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Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking in Adolescents: A Literature Review

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Abstrak

Remaja saat ini terpapar informasi digital secara intens melalui media sosial dan platform daring, tetapi literasi digital dan kemampuan berpikir kritis mereka masih rendah. Kajian literatur ini menelaah tantangan dan praktik terbaik dalam pengembangan literasi digital remaja. Hasil menunjukkan kesenjangan antara akses digital tinggi dan literasi kritis rendah, pengaruh media sosial terhadap perilaku remaja, serta keterbatasan bimbingan dari sekolah dan orang tua. Praktik terbaik meliputi integrasi literasi digital ke kurikulum formal, *Project-Based Learning*, *Problem-Based Learning*, pelibatan orang tua, dan program literasi digital komunitas. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya pendekatan kolaboratif dan pengalaman nyata untuk mengembangkan kemampuan evaluatif dan analitis remaja. Penelitian lanjutan disarankan untuk melakukan validasi empiris di kelas guna mengidentifikasi strategi paling efektif.

Kata Kunci: Literasi digital, Berpikir kritis, Remaja, Kolaborasi.

Abstract

Adolescents today are intensely exposed to digital information through social media and online platforms, yet their digital literacy and critical thinking skills remain limited. This literature review examines the challenges and best practices in fostering adolescents' digital literacy. The findings reveal a gap between high digital access and low critical literacy, the influence of social media on adolescent behavior, and the limited guidance provided by schools and parents. Best practices include integrating digital literacy into formal curricula, employing *Project-Based Learning* and *Problem-Based Learning* approaches, engaging parents, and implementing community-based digital literacy programs. These findings highlight the importance of collaborative approaches and experiential learning to strengthen adolescents' evaluative and analytical abilities. Further research is recommended to conduct empirical validation in classrooms to identify the most effective strategies.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Critical Thinking, Adolescents, Collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has brought significant changes to society, including among adolescents. This generation grows up in an environment saturated with the internet, social media, and digital devices that directly influence the way they interact, learn, and construct their self-identity (Tasya Fajriah, 2024). Such conditions make digital literacy skills a fundamental necessity. However, not all adolescents possess adequate ability to filter the vast flow of information. The phenomena of information overload, hoaxes, and misinformation present serious challenges that often entrap them in unhealthy patterns of information consumption (Keke et al., 2025). This highlights a clear gap between the availability of technology and adolescents' ability to manage information critically.

Furthermore, adolescents are in a vulnerable psychosocial developmental stage, where the need for social recognition and identity formation often becomes more dominant (Fadly & Islawati, 2024). Social media, which functions as both a space for expression and interaction, frequently generates negative impacts, such as tendencies toward self-comparison, the pursuit of validation through likes or comments, and engagement in risky digital behaviors (Shofiyyah et al., 2024). The lack of critical thinking skills in responding to digital content makes adolescents easily influenced by trends that are not always healthy or beneficial (Andika Drajat Murdani, Hasna Wijayati, 2025). This situation demonstrates that digital literacy is not only about technical skills in using technology but also about cognitive and critical capacities to interpret information.

On the other hand, the educational environment, ideally the primary arena for cultivating digital literacy and critical thinking skills, has not yet functioned optimally. Curricula still tend to emphasize traditional cognitive aspects without providing sufficient space to sharpen evaluative skills toward digital information (N. Aulia et al., 2025). Many educators also remain insufficiently skilled in utilizing digital media as a means for fostering critical learning (Ibrahim et al., 2025). As a result, adolescents often learn independently through social media or other online platforms that are not always verified, leading to high digital exposure but low critical literacy. This creates a significant gap between access and comprehension.

Moreover, the lack of collaboration among families, schools, and communities in building a digital literacy ecosystem exacerbates the issue (Tenri et al., 2025). Parents frequently lack the knowledge or skills to guide their children in using technology, while schools are not always able to bridge adolescents' needs for critical digital competencies. In fact, the development of digital character during adolescence is crucial in determining how they will confront challenges in today's digital era as well as in the future.

Although digital literacy and critical thinking have been widely studied separately, empirical research and literature reviews that specifically highlight the interconnection between the two in the context of adolescence remain limited. Most studies focus on technical aspects of technology use or general curriculum development, without examining how digital literacy directly influences adolescents' critical thinking in facing the challenges of the digital age.

