2) actively using TikTok for at least one year; (3) regularly accessing TikTok to obtain information, news, or educational content; and (4) voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study. A total of five informants participated in this research. In qualitative studies, the adequacy of participants is determined by data saturation rather than statistical representation. Data saturation was achieved after the fifth interview because the information provided by participants became repetitive, no substantially new themes emerged, and the collected data adequately addressed the research questions. Additional interviews were considered unlikely to generate new conceptual insights regarding Generation Z's critical attitudes toward digital hoaxes on TikTok.

**Table 1.** Profile of research informan

| Informant | Gender | Age | Education             | Occupation       | TikTok Use Frequency |
|-----------|--------|-----|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| I1        | Female | 24  | Undergraduate student | Student          | 3-5 hours/day        |
| I2        | Female | 23  | Undergraduate student | Student          | 2-4 hours/day        |
| I3        | Female | 23  | Undergraduate student | Student          | 4-6 hours/day        |
| I4        | Female | 22  | Undergraduate student | Student          | 2-3 hours/day        |
| I5        | Male   | 24  | Bachelor's Degree     | Private Employee | 2-5 hours/day        |

### 2.2. Data Collection

Primary data were collected between June 2026 through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. An interview guide consisting of 15 open-ended questions was developed based on indicators of critical thinking and digital information verification, including the ability to recognize misinformation, evaluate information sources, compare information across multiple platforms, assess content credibility, and determine whether information should be shared. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at locations agreed upon by the participants (such as university campuses or public discussion spaces). All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, with participants' permission obtained before audio recording. The recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. Observations were conducted to complement the interview findings by examining participants' behaviors when accessing and responding to information on TikTok. Documentation, including field notes, interview transcripts, screenshots of relevant TikTok content, and supporting documents, was collected to strengthen data credibility.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three interrelated stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis began with verbatim transcription of all interview recordings. During the data condensation stage, researchers carefully read each transcript several times and conducted open coding by assigning labels to meaningful statements related to participants' critical attitudes toward digital misinformation. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories through axial coding, resulting in themes such as *information verification practices*, *trust in information sources*, *critical evaluation of content*, *influencing factors*, and *decision-making before sharing information*. The categorized data were then

organized into matrices and narrative descriptions (data display) to facilitate comparisons across participants and identify recurring patterns. Finally, conclusions were developed and continuously verified by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure consistency and credibility.

#### **2.4. Trustworthiness**

To ensure research rigor, this study employed source triangulation, method triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from different participants. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. Time triangulation was achieved by collecting and confirming information at different points during the research process to ensure consistency. The researcher also conducted member checking, in which participants reviewed summaries of the interview findings to confirm that the interpretations accurately represented their perspectives.

#### **2.5. Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to ethical principles in qualitative research. Before participation, each informant received an explanation regarding the research objectives and procedures and signed an informed consent form. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms (I1-I5) were used throughout the study, and all interview recordings, transcripts, and supporting documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher for academic purposes. To understand Gen Z's critical attitudes toward digital misinformation on TikTok, this study employed a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The qualitative approach was chosen because the informants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the research subjects allow them to describe social phenomena. This study shows that Gen Z students use TikTok as a medium to collect and share digital data. Purposive sampling technique, the selection of informants based on research objectives was used to select research subjects. The criteria for informants were as follows: (1) included in Generation Z, namely those aged 18 to 25 years; (2) have actively used the TikTok application for at least the past year; (3) regularly access TikTok to get information, news, and educational content; and (4) willing to be research informants. The principle of data sufficiency, also known as "data saturation", states that when the pattern of collected data becomes repetitive and no significant new information is found, the data collection process is stopped.

The primary data for this study came from direct informants through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted semi-structured using interview guidelines based on critical thinking skills, such as the ability to distinguish false information, verify information sources, evaluate message content, and make informed decisions before disseminating information. Observations were conducted to observe informants' behavior in accessing and responding to digital content on the TikTok platform, while documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of screenshots, field notes, and other supporting documents relevant to the research.

Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña developed an interactive analysis model for data analysis, consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. First, data obtained from observations, documentation, and interviews were transcribed and categorized according to critical attitudes toward digital hoax information. Then, the data were presented in narrative form to facilitate researchers in identifying patterns, relationships, and meanings within the research findings.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, method triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various informants, method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, and time triangulation was conducted by examining data at different points in time to ensure that the information provided by

informants was consistent. In addition, the researcher also conducted member checking by asking informants to confirm the results of data interpretation.

Social research ethics include maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities, obtaining informed consent before data collection, and ensuring that all data is used solely for academic purposes. Participants are given the freedom to discontinue their participation at any time without consequence. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of information provided by informants, all research data is stored securely and is accessible only to the researcher.

### **3. Analysis and Results**

Based on interviews with five Generation Z informants who actively use TikTok, it was found that most informants have realized the importance of being critical of information circulating on social media. Informant 1 stated that he does not immediately believe information that appears on TikTok and usually searches for similar information through Google or trusted news media to confirm its truth. Informant 2 revealed that he often checks the identity of the uploader's account and reads other users' comments as a first step in assessing the credibility of information. Meanwhile, Informant 3 said that he once found information that turned out to be a hoax, so this experience made him more cautious and accustomed to comparing information from several sources before believing it.

Furthermore, Informant 4 explained that he tends to verify information received regarding important issues such as health, education, or national events. However, for entertainment content or viral trends, he admitted he doesn't always conduct further checks. Unlike the other informants, Informant 5 admitted that he is sometimes influenced by the number of views and popularity of content when assessing the veracity of information. Nevertheless, he tries not to immediately share information with others without a clear source. Overall, the interview results indicate that all five informants are aware of the importance of verifying information before believing or sharing it. The most common forms of critical thinking include checking the source of information, comparing it with other media, reading other users' responses, and seeking confirmation from official sources. However, the level of critical thinking varies among informants and is influenced by their level of digital literacy, experience using social media, and the type of information received through TikTok. These findings suggest that Generation Z already possesses basic skills in dealing with digital hoaxes, although further improvements in digital literacy are needed to ensure a more consistent and in-depth information verification process. Research shows that Generation Z, who actively use TikTok, has demonstrated a critical attitude towards information they receive, especially information that potentially contains hoaxes. This critical attitude is demonstrated by checking sources, comparing them with other media, and seeking clarification from sources deemed more credible. These findings suggest that Generation Z are not entirely passive consumers of digital information; instead, they are beginning to develop evaluative skills in handling the increasingly complex flow of information. This finding aligns with previous research showing that, despite varying levels of information consistency, Generation Z prefers to verify information before sharing it (Pratiwi et al., 2024). These results demonstrate the digital competency paradox. Generation Z is a group that is very familiar with digital technology, but not all of them possess the critical thinking skills necessary to handle hoaxes. This situation suggests that the ability to use technology does not always equate to the ability to evaluate information correctly (Ayu et al., 2025).

This study also found that some informants still use content popularity as an indicator of the veracity of information. The number of views, the number of followers, and the number of positive comments are often considered evidence of the trustworthiness of information. However, popularity does not always indicate the validity of information. This phenomenon demonstrates the paradox of digital competence, a situation where someone possesses advanced technical skills in using technology but lacks adequate evaluative skills to assess the quality of information. These findings align with various studies that suggest that critical thinking skills must be developed alongside increased digital literacy to prevent social media users from being easily influenced by misleading information.

The increasingly intensive use of TikTok has also impacted Generation Z's behavior and how they interact with information. TikTok is used not only for entertainment but also as a means of obtaining news, knowledge, and various other information. Therefore, users need to be able to select credible information to avoid being easily influenced by manipulative or misleading content. Research by (Maulida et al., 2022) shows that TikTok use can influence Generation Z's behavior and interaction patterns, necessitating wise and responsible use of social media. Critical thinking skills are crucial in addressing the proliferation of false information on social media. According to (Nasution et al., 2025), critical thinking skills enable individuals to recognize cognitive biases, evaluate the credibility of sources, and avoid the spread of misinformation. In the context of this study, most informants demonstrated behavior consistent with critical thinking indicators, although the level of implementation varied.

### 3.1. Generation Z's Critical Attitude toward Hoaxes on TikTok

Based on interviews with five informants, all participants demonstrated awareness of the importance of verifying information before accepting or sharing content on TikTok. However, the level of critical evaluation varied among participants. Four informants consistently verified information related to health, politics, education, and public issues, whereas one informant admitted that content popularity, including the number of views and followers, sometimes influenced judgments regarding information credibility.

