

Generation Z and Hoaxes: The Challenges of Media Education in the Digital Native Era

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges of media education in addressing the spread of hoaxes among Generation Z, who are digital natives living in the digital era. Although Generation Z has extensive access to technology and social media, their levels of digital literacy vary significantly, particularly in information verification and digital ethics. Their susceptibility to hoaxes is influenced by the intensity of social media use, limited critical thinking skills, and the insufficient integration of media literacy into formal education. Using a literature review method, this study analyzes the characteristics of Generation Z, the factors contributing to their vulnerability to hoaxes, and effective strategies for strengthening media literacy. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive, collaborative, and adaptive media literacy education that aligns with technological developments and the specific characteristics of Generation Z, enabling them to become smart, critical, and responsible digital citizens. This study contributes to the understanding of how media education can be optimized to enhance Generation Z's resilience against misinformation, offering a conceptual framework for developing more effective and contextually relevant media literacy programs.

Keywords: *Generation Z, Hoaxes, Digital Literacy, Media Education, Digital Natives*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received

August 19, 2025

Revised

October 26, 2025

Accepted

November 02,
2025

. Journal Homepage

<https://attractivejournal.com/index.php/aj/>

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Published by

CV. Creative Tugu Pena

PENDAHULUAN

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is known as the first generation to fully grow and develop in the digital era. They are also called digital natives because they have been familiar with digital devices, the internet, and social media from an early age, making technology an integral part of their daily lives. The presence of technology since childhood has shaped Generation Z's character, mindset, and way of interacting with the world around them (Malafitri, 2024). As digital natives, Generation Z is accustomed to using various devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops to

communicate, study, work, and seek entertainment. The abundant availability of information and instant access makes them highly adaptive to technological changes and quickly mastering new applications or platforms. However, this ease of access also brings its own challenges, especially in sorting and verifying the accuracy of the information received (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the social and cultural landscape among Generation Z. They are not only consumers of information but also content producers across various digital platforms. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become primary platforms for Gen Z to express themselves, build their identities, and form global social networks. However, intense online interaction also makes them vulnerable to various negative influences, one of which is the spread of hoaxes (Bahri, 2024).

Hoaxes, or fake news, are becoming increasingly prevalent in the digital age. Unverified information can easily spread widely through social media and instant messaging apps. Generation Z, highly active online, often becomes both the target and unwitting spreader of hoaxes (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). This is due to low digital literacy and a lack of critical skills in sorting out valid information. The main challenge facing Generation Z is distinguishing between true information and hoaxes amidst the overwhelming flow of data. Many of them feel confident in using technology, but lack the ability to analyze and verify the truth of information. This situation is exacerbated by social media algorithms that tend to reinforce bias and expand the reach of sensational content, including hoaxes (Shin et al., 2022).

The impact of the spread of hoaxes among Generation Z is not limited to misinformation, but can also trigger social conflict, polarization, and even threats to public security and health. Cases of the spread of hoaxes related to health, politics, and social issues have demonstrated the significant influence of false information on public behavior and opinion, particularly among the younger generation. Therefore, it is important to understand how Generation Z is facing this challenge (Arifin, 2024).

Media education is a strategic solution for equipping Generation Z to navigate the flow of information in the digital age. Media education not only teaches technical skills in using digital devices but also instills critical thinking, content analysis, and fact-checking skills. However, the implementation of media education in Indonesia still faces various obstacles, ranging from an unintegrated curriculum to a lack of training for educators (Salsabila, 2024).

Strong digital literacy is essential for Generation Z to become more than passive technology users, but also to become intelligent and responsible digital citizens. Digital literacy encompasses the ability to search for, evaluate, and use information wisely, as well as an understanding of the ethics and social impacts of digital media use. Without adequate digital literacy, Generation Z will be increasingly vulnerable to information manipulation and the spread of hoaxes (Nurbayti, 2025). In addition to literacy challenges, Generation Z also faces mental health issues due to exposure to negative content and social pressures

on digital media. Technology addiction, cyberbullying, and the pressure to appear perfect on social media are common problems experienced by Gen Z. This suggests that media education must encompass psychological and social aspects, not just technical ones (Firamadhina & Krisnani, 2023).