Based on this gap, this literature review aims to identify the primary challenges that adolescents face in developing digital literacy and critical thinking skills in the digital era. In addition, it examines best practices implemented in both formal and non-formal education contexts to enhance these skills. More broadly, this study aims to offer strategic recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers on establishing a digital literacy ecosystem that promotes the development of critical thinking skills among adolescents.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a literature review approach (John W. Creswell, 2016), using thematic analysis. Data collection was conducted through systematic searches of academic articles in

online databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ. The search was performed using keywords including “digital literacy,” “critical thinking,” “adolescents,” “education,” “best practices,” as well as their Indonesian equivalents (“literasi digital remaja” and “berpikir kritis remaja”). The search was limited to publications from 2022 to 2025 to ensure the relevance and currency of the findings.

The initial search yielded 126 articles. A two-stage screening process was then conducted. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were screened to exclude articles that did not address both digital literacy and critical thinking. In the second stage, full-text screening was carried out to ensure alignment with the inclusion criteria: (1) journal articles, conference proceedings, or research reports, (2) focus on adolescents in either formal or non-formal educational contexts, and (3) discussion of the interrelation between digital literacy and critical thinking. Exclusion criteria included (a) studies focusing solely on one variable without linking it to the other, (b) studies involving populations outside the adolescent age range, and (c) publications not peer-reviewed or lacking methodological rigor.

After applying these criteria, 23 articles were retained for in-depth analysis. Each article was examined systematically, and data were coded into thematic categories such as challenges in digital literacy, barriers to the development of critical thinking, and effective best practices. To ensure the validity of findings, triangulation of sources was applied by comparing insights across multiple databases and publication types, while consistency of thematic coding was maintained through peer debriefing with two academic colleagues.

From an ethical standpoint, this study only utilized secondary data in the form of scholarly publications and therefore did not involve human subjects directly. Ethical considerations were thus primarily emphasized in terms of academic integrity, including maintaining originality, avoiding plagiarism, and providing proper citation for all referenced sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Key Challenges in Adolescents’ Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking

Adolescents today are growing up in a digital ecosystem saturated with diverse forms of information. They are exposed daily to online news from national and international portals, blog articles, or social media headlines competing for attention (Susanti, 2024). Such content may range from politics, health, and entertainment to rapidly spreading viral trends, yet not all of it is verified for accuracy. In addition, the social media content they encounter is highly diverse, Instagram or TikTok feeds filled with short videos, memes, friends’ or influencers’ opinions, as well as viral stories or threads. Much of this content is deliberately designed to trigger emotions or clicks; thus, even when the factual basis is unclear, adolescents are still compelled to watch, share, or respond.

Digital videos have also become a primary source of information, including tutorials, vlogs, live streams, and news clips from YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms. Many of these videos are entertainment-heavy but packaged as though they contain essential facts, making it difficult for adolescents who lack critical thinking skills to distinguish between entertainment and valid information (Sevila et al., 2025). Furthermore, messages from digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or online community groups often include forwarded news, opinions, or unverified rumors. These spread rapidly due to the personal and trust-based nature of such communication, leading adolescents to accept information without further scrutiny (Shofiyah & Miharja, 2025).

This phenomenon of information overload leaves adolescents overwhelmed in their ability to discern accurate and high-quality information. The prevalence of misinformation and hoaxes deliberately crafted to appear engaging and easily shareable further highlights adolescents’ limited capacity to evaluate the credibility of sources. These conditions underscore that digital literacy extends beyond technical skills in

accessing information; it entails cognitive and critical abilities to evaluate the quality, relevance, and truthfulness of digital content encountered daily.

Another critical challenge lies in the limited critical thinking skills of adolescents. Literature indicates that many adolescents show weak critical engagement when responding to digital content (Rafi et al., 2025). They tend to accept information at face value, follow trends, or trust popular opinions without questioning their validity. Their capacity to analyze, evaluate evidence, and assess the credibility of information sources remains low, largely because critical thinking instruction is not yet fully integrated into formal education. Studies emphasize that adolescents often make digital decisions based on emotions and social pressures, such as the desire for “likes” or community acceptance (Shofiyyah et al., 2024). This makes them more susceptible to viral content, hoaxes, or influencers’ opinions than to judgments grounded in logic and evidence. The lack of evaluative learning experiences, opportunities to practice systematic assessment, analysis, and evaluation of information, further limits their critical capacity (Muhammad Shaleh Mahfuzh et al., 2024). In schools, such experiences could take the form of discussions comparing multiple sources, project-based assignments requiring content analysis, debates, or case studies demanding logical reasoning.

