The Lack Of Digital Literacy On Instagram: A Case Study Of Reactive Behavior Based On Clickbait

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Abstract, This study analyzes the phenomenon of limited digital literacy on the social media platform Instagram, particularly concerning users' tendency to respond emotionally to provocative titles (clickbait) without fully reading and comprehending the content. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research highlights behavioral patterns in which users prioritize quick responses over critical understanding. The findings reveal that the primary factor contributing to this phenomenon is the attention economy, where users are accustomed to instant access to information and feel compelled to engage immediately in public discourse. The implications of this behavior include the proliferation of misinformation and the intensification of opinion polarization. This study recommends the need for more structured digital literacy education and the implementation of platform features that encourage users to engage with content before interacting. The tendency to react without thoroughly evaluating content contributes to an increasingly fragmented digital space where echo chambers thrive. This study recommends the need for more structured digital literacy education, focusing on critical thinking and the importance of evaluating content before sharing or reacting. Additionally, it suggests the implementation of platform features that encourage users to engage with content in a more thoughtful and responsible manner, helping mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Keyword: Clickbait, Instagram, Literacy Digital, platform features, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in human life, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for expressing thoughts, emotions, and self-identity. According to Tarigan et al. (2024), language serves as an important medium for expressing feelings, facilitating communication between humans as social beings, and is a fundamental aspect of communicative activities. Furthermore, Tarigan et al. (2024) emphasize that language is a tool for humans to absorb and understand various phenomena around them. Tarigan et al. (2025) further add that individuals express themselves through language, manifested in their choice of speech and words. It can be concluded that through language, meaning can be constructed, conveyed, and interpreted, both orally and in writing.

Similarly, language and literacy are inseparable. Literacy is a fundamental skill that functions to understand and produce meaning through language. According to Ginting (2021), literacy is a person's ability to use their potential and skills to manage and understand information through reading, writing, arithmetic, and problem-solving in everyday life. It can be concluded that literacy serves as a bridge between language comprehension and cognitive awareness. However, in the digital era, the concept of literacy has evolved into digital literacy, namely the ability to access, disseminate, and create information using digital technology.

Restianty (2018) explains that media literacy and digital literacy are interrelated, emphasizing the importance of a critical approach to media messages so that individuals can use digital media consciously and responsibly. Naufal (2021) defines digital literacy as the ability to obtain, understand, and utilize information from various digital sources. Meanwhile, Pitrianti (2023) emphasizes that digital literacy encompasses human resource capabilities and governance structures that regulate digital interactions. Sutrisna (2019) also adds that digital literacy can foster critical and creative thinking skills, enabling society to develop rational and reflective digital practices.

In literacy, reader response is a crucial part of literacy practice, particularly in the digital realm. Egidio (2015) explains that reader understanding focuses on the reader's role in interpreting the text, not the text itself. In the digital environment, reader responses are often direct and open, reflecting the level of cognitive and emotional engagement with the content consumed. The way social media users interpret and respond to digital texts indicates the development of their digital literacy skills and critical awareness. Reader responses are closely related to literacy levels.

Indonesia's public literacy rate remains relatively low. Data from the Ministry of Communication and Digital (2020) shows that Indonesia ranks second lowest globally in terms of literacy. A UNESCO report even noted that Indonesians have a reading interest of only 0.001%, meaning only 1 in 1,000 people regularly read. This low literacy culture impacts people's behavior on social media. Dinata (2021) outlined eight important aspects of digital literacy, such as functional skills, creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and security but most of these aspects remain poorly understood. Consequently, low digital literacy often leads to emotional and impulsive behavior on social media. Sinaga (2023) found that low digital literacy is associated with poor emotional control online, while Prasetya (2022) observed that Indonesian netizens tend to react emotionally and reactively to viral content.

This study aims to analyze how Instagram users respond to clickbait content and how limited digital literacy influences emotional and reactive engagement patterns in digital spaces. By examining the relationship between language expression, literacy competency, and reader response, this study aims to illustrate the sociolinguistic conditions of Indonesian digital behavior in the social media era.

2. METHODS

This study applies a qualitative case study approach to examine patterns of reactive digital behavior on Instagram. According to Abdussamad (2021), qualitative research is research that focuses on interpretation.. Following the stages of case study research (Ilhami, 2024), the process includes selecting research subjects, defining methods, collecting relevant data, analyzing findings, and presenting results systematically.

Data were collected from two main sources: (1) content analysis of 50 Instagram posts from popular news/discussion accounts employing clickbait, and (2) in-depth interviews with 15 active Instagram users aged 20–35, selected through purposive sampling. Comments were categorized into three groups:

1. Reactive/emotional responses,
2. Superficial understanding,
3. Relevant and critical comments.

Interview data were thematically analyzed to uncover underlying motivations and perceptions regarding clickbait responses.