The importance of media education in the digital native era is increasingly pressing given the continued rise in internet user data in Indonesia. Recent research indicates that internet users in Indonesia have reached over 200 million, with the majority being from the younger age group, including Generation Z. This high internet penetration increases both the opportunities and risks associated with the spread of hoaxes among the younger generation (Amanda et al., 2024).

This research stems from the urgency to understand the challenges faced by Generation Z in dealing with hoaxes and how media education can be an effective solution. Using a literature review method, this study will identify the characteristics of Generation Z as digital natives, analyze the factors that contribute to their vulnerability to hoaxes, and explore relevant and adaptive media education strategies in the digital age.

It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the development of media education policies that are more responsive to the needs of Generation Z. In addition, this study is also expected to be a reference for educators, parents, and other stakeholders in building a young generation that is intelligent, critical, and resilient in facing the challenges of information in the digital native era.

METHODS

This study uses a literature review method with a qualitative approach, namely collecting, reviewing, and analyzing various literature sources such as scientific journals, books, articles, and research reports relevant to the topic of Generation Z, hoaxes, and media education in the digital native era. The analysis was conducted thematically to identify patterns, challenges, and strategies for media education in equipping Generation Z to face the spread of hoaxes, so that a comprehensive picture of the issue under study is obtained based on findings from various trusted sources (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025); (Torraco, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generation Z's Digital Literacy Level

The digital literacy level of Generation Z in Indonesia exhibits quite complex dynamics, with variations between moderate and low categories across regions and measured aspects. A 2022 survey by the Katadata Insight Center (KIC) in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo) found that the national digital literacy index for Generation Z was in the moderate category, at 57.5%. However, data from several regions, such as Denpasar City, showed a digital literacy index of only 34.4%, which is considered low (Aveny et al., 2023).

The four main aspects measured in Generation Z's digital literacy include digital skills, digital ethics, digital security, and digital culture. Of these four aspects, digital skills scored the highest with an index of 46.8%, while digital ethics scored the lowest with a score of 34.4%. This indicates that although Generation Z is quite adept at using digital devices and accessing information, they still lack ethical skills, such as understanding the consequences of online behavior (Ismayani et al., 2021). The ability to comprehend digital information also presents a challenge. Many Generation Z are accustomed to consuming short content such as short videos, memes, and infographics, resulting in a decline in reading interest and the ability to comprehend long texts. As a result, analytical and critical thinking skills in filtering digital information are less than optimal (Febria, 2023).

Research in Denpasar City reinforces these findings, where the highest score for understanding digital information was only 46.8% (moderate category), while the ability to access and select information was at 35% and 32.3% (low category), respectively. The ability to analyze information also remains low, with a score of 33.3%, despite indications of developing critical thinking skills among students. Another challenge facing Generation Z is low interest in reading, especially print media. This generation is more interested in visual and digital learning, such as e-books, online libraries, and social media. Innovation in digital literacy is urgently needed to make the learning process and information search more engaging and relevant for them (Lina, 2024).

Despite this, approximately 60% of Gen Z in Indonesia are already included in the group with a high digital literacy index according to the 2021 KIC survey. This figure is higher than previous generations, such as Millennials (54%), Gen X (39%), and Baby Boomers (28%). This indicates that early exposure to digital technology provides a distinct advantage for Generation Z in accessing and using technology (Leaning, 2020). However, high digital access and skills have not been fully matched by the ability to verify information and ethical awareness in social media. Many Generation Z are unable to distinguish between true information and hoaxes, and lack an understanding of the ethical impact of their online behavior. This is a major concern in the development of comprehensive digital literacy (Kurniawan, 2024).

The digital literacy education received by Generation Z has not been fully effective in equipping them to face the challenges of the digital era. Many aspects still need improvement, such as critical thinking skills, content analysis, and self-protection from cyber threats. Ideally, digital literacy education should not only focus on technical aspects but also instill ethical values and digital culture (Saputra et al., 2024); (Cahyono & Aslan, 2025).