In non-formal settings, evaluative experiences can be nurtured through parental guidance in verifying social media information, participation in digital literacy workshops, or involvement in literacy clubs and online communities emphasizing fact-checking. Unfortunately, many adolescents do not receive sufficient evaluative learning due to interconnected factors (C. Aulia & Saleh, 2024). School curricula still emphasize traditional cognitive aspects such as memorization and test-taking, with limited room to practice analytical and evaluative skills toward digital content (Nurlisda, 2025). Many educators also lack the skills or confidence to employ digital media as a tool for critical learning, which leaves adolescents relying heavily on unverified online sources (Krisdiawan & Asikin, 2025). Consequently, although adolescents have high access to technology, their analytical and evaluative skills in judging digital information remain low. In other words, greater digital exposure does not automatically translate into improved critical thinking.

Another important challenge is the influence of social media. Literature shows that social media significantly shapes adolescents’ behavior and critical thinking through various mechanisms (Asqia et al., 2025). Adolescents often experience social pressure and seek validation through “likes,” comments, or shares, frequently comparing themselves with peers showcasing achievements or lifestyles on Instagram or TikTok (Shofiyyah et al., 2024). The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) drives them to constantly check feeds to follow the latest trends, such as viral TikTok dance challenges or popular Instagram quizzes, leading to rapid content consumption without critical evaluation (Wahyu & Suhesty, 2025). Limited digital literacy also heightens the risk of negative digital behavior, such as spreading celebrity hoaxes, engaging in cyberbullying, or believing influencers’ opinions on diets or beauty products without fact-checking. These issues are exacerbated by the lack of parental and teacher guidance in evaluating digital information quality. As a result, despite high access to technology, adolescents’ development of critical thinking is hindered by their tendency to follow popular trends rather than engage in logical and analytical assessments of content.

The role of education in fostering adolescents’ digital literacy and critical thinking also remains constrained. Multiple factors contribute to this limitation (Dwiki Darmawan et al., 2025). School curricula often prioritize traditional cognitive aspects, such as memorization and task completion, without adequately training analytical, evaluative, and critical skills for digital information. Many teachers are not yet fully skilled or confident in using digital media as a critical learning tool, reducing the effectiveness of fostering adolescents’ digital literacy. Teachers often use technology only to present material or assign digital tasks passively, without encouraging students to evaluate, compare, or verify information. Furthermore, some teachers report limited familiarity with various online platforms, digital sources, or interactive teaching strategies that could strengthen students’ analytical skills. These constraints reduce the role of technology in

classrooms to procedural rather than critical functions, limiting its potential for developing adolescents' digital literacy.

In conclusion, adolescents' critical thinking capacity faces complex and interrelated challenges. They are constantly exposed to information overload, hoaxes, and emotionally charged viral content across digital platforms, yet their ability to filter, evaluate, and judge credibility remains low. This limitation is compounded by insufficient evaluative learning experiences, curricula that emphasize traditional cognition, teachers' limited confidence and skills in leveraging digital media critically, and minimal parental guidance at home. Social pressures, the search for validation, FOMO, and negative digital behaviors further inhibit critical thinking development. Consequently, although adolescents enjoy high access to technology, their analytical and evaluative capacities remain limited, affirming that the development of critical digital literacy requires integrated interventions from schools, families, and the broader social environment.

Best Practices Identified

The literature highlights several best practices for strengthening adolescents' digital literacy and critical thinking. The first is the integration of digital literacy into the formal curriculum (Ari Susandi, 2025). This approach emphasizes the importance of instilling evaluative and analytical skills from an early stage, ensuring that adolescents are not only capable of accessing technology but also able to critically assess the quality and credibility of digital content. In practice, teachers may design learning activities that encourage students to compare different information sources, conduct fact-checking, or analyze news reports and social media content in depth (Sulistya & Wahidi, 2024). For instance, students may be assigned a project to analyze online articles from various news portals to identify bias, inaccuracies, or incomplete information. Similarly, debates, case studies, and discussions based on digital content can be used to cultivate logical reasoning, argumentation, and critical reflection. By embedding digital literacy into the formal curriculum, schools provide structured opportunities for adolescents to sharpen their analytical and evaluative skills, equipping them to respond intelligently and critically to the flood of information in the digital era.

