

Navigating Digital Content Proliferation: A Study on the Information Behaviour of Communication Science Students at UINSU

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the impact of digital content proliferation on the information consumption behaviour of Communication Science students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU). The development of information and communication technology has fundamentally changed the media landscape, shifting focus from conventional media to digital platforms such as social media, online news sites, and blogs. This phenomenon has broadened access to various types of content, challenging students to navigate, evaluate, and utilise information effectively. Amidst the increasing volume and diversity of information sources, Communication Science students, as adaptive and active technology users, often face challenges in distinguishing between accurate information and misinformation, which can significantly influence their opinion formation and behaviour. Adopting a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach, this study integrates the Uses and Effects analysis to deepen the understanding of how daily interactions with mass media affect students. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation from March to May 2024, exploring how students select, process, and use digital information in their daily lives. The findings indicate that students tend to prioritise visual and interactive content but often get trapped in filter bubbles that affect their understanding and attitudes towards important issues. Therefore, this study highlights the need for more integrated media literacy education in the curriculum to equip students with the critical skills necessary to handle the complexity of information in the digital era. Further discussion of these findings is expected to provide valuable insights for the development of future educational and communication strategies.

Keywords information behaviour, proliferation, digital content

INTRODUCTION

Human interaction, which occurs between two or more individuals, heavily relies on communication as a means of exchanging messages or ideas to achieve common goals, thereby classifying humans as social beings who require this synergy (Rahman & Deni, 2022). The development of information and communication technology has ushered the world into a sophisticated modern era, where humans must keep pace with these advancements to remain relevant, particularly in increasingly practical and efficient daily life. The complexity of living demands has driven the creation of tools that facilitate daily activities and reduce workload, one of which is the smartphone. Smartphones, often regarded as an innovation or a new commodity, have become a primary necessity for humans, including schoolchildren and adults, all of whom engage in the use of this technology (Agus Sulistyono & Ismarti, 2022).

With the proliferation of digital content, there has been a fundamental shift in the way information is delivered and consumed. Conventional media such as magazines, newspapers, television, and radio have now transitioned to modern media like social media, online news, and blogs. This phenomenon has not only increased the quantity and diversity of content



available online, including blog articles, videos, podcasts, social media, and other platforms, but it has also fundamentally changed the media landscape (Arianto, 2022).

Communication Science students, being a group familiar with technology and social media, may face significant impacts from these trends. They might encounter new challenges in navigating, evaluating, and using digital content, affecting how they search for, assess, and use information. As active media users, these students are involved in the information consumption process, which may be influenced by various factors, including personal preferences, habits, academic needs, and digital culture (Rahmawani, 2023).

The ability to identify accurate information, evaluate the diversity of sources, and understand the implications of consumed information becomes crucial in facing the variety of digital content. Therefore, it is essential to understand how Communication Science students select, process, and use the information they find online. In this context, the students' digital literacy and communication skills can be influenced by the proliferation of digital content, as will be analysed in this article (Syaifulloh, 2023).

Research by Rahmawani revealed the positive and negative impacts of digital content proliferation on students at UIN Alauddin Makassar. The positive impacts include increased proficiency in public speaking and creativity in content creation, while the negative impacts involve changes in behaviour towards parents and friends (Sugiono, 2020). Another study by Muhammad Rifqi Syaifulloh on the 'Phenomenon of Toxic People and Its Impact on Learning Styles of FITK UIN Walisongo Semarang Students' showed that students often experience negative impacts, imitated while interacting using harsh language in games or other digital content (Sari et al., 2021).

Research by Sari and colleagues on the 'Phenomenon of TikTok Usage among UIN Shulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi Students' reported that the positive impact was self-existence due to having many followers and friends (Priyana & Yasin, 2023). These findings indicate that students are a group significantly affected by digital content.

Globally, data from We Are Social showed that as of October 2023, the global digital user population reached 8.06 billion people, with an increase of 72 million over the past 12 months. According to GSMA Intelligence, the number of unique mobile subscribers reached 5.60 billion, equivalent to 69.4% of the total population, with a 2.7% increase over the past year. Internet users also grew by 3.7% over the past year, reaching 5.30 billion, equivalent to 65.7% of the global population (We Are Social, 2023).