The digital paradox phenomenon also occurs among Generation Z. Despite being highly digitally connected, their literacy skills are actually declining, especially when it comes to reading and understanding long texts. As a result, Generation Z often struggles to construct arguments, analyze complex information, and distinguish fact from opinion. Low digital literacy is not only an individual problem, but also a social challenge that can impact society's

resilience to hoaxes and disinformation (Kurniawan, 2024). Therefore, collaboration between the government, educators, parents, and communities is essential to strengthening a culture of digital literacy among Generation Z.

Efforts to improve digital literacy can be implemented through various innovations, such as digital literacy campaigns, educational app development, literacy competitions, and the formation of digital literacy communities. With the right strategies, Generation Z is expected to become intelligent, critical, and responsible digital citizens in facing the challenges of the information age.

Factors Causing Vulnerability to Hoaxes

Generation Z's vulnerability to hoaxes is influenced by various interrelated factors, including psychological, social, and technological ones. One key factor is their extremely high level of social media usage. Generation Z is known as heavy social media users, averaging 4-6 hours per day, with some even spending more than 7 hours a day. While social media is a primary source of information, it also serves as a fertile ground for the spread of hoaxes due to its instantaneous and viral nature. Furthermore, a lack of information verification skills is a significant contributing factor (Guess et al., 2019). Many members of Generation Z share news without verifying its veracity. Studies in Southeast Asia show that 28% of Generation Z share news without verifying its accuracy, a significantly higher rate than other generations. This is exacerbated by their high level of confidence in their digital literacy skills, despite the fact that many still struggle to distinguish between genuine news and hoaxes (Susilo et al., 2020).

Lack of digital and media literacy also plays a significant role. Despite growing up in the digital age, Generation Z still lacks adequate digital literacy skills, particularly in critical analysis and evaluation of information sources. Many simply read news headlines without delving into the content and verifying the facts, making them susceptible to misleading information. Psychological factors such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) contribute to the consumption and spread of hoaxes (Simamora, 2024). The fear of missing out on important information makes them prone to quickly sharing news without careful consideration. FoMO also reinforces the need to stay connected and active in online conversations, often neglecting verification (Mulyana et al., 2017).

Emotional aspects and social identity also influence Generation Z's behavior in disseminating information. The urge to participate in online discussions, demonstrate concern for a particular issue, or support a group identity often leads them to share information without first verifying its veracity. This is further reinforced by a relativistic view of truth, where truth is considered subjective and subject to interpretation based on one's perspective (Sari, 2024).

The influence of public figures and idols is another significant factor. Generation Z tends to accept information from figures they idolize without adequate verification. If a hoax is spread by a public figure, they are more likely

to believe it and participate in spreading it. Gaps in digital literacy education in schools also exacerbate this vulnerability (Pratama, 2022). Many educational institutions have not yet comprehensively integrated digital literacy into their curriculum, so Generation Z does not receive sufficient training to identify and counter hoaxes. Easy access to modern technology and communication tools facilitates the massive spread of false information. With low costs and widespread access, anyone can become a producer or consumer of information without adequate filters. A lack of interest in reading is also a major factor. Generation Z prefers visual and concise content, so they tend to neglect the critical reading process that is essential for identifying hoaxes (Rahmawati et al., 2023). As a result, analytical skills and skepticism towards digital information decline.

Social and cultural influences, such as peer pressure and online community norms, also encourage the behavior of sharing information without verification. In some cases, the spread of hoaxes is even seen as a form of group solidarity or a way to strengthen community identity. Religious sentiment and sensitive issues are often exploited in the spread of hoaxes to trigger emotions and reinforce polarization. Generation Z, who grew up in a society with strong religious sentiment, tends to be more easily provoked by hoaxes containing religious or hateful content (Kusumalestari et al., 2021).

Finally, the lack of social control mechanisms in the digital world makes it difficult to contain the spread of hoaxes. Anonymity and freedom of expression on social media allow hoax spreaders to operate without clear social sanctions, making Generation Z, as active users, a highly vulnerable group to exposure and involvement in the spread of hoaxes (Putri, 2024).