**Table 2.** Emergent themes from interview findings

| Theme                                    | Number of Informants | Evidence                                     |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Checking information sources             | 5/5                  | All informants verified uploader credibility |
| Comparing with other media               | 5/5                  | Google, news websites                        |
| Reading comment sections                 | 4/5                  | Used as initial verification                 |
| Confirming through official institutions | 4/5                  | Government/news media                        |
| Influenced by popularity metrics         | 2/5                  | Views and followers affected trust           |
| Sharing without verification             | 1/5                  | Only entertainment content                   |

These findings indicate that source verification and cross-platform comparison were the dominant verification strategies among participants. Nevertheless, verification practices became less consistent when participants encountered entertainment-oriented or viral content. According to (Ifah et al., 2025), critical thinking is an individual's ability to analyze information objectively, evaluate its truth, and make rational decisions. This is a crucial skill for navigating the complexity of information in the modern era. Therefore, critical thinking is not merely thinking, but involves logical analysis, evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making. According to (Zakaria et al., 2021), the characteristics of critical thinking encompass several main dimensions: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. This indicates that individuals with a critical attitude are able to understand information in depth (interpretation), analyze problems logically, evaluate arguments or evidence, explain the results of their thinking, and control and reflect on their own thought processes.

According to (Suciono, 2020), "a person's critical thinking ability is influenced by various factors, such as learning motivation, learning environment, teaching methods, and individual intellectual abilities. These factors can significantly influence a person's ability to analyze information and solve problems rationally." Advances in information and communication technology have brought significant changes to the way people obtain and share information. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow information to be disseminated very quickly and reach a wide audience in a short time. However, this ease of access also presents challenges in the form of the increasing spread of inaccurate information or fake news in the digital space (Komala sari, 2024). Critical thinking plays a crucial role in helping individuals analyze, evaluate, and verify information circulating on digital media. Critical thinkers tend not to immediately believe the information they receive, but instead verify the source, seek supporting evidence, and compare the information with other, more credible sources. This process is crucial for preventing the spread of false or misleading information in society (Halimah, 2025). Meanwhile, according to (Juliyantika & Batubara, 2022), critical thinking is characterized by the ability to think reflectively, logically, and deeply about a problem. Therefore, its main characteristics include being reflective (not hasty), rationally

skeptical (not easily trusting), analyzing information thoroughly, and focusing on the search for truth. Furthermore, according to (Khotimah et al., 2024), critical thinking is closely related to the process of analyzing, evaluating, and drawing conclusions from information to find solutions to problems. This ability helps individuals understand information more deeply than simply passively receiving it. According to a study published in the Journal of Science and Technology, Generation Z is generally defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, namely, the generation born after the millennial generation and growing up alongside the development of digital technology and the internet (Sunaryanto & Idrus, 2025).

Several studies have shown that Generation Z is known as the "digital natives," individuals who have been accustomed to using digital technology in their daily lives since childhood. This makes them highly adept at accessing information online and utilizing various digital platforms for learning, communication, and entertainment (Fadilla Awalia, 2025). The study's findings indicate that most informants recognize the importance of pre-checking information deemed controversial, particularly regarding social, health, educational, and political issues. Reading other users' comments, checking the credibility of the uploader's account, comparing information with other sources, and searching for similar information through search engines or official media outlets are some examples of critical thinking demonstrated. The results indicate that Generation Z is capable of identifying hoaxes on social media. This ability is supported by their extensive use of digital technology, which has taught them how to interact with various data sources. However, a comprehensive verification process has not fully align with this ability. Many informants still rely on subjective assessments such as the number of followers an account has or the number of video views to determine whether information is true. Previous studies have found that Generation Z's verification strategies are still spontaneous (ad hoc) and often influenced by emotions and the context of the TikTok platform (Aditya et al., 2025). The results of the study indicate that informants undertake several verification steps before trusting the information they receive. These steps include checking the source, comparing the content with other sources, and requesting clarification from official sources. Some informants admitted to using search engines like Google to ensure the accuracy of viral content on TikTok.