The growth in the number of users over time can be a primary indicator of information consumerism through social media. This highlights the importance of understanding how the use of digital content affects students' information consumption patterns and its impact on their communication patterns and understanding of various issues and topics.

The Uses and Gratifications theory is based on the idea that individuals use media to fulfil their needs, and the impact varies depending on the usage. In the context of Communication Science students, Uses and Effects analysis can provide insights into how they use digital content and its impact on their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour (Nurhadi, 2017).

Overall, this research can reveal how students use and are influenced by digital content in their daily lives and the extent to which this content affects their understanding of important issues. Students may also become ensnared in spending excessive time on digital content, thus disrupting their academic productivity. Consequently, excessive use of social media or online games can lead to detrimental dependence.

Therefore, digital content becomes a crucial issue to discuss as it has complex impacts on students, both negatively and positively. It is hoped that with a better understanding of this phenomenon, valuable insights can be provided to Communication Science students in facing challenges and opportunities in the current digital era, as well as supporting them in developing relevant and adaptive skills for the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of relevant literature, several studies have investigated aspects related to the theme discussed in this article. For example, a study reviewed in the article (Bungin, 2008) examines the impact of digital content consumption on the social development of adolescents, focusing on the analysis of friendship patterns, communication skills, and collaborative behaviour within online communities in West Java. This research found a significant and positive relationship between friendship patterns and digital content consumption, highlighting a dynamic interaction that differs from the focus of this article, which more broadly targets university students.

An article by (Ajeng Nurhasanah & Kiki Zakiah, 2023) explores the influence of social media usage, particularly TikTok by Vina Muliana, on fulfilling the information needs of her followers. This article analyses the content published by the Instagram account @Faktaseventeen and its impact on meeting the information needs of its fans. The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of content in fulfilling information needs, contrasting with the focus of this article on the use of social media by students and its impact on their information consumption.

Furthermore, research detailed in the article titled "Analysis of Media Convergence on Seatoday Channel to Meet Information Needs in the Digital Era" by (Soeminto, 2023) emphasises media convergence and its impact on fulfilling information needs in the digital age. The primary focus of this research is on evaluating the content presented by Seatoday Channel, media integration, and audience responses to this convergence, offering a different perspective from this article, which emphasises the overall impact of digital content.

Additionally, the article titled "Trust of Gen X in Information on Social Media" by (Nova Nadifah & Atie Rachmiatie, 2022) examines how a particular generation, namely Generation X, trusts the information presented on social media. This study analyses the level of trust and how information is evaluated by this generation, differing from the broader focus of this article on the impact of digital content on university students.

Lastly, the research discussed in the article (Ridwan, 2023) titled "A Critical Review of Multimedia Information Retrieval Systems Based on Content, Context, and Concept" provides a more technical analysis. This article delves into how multimedia information retrieval systems function and how they can be improved or critiqued, considering various



aspects such as available content, usage context, and underlying concepts. This offers a different perspective from the more social and psychological analysis in this article regarding the impact of digital content on students. While differing in substance and focus, this body of literature provides a rich context for understanding various dimensions of the impact of digital content on information consumption, which will be further analysed in this article.

METHOD

In this study, the authors chose a qualitative method using a phenomenological approach to explore and analyse the influence of mass media on its users. This approach allows the research to delve into social phenomena, perceptions, and experiences of individuals and groups, in line with the objectives of qualitative research which aims to describe and analyse these aspects (Nawawi, 2001). To achieve a deep understanding, the researchers integrated the Uses and Effects approach with phenomenology in qualitative data analysis, providing a richer perspective on individuals' daily interactions with mass media (Butar Butar, 2022).

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Communication Science Study Programme, State Islamic University of North Sumatra, between March 2024 and May 2024. This approach relied on the use of primary data collected directly from subjects through interviews, observations, and direct research, as well as secondary data derived from academic literature such as journals, books, theses, and reports (Moleong, 2018).