Thus, Generation Z, as digital natives, has advanced technological access and skills, but still faces significant challenges in distinguishing between valid information and hoaxes in the digital age. Their digital literacy levels tend to vary, with relatively good technical skills but still weak in aspects of critical analysis, digital ethics, and information verification. Vulnerability to hoaxes is influenced by the intensity of social media use, lack of verification skills, low interest in reading, the influence of the social environment, and the lack of integrated digital literacy education. The spread of hoaxes among Generation Z not only impacts the quality of information consumed, but also social behavior and the formation of public opinion.

Therefore, adaptive, collaborative, and comprehensive media education is essential to building Generation Z's resilience against hoaxes. Integrating digital literacy into the curriculum, strengthening critical thinking skills, and collaborating with the government, educational institutions, and the community are key to addressing this challenge. With targeted and sustained efforts, Generation Z is expected to become intelligent, critical, and responsible digital citizens in navigating the flow of information in the digital native era.

Challenges of Media Education

The challenges of media education in the digital era for Generation Z are complex and multidimensional. One major challenge is their low critical thinking skills in evaluating digital information. Although Generation Z is very familiar with technology, they often struggle to distinguish between valid information and hoaxes, especially due to the rapid and diverse flow of information on social media. Exposure to algorithmic bias is also a serious challenge (Fauzan Abdillah & Guruh Marhaenis Handoko Putro, 2022). Social media algorithms tend to display content that aligns with user preferences, narrowing their perspectives and strengthening echo chambers. This makes Generation Z more susceptible to information polarization and less exposed to diverse viewpoints (Tandoc et al., 2018).

A lack of ethical awareness in the use of digital media exacerbates the situation. Many of them don't yet understand the importance of privacy, the ethics of sharing information, and the impact of the spread of hoaxes on society. This lack of understanding makes Generation Z more vulnerable to becoming both spreaders and victims of misinformation. Disparities in access to technology and infrastructure remain a real obstacle, especially in areas without adequate internet access or digital devices (Livingstone & Third, 2017). This means that not all members of Generation Z have equal access to media education, widening the digital literacy gap between the wealthy and the less fortunate.

The lack of integration of digital literacy into formal education curricula is also a major challenge. Many schools have not yet taught comprehensive media literacy skills, including technical, critical, and ethical aspects. As a result, media education is often partial and unsustainable. The lack of training and capacity building for educators also hampers the effectiveness of media education. Many teachers and educational staff lack the knowledge and skills to effectively teach digital literacy to students (Arribathi & Nawawi, 2024). High levels of social pressure and digital culture also influence Generation Z's behavior in consuming and disseminating information. Online community norms, the pressure to stay up-to-date, and the tendency to follow trends without verification often lead them to disregard the validity of information (Setiawan, 2022).

The lack of collaboration between the government, educational institutions, and the private sector in educating the public about media literacy is also a barrier. Efforts to improve digital literacy are still being carried out independently and are not optimally coordinated, even though this challenge requires cross-sector synergy. Vulnerability to content containing religious, political, and sensitive issues is a particular challenge. Information packaged with religious narratives or sensitive issues is often more easily accepted and spread without verification, so Generation Z needs to be equipped with special skills to identify and counter such hoaxes (Maryani & Wulandari, 2025).

Finally, the lack of innovative and adaptive educational programs makes media education feel monotonous and less relevant to the needs and

characteristics of Generation Z. An interactive, experience-based learning approach that utilizes the latest technology is needed so that media education is truly effective in building Generation Z's resilience against hoaxes and disinformation.

Media Literacy Strengthening Strategy

Strategies to strengthen media literacy for Generation Z must be designed innovatively, collaboratively, and adaptively to their digital native characteristics. One effective approach is to integrate media literacy into formal and informal educational curricula from an early age, involving families, schools, and communities as a mutually supportive learning ecosystem. Media literacy cannot simply be taught as theory; it must be applied through hands-on practice and critical discussions of current issues in digital media (Malafitri, 2024).