However, not all informants undertake a thorough verification process; some admitted to only verifying information if it is deemed important or directly impacts their lives. However, most informants tend to accept information without further investigation if it is for entertainment or a viral trend. This suggests that the level of importance of information received by TikTok users still influences their critical thinking. These results support research suggesting that high TikTok usage can improve digital literacy, but does not necessarily guarantee consistent information evaluation across all types of content (Pratiwi et al., 2024).

### 3.2. Types of Information Verification Performed by TikTok Users

Interview analysis identified four dominant verification strategies employed by Generation Z before accepting information on TikTok.

**Table 3.** Types of information verification performed by informants

| Verification Form                          | Frequency of Findings |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Checking sources of information            | High                  |
| Comparing with other media                 | High                  |
| Reading user comments                      | Medium                |
| Seeking confirmation from official sources | High                  |
| Sharing without verification               | Low                   |

The most dominant verification behavior was checking information sources before believing a claim. This finding reflects an emerging pattern of digital literacy among Generation Z, in which users no longer rely solely on algorithmically recommended content. However, the findings also demonstrate selective verification behavior. Most participants admitted that verification was performed mainly when the information related to politics, health, education, or national issues. Entertainment content and viral trends were rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny. This selective verification behavior can be interpreted using the framework of

bounded rationality, where individuals allocate cognitive resources according to the perceived importance of information. Consequently, critical thinking becomes context-dependent rather than consistently applied. The results of the study indicate that informants undertake several verification steps before trusting the information they receive. These steps include checking the source, comparing the content with other sources, and requesting clarification from official sources. Some informants admitted to using search engines like Google to ensure the accuracy of viral content on TikTok. Research findings indicate that informants' information verification activities are still dominated by checking sources and seeking comparative information through other media. This pattern indicates an awareness of not immediately accepting information circulating on TikTok as absolute truth. According to (Illahi & Gani, 2024), the ability to verify information through multiple sources is a key indicator of digital media literacy, which can help individuals reduce the risk of spreading hoaxes. Users who make a habit of comparing information from multiple media outlets tend to be better able to distinguish between valid information and information containing elements of misinformation or disinformation. Therefore, the verification process is a crucial step in building a healthy digital culture among Generation Z.

In addition to checking information sources, some informants use the comments section as a means to gain additional perspectives on information. Comments from other users are often used as initial considerations in assessing the credibility of content. However, this method has limitations because the comments may not necessarily come from competent sources or have a strong factual basis. (Rahmawan et al., 2023) explain that user interaction on social media can aid in the process of clarifying information, but it cannot be used as the sole basis for determining the truth of information. Therefore, users still need to check through official sources and credible media. This study also found that the use of search engines like Google was one of the most frequently used verification strategies by informants. This step indicates that Generation Z has utilized various digital platforms to cross-check the information they receive. (Astuti & Purnomo, 2023) stated that the ability to search for information independently is an important part of digital literacy because it allows individuals to obtain more diverse and objective information. The more sources used in the verification process, the less likely someone is to be influenced by false information circulating on social media.

However, not all informants undertake a thorough verification process; some admitted to only verifying information if it is deemed important or directly impacts their lives. However, most informants tend to accept information without further investigation if it is for entertainment or a viral trend. This suggests that the level of importance of information received by TikTok users still influences their critical thinking. These results support research suggesting that high TikTok usage can improve digital literacy, but does not necessarily guarantee consistent information evaluation across all types of content (Pratiwi et al., 2024). These findings indicate that Generation Z's ability to verify information remains selective. Users tend to be more critical of information perceived as having a direct impact on their lives than of information that is lighthearted or entertaining. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy needs to be directed not only at recognizing hoaxes on important issues but also at evaluating all forms of information circulating on social media. This way, TikTok users can apply a more consistent critical attitude in every digital information consumption activity.