The data collection methodology involved in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, all aimed at ensuring the accuracy and relevance of the data analysed. This data collection technique was designed to detail the context, duration, and process of the research (Sugiyono, 2014).

Data analysis, following the framework proposed by Bogdan, was conducted through a series of systematic processes that included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process ensures that the interpreted data effectively reveals the nuances and complexities of the phenomenon being studied (Ferreira et al., 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Proliferation in the Communicative Landscape of Students

The proliferation of digital content has fundamentally transformed the media and communication landscape, substantially impacting how individuals' access, consume, and interact with information. Within this framework, it is crucial to explore how Communication Science students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) interact with digital content and the implications for their information consumption patterns. Based on data from Databoks for the years 2020-2021, on average, 73% of the public obtained information through social media, as illustrated in the following diagram:

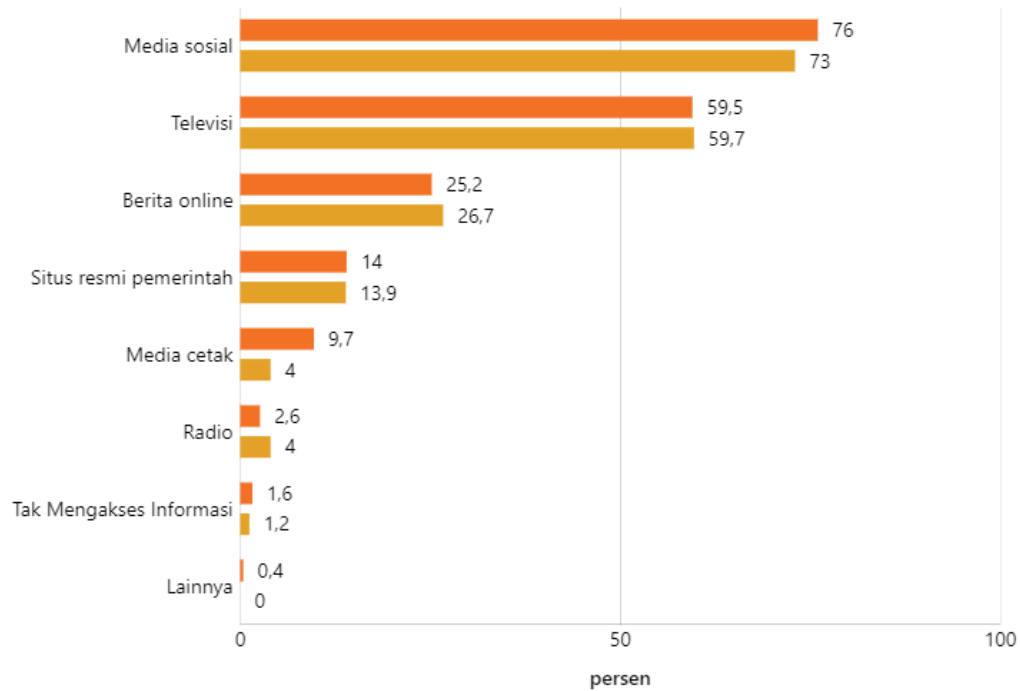


Figure 1. Diagram of Public Information Acquisition

Data analysis shows that in 2021, 73% of respondents chose social media as their primary source of information, down from 76% in 2020. Despite this decline, social media remains the dominant source of information, followed by television at 59.7% in 2021, and online news at 26.7% in the same year. The ability of social media to provide quick and easily accessible information significantly influences individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge, often triggering phenomena such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, which reinforce existing beliefs and reduce exposure to differing perspectives.

Television, as a traditional information source, still plays a crucial role in shaping viewers' thoughts and perceptions through persuasive visual and narrative techniques. Online news, with the advancement of internet technology, has become an increasingly popular source and has significant cognitive impacts due to the dynamic and rapidly changing nature of information. The phenomena of clickbait and the spread of false information or hoaxes on these platforms also pose challenges to individuals' cognitive processes, often leading to the dissemination of biased or invalid information.