Peer-based learning has been shown to be more effective in developing positive digital behaviors among Generation Z. Research shows that peer-to-peer approaches are 40% more effective than conventional methods, as Gen Zers rely more on their peers to receive information and develop healthy media habits. This approach can be implemented through mentoring programs, group discussions, and digital literacy communities in schools and universities (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Gamification and the use of interactive learning apps are highly relevant strategies for increasing Generation Z engagement in media literacy education. The use of game elements, challenges, and rewards can motivate Gen Z to actively learn to sort information and verify the veracity of news they encounter on social media. Digital platforms that present educational content in a visual, creative, and interactive manner are also highly effective in capturing their attention (Bahri, 2024).

Capacity building for educators and media literacy facilitators is crucial to ensure program effectiveness. Many teachers and educators still lack confidence in teaching digital literacy, necessitating ongoing training encompassing technology, cognitive psychology, and an understanding of how misinformation and disinformation operate. This training should also equip educators with learning methods that are adaptive to the needs of Gen Z (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). Collaboration between the government, educational institutions, social media platforms, and communities is key to building media literacy resilience. The government can organize public awareness campaigns and provide supportive regulations, while social media platforms must actively monitor and verify uploaded content and provide easily accessible fact-checking features (Shin et al., 2022).

The use of social media as an educational tool is also very effective, considering that the majority of Gen Z spends time on digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Educational content that is presented visually, concisely, and relevant to current issues can strengthen their understanding of the dangers of hoaxes and the importance of verifying

information before sharing it publicly (Arifin, 2024). Community-based digital literacy campaigns can expand the reach of education and build a critical culture among Gen Z. Social movements such as the Digital Literacy Care Community (MALIDI) utilize social media to disseminate news clarification (debunking) content and educate about hoaxes on a massive scale, involving fact-checkers in every published content. This strategy has proven effective in raising awareness of fake news (Salsabila, 2024).

The implementation of supporting technologies such as fact-checking apps and information filters can help Gen Z verify news quickly and efficiently. Developing user-friendly educational apps integrated with social media platforms will make it easier for them to access valid information and avoid hoaxes. Information literacy education should also emphasize the importance of diverse sources and critical analysis skills. Gen Z needs to be equipped with the skills to identify trustworthy sources, recognize bias, and understand the potential for information manipulation. Critical thinking exercises and cross-perspective discussions can strengthen their resilience against polarization and algorithmic filter bubbles (Nurbayti, 2025).

Empowering Gen Z as agents of change is crucial in a media literacy strengthening strategy. With strong digital literacy, they can be pioneers in breaking the chain of hoax spread in their communities, both on campus and in the wider community (Firamadhina & Krisnani, 2023). Digital leadership training programs and media literacy advocacy can strengthen this role. The involvement of influencers and public figures relevant to Gen Z's world can strengthen media literacy messages. Influencers with significant credibility and influence on social media can serve as role models in disseminating responsible and critical media practices (Amanda et al., 2024).

Finally, ongoing evaluation and development of media literacy programs are essential to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of implemented strategies. Regular monitoring, impact surveys, and adjustments to learning methods in line with technological developments and social media trends should be an integral part of efforts to strengthen media literacy for Generation Z.

CONCLUSION

As digital natives, Generation Z has extensive access to and advanced skills in digital technology, but this is not yet accompanied by adequate media literacy skills. They still face significant challenges in distinguishing between valid and false information, primarily due to the rapid flow of information on social media, poor verification skills, and the minimal integration of digital literacy education into formal and non-formal educational settings.

Generation Z's vulnerability to hoaxes is influenced by various factors, ranging from the intensity of social media use, peer pressure, to the lack of habituation of critical and ethical thinking in media. The challenges of media education are increasingly complex with the presence of algorithmic bias, gaps in technology access, and the lack of innovation in digital literacy learning

methods relevant to the characteristics of Gen Z. To address these challenges, a comprehensive, collaborative, and adaptive media literacy strengthening strategy is needed. Integration of media literacy in the curriculum, educator training, technology utilization, and community and influencer involvement are crucial to building Generation Z's resilience to hoaxes. With targeted efforts, Generation Z can become intelligent, critical, and responsible digital citizens in the digital native era.

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