Another effective practice is the application of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Problem-Based Learning. Both approaches engage students in authentic learning situations where they are confronted with problems or projects requiring analysis, evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making (Arif Desramaza, Sufri, 2022). In PBL, students collaborate in groups to design, research, and complete specific projects, such as developing a digital literacy campaign or analyzing trends in social media information. This requires them to evaluate data validity, compare sources, and formulate logical solutions (Tenri et al., 2025). In contrast, Problem-Based Learning challenges students to resolve complex issues, such as identifying and addressing hoaxes or controversial digital topics, by analyzing facts, reviewing arguments, and proposing evidence-based solutions. These approaches foster reflective thinking, consideration of multiple perspectives, and the development of argumentation skills. As such, critical thinking becomes not merely theoretical but experiential, allowing adolescents to practice evaluating information, making sound decisions, and navigating digital challenges critically.

A further best practice is parental involvement, which plays a crucial role in enhancing adolescents' digital literacy and critical thinking. Parental guidance helps adolescents assess the quality of information encountered on social media, online platforms, or digital news. For example, parents can discuss viral content with their children, evaluate the accuracy of news items, or demonstrate how to fact-check using reliable sources. Additionally, digital literacy education at home, such as modeling healthy social media use, teaching how to recognize hoaxes, and emphasizing the importance of critical reflection before sharing information, helps to cultivate analytical habits from an early age.

Community and national-level digital literacy programs, such as anti-hoax campaigns and information verification training, also represent important practices. Anti-hoax campaigns are typically conducted through

mass media, social media, and face-to-face events to raise awareness of the dangers of misinformation and its implications for social, political, and security contexts (Putri et al., 2025). Verification training, in contrast, focuses on equipping participants with practical skills, such as authenticating sources, using fact-checking tools, identifying text or image manipulation, and distinguishing between opinion and fact. These programs are effective because they target not only individuals but also collective culture, encouraging communities to remind one another, share verification techniques, and actively counter misinformation. When implemented nationally, such programs can have a broad impact by engaging educational institutions, governments, civil society organizations, and media outlets, thus framing digital literacy not merely as an individual responsibility but as a collective movement.

In conclusion, enhancing adolescents' digital literacy and critical thinking requires an integrated approach spanning education, family, and community. Incorporating digital literacy into formal curricula creates structured opportunities for evaluation and analysis, while Project-Based and Problem-Based Learning provide authentic experiences that demand reflective and evidence-based reasoning. Meanwhile, parental involvement reinforces critical habits in everyday life, complementing the role of schools. At the community and national levels, initiatives such as anti-hoax campaigns and verification training foster collective awareness and cultivate a culture of critical engagement. Together, these best practices position digital literacy not only as a technical skill but also as a foundational competency for building a generation of young people capable of thinking critically, reflectively, and wisely amid the increasingly complex digital information landscape.

Patterns or General Trends in the Literature

A consistent pattern in the literature on digital literacy is the gap between high access to technology and low levels of critical literacy (Rany et al., 2025). This phenomenon demonstrates that ease of access to information does not automatically correspond to the ability to select, comprehend, and process that information. Consequently, there is a growing need to integrate both formal and non-formal education to build more comprehensive digital literacy. Formal schooling must be reinforced with non-formal activities such as community training, family-based programs, and public campaigns.

Moreover, collaboration in digital literacy is achieved through the synergy between schools, parents, and communities to ensure a more holistic and sustainable educational process. Schools serve as the formal learning center by providing theoretical knowledge and practical guidance on the healthy use of technology. Parents contribute from home through guidance, supervision, and the habituation of responsible device use in everyday life. Meanwhile, communities play a role through community-based programs, anti-hoax campaigns, and digital skills training accessible to diverse groups.

Through this collaborative approach, digital literacy is no longer seen solely as the responsibility of educational institutions but evolves into a shared cultural practice embedded within both family and social environments.