Therefore, information sources from mass media have varied cognitive effects, influencing the formation of opinions, attitudes, and even individuals' understanding and interpretation of issues in the world around them. This discussion highlights the importance of understanding the impact of digital content in academic and social contexts, particularly among students who serve as active information consumers in the digital era.

Findings and Analysis

Research findings reveal that Communication Science students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU) tend to adopt various digital platforms—such as



social media, online news sites, and video-sharing platforms—to access information. Their online time is predominantly spent accessing entertaining and informative content, with a strong preference for visual and interactive material. These findings support previous data showing that the majority of people today choose social media as their primary source of information.

The trend of digital content consumption among students indicates a preference for material that is not only visually appealing but also easily accessible. The implications for their information consumption patterns are significant, potentially influencing their perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge substantially.

Analysis from interviews reveals the effects of using social media as an information consumption tool among Communication Science students at UIN-SU, outlined as follows:

1. The ease of access to information: Communication Science students at UIN-SU rely on social media for quick and efficient access to a wide range of information. These platforms facilitate following informative accounts, participating in discussion groups, and receiving instant updates, all of which enrich their learning experiences. Social media, with its speed in delivering information, becomes an essential tool that supports their academic and professional activities, as illustrated by the following image showing an example of informative content accessed through the TikTok application.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Content Providing Information from the TikTok Application

The news content presented above shows that the iNews account provides information needed by students. In addition to the speed of information obtained, students also receive visual information through the video shown above.

2. Impact on Opinions and Attitudes: Interaction with digital content, especially through social media, often influences the formation of students' opinions and attitudes. This factor is reinforced by their exposure to widely circulated narratives on these platforms, which may come from influencers or popular trends such as podcasts that particularly appeal to the student community. This exposure can modify or reinforce their views on specific topics.



3. Construction of Digital Identity: Students actively use social media to build and express their digital identities. By sharing content relevant to their field of study or creating creative works, they not only expand their professional networks but also contribute to digital discourse in the field of Communication Science. This digital identity emerges not only in the form of the content they share but also in their interactions on digital platforms, reflecting the broad influence of social media in their academic and social lives.

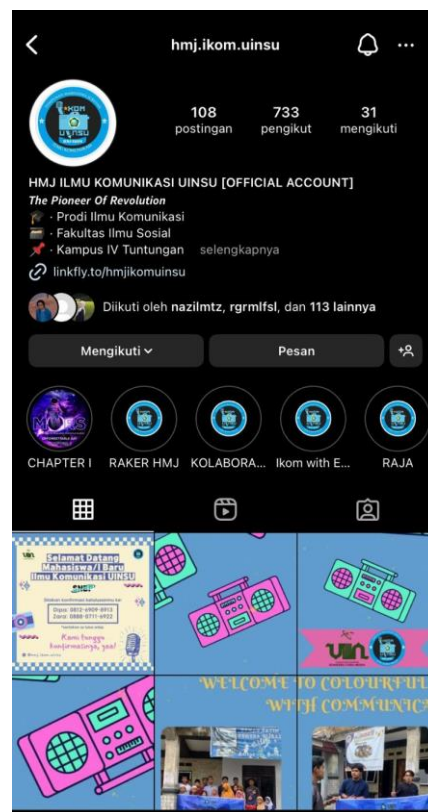


Figure 3. Digital Identity of Communication Science Student Association

The Instagram account image above illustrates that students who use social media will form their digital identities.

4. Risk of Information Distortion: While social media expands access to information, these platforms are also prone to spreading false information or hoaxes. Students are expected to develop critical skills in assessing the accuracy and reliability of the information they consume, avoiding the echo chamber trap that reinforces biases without critical challenge. This is crucial for ensuring their academic and professional integrity in the fast-paced information era.
5. Active Participation in Discussions: social media is not just a tool for passive information consumption but also a platform for active participation. Communication Science students can use social media to engage in discussions, share thoughts, or disseminate information related to academic activities. These platforms become essential for extracurricular activities, academic discussions, and the exchange of ideas among students.