3. RESULTS

The analysis found that approximately 75% of comments on clickbait posts on Instagram were reactive, showing more emotion and tending to be irrelevant to the post's content. Many comments contained criticism, harsh judgments, or conclusions drawn without fully reading the caption. This finding aligns with research by Prasetya (2022), which states that Indonesian netizens often interact with high emotional intensity online. In other words, users tend to react more quickly than they think, more easily provoked by provocative titles or images than by understanding the true context.

From the data, four key behavioral patterns emerged that were quite interesting. First, *Thumbs-Up Culture and Speed*, where users prioritize speed in scrolling over comprehension. They often react impulsively to titles or images, as if *liking* or quickly commenting without fully reading the content. Second, *Immediate Urge to Participate*, which is the urge to comment immediately to be seen as relevant and not be left behind by trends. Many admitted feeling *pressured* to participate in discussions even though they didn't fully understand the context of the discussion. Third, *Algorithmic Influence*, where Instagram's algorithm encourages users to continuously react to viral posts that receive high engagement. This reinforces a culture of quick and shallow responses because the system itself rewards content with high levels of engagement. Fourth, *Cognitive Limitations*, which refers to the limitations in processing

lengthy information. Several participants frankly admitted that reading long captions was tiring, so they preferred to understand the content solely from visuals or the first sentence.

This phenomenon suggests that user behavior on social media is not entirely driven by curiosity or a need for information, but rather by emotional impulses and instant habits formed by the digital system itself. It also demonstrates a decline in critical thinking skills amidst a fast-paced digital culture. It was also found that the way people react on social media reflects how they process information, and unfortunately, that process often stops at the first impression.

Furthermore, the emotional volatility in user responses aligns with Sinaga's (2023) findings, which state that the longer someone uses social media, the higher their tendency to experience emotional instability. This situation is inextricably linked to the low national literacy rate. According to data from the Ministry of Communication and Information (2020) and UNESCO, Indonesia ranks low in the world literacy rankings. This low literacy rate explains why important aspects of digital literacy such as the ability to evaluate information, collaborate productively, and think critically (Dinata, 2021) often remain absent from social media user interactions.

From these findings, it can be concluded that the clickbait phenomenon on Instagram is not simply a matter of algorithms or content strategy, but also a reflection of an immature literacy culture. Quick reactions, emotional comments, and a lack of critical engagement indicate that most users are more oriented toward social participation than substantive understanding. In other words, the digital space has become an arena for spontaneous expression that emphasizes emotion over reflection.

4. DISCUSSION

The study's findings suggest that Instagram users' reactive behavior is not accidental, but rather stems from a combination of platform design and inadequate digital literacy. This aligns with Restianty's (2018) findings, which suggest that media literacy should foster critical evaluation skills, skills that, in this context, have not yet been fully implemented. This aligns with Naufal's (2021) view that digital literacy as the acquisition and interpretation of information is weakened when users react solely based on headlines.

Furthermore, Dinata's (2021) digital literacy framework reveals a gap: most users fail to practice critical thinking, collaboration, or cultural understanding. Instead, interactions are dominated by impulsive reactions. Sutrisna's (2019) notion that digital literacy fosters critical-

creative communities contradicts the polarized and emotionally charged behavior observed in this study.

The Indonesian context further complicates this issue. The low literacy culture (Kominfo, 2020; UNESCO) indicates that in-depth reading habits and critical engagement remain weak. As a result, online interactions are dominated by reactive behavior, which strengthens echo chambers and intensifies misinformation.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the lack of digital literacy on Instagram is evident in users' reactive behavior toward clickbait content, as comments are often emotional, uninformative, and lacking critical evaluation, reflecting a weak application of digital literacy skills. This finding aligns with previous research by Prasetya (2022) which showed that Indonesian netizens are emotionally reactive, and also Sinaga (2023) who stated that Indonesian netizens are emotionally unstable when using social media excessively, and is influenced by the low national literacy rate (Kominfo, 2020; UNESCO). To address this, two approaches are needed: first, digital literacy education, which strengthens the eight aspects outlined by Dinata (2021), particularly critical thinking, collaboration, and e-safety; and second, platform innovation, where social media platforms like Instagram can implement features such as content prompts or reading warnings to encourage understanding before interaction. In line with Sutrisna (2019), fostering a critical and creative society requires systemic education and a supportive digital infrastructure. Without these steps, online discourse will likely remain dominated by emotional reactivity and polarization.

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