3.3. Factors Influencing Generation Z's Critical Attitude Toward Digital Hoaxes

Three major factors emerged from thematic analysis.

| Table 3. Factors influencing critical attitudes |     |        |                                                                                                 |  |  |                                                 |  |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------------------|--|
| Factor                                          |     |        | Evidence from Interviews                                                                        |  |  | Theoretical Interpretation                      |  |
| Digital literacy                                |     |        | All informants with broader information search habits performed more comprehensive verification |  |  | Digital literacy strengthens evaluation ability |  |
| Educational environment                         | and | social | Participants active in academic environments demonstrated better analytical reasoning           |  |  | Social learning enhances critical thinking      |  |

| Factor           | Evidence from Interviews                                         | Theoretical Interpretation          |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| TikTok algorithm | Repeated exposure increased perceived credibility of information | Filter bubble and confirmation bias |

The findings indicate that digital literacy constitutes the strongest determinant influencing Generation Z's critical attitude toward online misinformation. Participants who frequently utilized search engines, official media, and multiple information sources demonstrated considerably stronger verification behavior than participants relying primarily on TikTok. Interview results indicate that several factors influence Generation Z's critical attitudes toward hoaxes on TikTok. The first is users' digital literacy levels; people with more experience using digital media tend to be more thorough in evaluating information than those who only use TikTok for entertainment. Education and social environment are the second factors. People who actively participate in academic activities, organizations, or public conversations demonstrate better analytical skills in distinguishing between true and false information. The third factor is the features available on the TikTok platform. TikTok's algorithm displays content quickly and repeatedly, which often leads users to accept content without much thought. As a result, emotionally appealing information is more easily believed and shared than fact-based information. According to (Rahmawati et al., 2019), digital information is internet technology-based information that can be accessed through digital media and has the characteristics of being fast, interactive, and easily disseminated widely in society. These findings reinforce previous research indicating a link between digital media literacy and an individual's ability to deal with the spread of hoaxes. The higher a person's digital literacy, the better their ability to evaluate and verify information (Adi Prakoso et al., 2023).

Digital information in digital literacy refers to a person's ability to access, understand, evaluate, and utilize information available through digital media. Digital literacy enables a person to use information technology effectively to search for, process, and disseminate information in the digital world (Sarifatul Jannah et al., 2024). This finding reinforces previous research that suggests a relationship between a person's ability to understand digital media and their ability to deal with hoaxes. The better a person understands digital media, the better they can evaluate and verify information (Illahi & Gani, 2024). Besides digital literacy factors, the characteristics of TikTok's algorithm also influence user behavior in receiving information. Recommendation systems that display content based on user preferences can create filter bubbles and confirmation bias. These conditions lead users to more frequently receive information that aligns with their beliefs, potentially reducing objectivity in evaluating information. (Morales-navarro, 2024) explains that social media algorithms can reinforce users' tendency to accept information that aligns with their views without conducting in-depth evaluation.

Furthermore, the characteristics of TikTok's algorithm also influence user behavior in receiving information. TikTok's recommendation system is designed to display content based on user interests and interactions, which can create filter bubbles and confirmation bias. Users tend to accept information that aligns with their views and are less exposed to divergent perspectives. Research on TikTok's personalization shows that user activity such as following specific accounts, liking content, and video viewing duration significantly influence the type of content recommended by the algorithm. This has the potential to increase trust in information that appears repeatedly, even if it is not necessarily true. This study also found that digital literacy is crucial in developing a critical attitude toward hoaxes. Those who habitually check multiple sources of information, compare references, and seek clarification from official media outlets are more likely to avoid the spread of false information. Therefore, formal and non-formal education must continue to improve digital literacy so that Generation Z becomes more critical and responsible social media users. This finding aligns with various studies emphasizing the importance of digital literacy education and critical thinking skills in addressing the rise of misinformation on social media (Tobing, 2024). However, this study also found that Generation Z does not yet possess ideal critical thinking skills. Some informants still use content popularity metrics, such as the number of views, the number of account followers, or the number of positive comments, to evaluate the veracity of the information they provide. This situation indicates a gap between the technical ability to use digital media and the critical ability to assess

data. This phenomenon is known as the digital competence paradox, where someone has extraordinary technological capabilities but is unable to correctly understand information. These results support the research of (Kusuma et al., 2025) found that Generation Z still uses spontaneous (ad hoc) information verification strategies and is often influenced by emotional factors and digital platform features (Aditya et al., 2025).