Based on the data outlined above, it is important for Communication Science students at UIN-SU to develop self-awareness regarding how they use social media and its impact on their understanding as students studying communication. Additionally, as students who specialise in Communication Science, they can make positive contributions to the digital society. This can be achieved through the development of strong media literacy, advanced analytical skills, and ethical awareness in the use of communication technology.

The proliferation of digital content has radically transformed the way students access and consume information (Cinelli et al., 2021; Quach et al., 2022). In the current digital era, Communication Science students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra are confronted with an extensive information landscape encompassing social media, blogs, and video-sharing platforms, all of which facilitate access to a myriad of information sources within seconds. However, this also presents unique challenges in determining the reliability of these sources, necessitating higher digital literacy skills to navigate through the vast and often contradictory volume of information.

Moreover, phenomena such as echo chambers and filter bubbles, reinforced by social media algorithms, can restrict students to homogenous perspectives and reinforce their biases (Gao et al., 2023; Katz et al., 1973). This leads to situations where students may not be exposed to diverse viewpoints or contradictory information, affecting their ability to think critically about the topics or issues they encounter.

Within the framework of the Uses and Gratifications theory (Rizaldi et al., 2020), students use media to fulfil specific needs such as entertainment, information, social integration, and personal identity. As social media and other digital platforms provide these gratifications instantly, students tend to spend significant amounts of time-consuming digital content. This impacts not only how they gather information but also how they interact with peers and build their social identities in an online environment.

However, excessive use of digital media also has the potential to disrupt academic and social activities, particularly when the time spent online replaces studying or face-to-face interactions. The impact of digital dependence is often detrimental in terms of spreading inaccurate or misleading information, exacerbating these issues.

The influence of digital content on students' digital identity and self-representation is also significant. They often use social media to project and reinforce their chosen identities, which can be beneficial for building connectivity and social networks. However, this can also lead to pressure to present an idealised life that does not always reflect reality, causing issues such as anxiety and decreased self-esteem.

Awareness and critical skills in evaluating information sources become increasingly important in this context. Media education and digital literacy within academic environments are key to equipping students with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of the information era more effectively (Obradović, 2022). Therefore, universities and educational institutions must integrate curricula that support the development of these critical and analytical skills.

Considering all these challenges, it becomes clear that students' use of digital media needs to be balanced with a deep understanding of how media influences their thinking and behaviour. The Uses and Gratifications theory provides a useful framework for analysing and addressing these impacts, enabling educators to design more effective strategies for teaching and communication in the digital age (Hasanah, 2017).

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the dynamic interaction between Communication Science students and digital media within the context of the Uses and Gratifications theory, which has not been extensively studied in the context of universities



in Indonesia. This study specifically explores how students are not merely passive recipients of content but actively select and use media based on their specific needs, impacting the formation of their attitudes and behaviours. Additionally, this research combines phenomenological qualitative analysis with media theory to identify how and why students use digital content in the ways they do, providing new insights into the social and psychological implications of digital media proliferation. This paves the way for more targeted and effective educational interventions in educating an informed and critical generation.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of digital content has significantly impacted how Communication Science students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU) access and consume information. With the increasing reliance on social media, online news sites, and video-sharing platforms, these students display a clear preference for visual and interactive content, which aids in the formation of their opinions, attitudes, and digital identity construction. However, the high dependency on digital sources also brings the risk of information distortion, necessitating the development of strong media literacy skills to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of the consumed information. The implications of this phenomenon extend beyond individual perceptions, affecting active participation and the formation of academic and social habits.

In this context, it is crucial for educational institutions and educators to integrate effective digital literacy training into the curriculum, preparing students to face the challenges of an evolving information society. Using the Uses and Gratifications theory as a framework, it becomes evident that while social media meets the need for information, uncritical interaction with digital content can lead to the consumption of unverified information and the spread of misinformation. Therefore, students must be equipped with critical skills to effectively and responsibly sift through information, ensuring that they are not just passive consumers but also active participants in creating and disseminating ethical and accurate content.

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