The literature indicates that adolescents' digital literacy and critical thinking skills remain relatively low despite their high digital exposure. This can be interpreted as the result of several interrelated factors. First, school curricula still emphasize traditional cognitive aspects, limiting evaluative and analytical learning experiences. Consequently, adolescents are rarely trained to systematically assess, compare, and verify digital information. This aligns with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller), which asserts that limited cognitive capacity makes adolescents more vulnerable to being overwhelmed when faced with abundant information without proper guidance (Surbakti et al., 2024). Second, teachers' limited skills and confidence in leveraging technology as a medium for critical learning hinder the full potential of digital media in enhancing adolescents' digital literacy. Third, parental guidance at home is often limited due to a lack of knowledge or digital literacy skills, leaving adolescents to learn independently through social media or online platforms that

are not always reliable. These combined factors create a significant gap between high digital access and low critical thinking ability.

In addition, the influence of social media on adolescent behavior can be interpreted as a form of social pressure and a strong need for self-validation. Likes, comments, and viral trends create an emotional feedback loop that encourages rapid content consumption without critical evaluation. This phenomenon can be explained through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger), which emphasizes that individuals tend to evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others (Firdaus et al., 2024). These conditions underscore that digital literacy is not merely a technical skill but also a cognitive and evaluative competence that must be cultivated through structured learning experiences and multi-stakeholder guidance.

Best Practices such as integrating digital literacy into the formal curriculum, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), parental involvement, and community digital literacy programs are found to be effective because they create opportunities for adolescents to directly experience, evaluate, and analyze information. Project- and problem-based approaches place adolescents in authentic situations requiring critical judgment, consistent with Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb), which highlights the role of real-life experience and reflection in developing competencies (Rahmi, 2024). Meanwhile, parental and community support reinforces evaluative habits beyond the classroom, fostering holistic collaborative learning. In other words, the effectiveness of these practices suggests that digital literacy and critical thinking develop optimally when interventions are collaborative, continuous, and experience-based.

Implications for Formal Education emerge from these findings. First, schools must revisit curricula to systematically integrate digital literacy and critical thinking. Teachers need to be trained to use technology not merely as a presentation tool but as a medium for evaluative learning that encourages students to assess, compare, and verify digital information. Second, parents play a crucial role in guiding adolescents to critically evaluate online information and to cultivate reflective habits from an early age. Direct parental engagement through guidance, discussion of viral content, and home-based digital literacy education strengthens critical thinking skills that cannot be fully developed at school alone.

At the policy level, these findings emphasize the need for collaboration among schools, governments, and communities to build a sustainable digital literacy ecosystem. Initiatives such as anti-hoax campaigns, information verification training, and community-based digital literacy clubs can extend the positive impact beyond classrooms, making digital literacy not only an individual or institutional responsibility but also a collective cultural practice.

In short, the implications highlight that the development of adolescents' critical digital literacy cannot be achieved through partial interventions. Effective efforts require collaborative, sustainable, and experience-based approaches to enable adolescents to navigate the flood of digital information with stronger analytical, evaluative, and critical capacities.

Limitations of the Literature must also be acknowledged. Most studies reviewed emphasize technical aspects of technology use, such as operating social media or digital devices, without sufficiently exploring how digital literacy directly shapes adolescents' critical thinking abilities. Many rely on relatively small samples or focus on specific schools or regions, limiting generalizability to broader adolescent populations. Moreover, empirical data directly linking levels of digital literacy to adolescents' analytical and evaluative skills remain scarce, making causal relationships difficult to establish.

Another limitation is that most research fails to consider the collaborative context among schools, parents, and communities in digital literacy development. As a result, many recommendations remain partial or insufficiently operational, limiting their practical implementation. Collectively, these limitations highlight the need for further research employing larger samples, stronger empirical data, and integrative approaches to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital literacy and critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Adolescents demonstrate high levels of digital access but continue to show low critical literacy, highlighting a gap between technology use and evaluative skills. This review underscores the need for collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities to strengthen digital literacy. Experiential approaches such as Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, and community literacy programs emerge as effective practices in enhancing analytical and evaluative abilities. Future research should empirically validate these strategies in classroom settings to identify the most impactful models for fostering critical thinking alongside digital literacy.

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