The research also shows that technological literacy is a crucial component influencing Generation Z's critical attitudes toward online hoaxes. Informants who better understand how digital media works tend to be more cautious when receiving and disseminating information. Conversely, informants with less technological understanding tend to be more easily influenced by viral information without adequate verification. Another study shows that digital literacy plays a crucial role in shaping anti-hoax behavior and enhancing an individual's ability to distinguish between false information (Weridity, 2026). TikTok users' critical attitudes are influenced by the platform's algorithm-based nature. TikTok allows certain content to reappear according to user preferences, increasing credibility in content even when it may be untrue. Users are at risk of experiencing filter bubbles and confirmation bias in these circumstances, which are the tendency to accept information that aligns with their beliefs and ignore conflicting information. Consequently, critical thinking skills are crucial for users to consider and evaluate the information they receive before making decisions or reposting it (Morales-navarro, 2024). The findings of this study have broad implications for the development of digital literacy education in Indonesia. Efforts to improve digital literacy must not only focus on the ability to use technology; Data literacy should also emphasize evaluation, analysis, and introspection when using data. Educational institutions, governments, and digital platform providers should collaborate to create digital literacy programs that help Generation Z think critically about the various types of hoaxes and misinformation circulating on social media. This approach is crucial because Generation Z is the group that most frequently uses digital media in their daily lives (Anisti et al., 2024). Future research could focus on quantitatively measuring the relationship between digital literacy and critical thinking skills in a broader population. Furthermore, future research could also investigate the effectiveness of digital literacy education programs or fact-checking training in helping Generation Z address hoaxes on various social media platforms, including but not limited to TikTok and Instagram. Therefore, further research is expected to provide more comprehensive advice on how to build a critical, intelligent, and responsible digital society (Weridity, 2026).

3.4. Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the findings, this study proposes a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between digital literacy, TikTok algorithm exposure, critical thinking, and hoax identification.

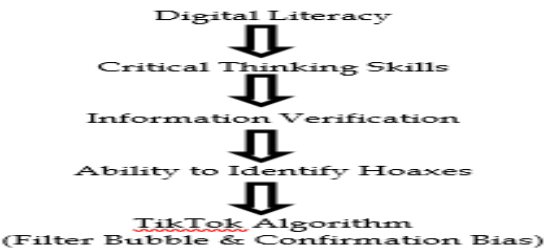


Figure 1. TikTok algorithm exposure, critical thinking, and hoax identification

The model suggests that digital literacy positively influences critical thinking, which subsequently improves information verification behavior and enhances the ability to identify hoaxes. Conversely, TikTok's recommendation algorithm may weaken critical evaluation through filter bubbles and confirmation bias. Therefore, critical thinking functions as the central mechanism that mediates the relationship between digital literacy and successful hoax identification.

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#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Generation Z, as active TikTok users, generally exhibits critical attitudes toward digital information by engaging in various information verification practices before believing or sharing content. The most common verification strategies identified among the informants include checking the credibility of information sources, comparing information across multiple media platforms, reading user comments, and confirming information through official institutions or trusted news media. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal variations in the level of critical thinking. While most participants consistently verified information related to health, education, politics, and public affairs, some remained influenced by popularity indicators such as the number of views, followers, and user engagement when evaluating the credibility of entertainment or viral content. Furthermore, this study identifies digital literacy, educational background, social media experience, social environment, and TikTok's algorithmic characteristics as the primary factors shaping Generation Z's critical attitudes toward digital hoaxes. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on digital literacy and critical thinking by demonstrating that information verification behavior is influenced not only by users' cognitive abilities but also by platform-specific characteristics, particularly algorithm-driven content personalization. These findings extend existing discussions on the digital competence paradox by showing that high levels of technological proficiency do not necessarily translate into consistent critical evaluation of online information.

Practically, the findings highlight the need to strengthen digital literacy and critical thinking education through formal education, community-based programs, and public awareness campaigns. Educational institutions should integrate information verification skills into digital literacy curricula, while families and communities should encourage reflective digital media consumption. In addition, social media platform providers should improve transparency regarding content recommendation systems and strengthen fact-checking mechanisms to reduce the spread of misinformation. From a policy perspective, the results suggest that collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and digital platform providers is essential for developing comprehensive digital literacy policies and evidence-based anti-misinformation strategies targeting young social media users. This study is limited by its relatively small number of participants and its focus on TikTok users within a qualitative research design. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse participant groups, employ mixed-methods or quantitative approaches, and compare information verification behaviors across different social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). Further research may also evaluate the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in improving critical thinking and reducing susceptibility to online misinformation among Generation Z.

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