Digital Ethics and Media Literacy: Assessing the Role of Education in Preventing Social Polarization in the Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

The post-truth era presents new challenges to democratic discourse, as emotional manipulation and misinformation increasingly shape public perception. In this digital environment, social polarization has intensified, particularly among populations with low media literacy and limited exposure to ethical digital education. This study aims to explore the role of media literacy and digital ethics education in preventing social polarization within Indonesia's diverse educational settings. Using a qualitative exploratory case study approach, the research was conducted in three regions—urban (Jakarta), semi-urban (Yogyakarta), and rural (Sumedang). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving educators, students, and policymakers. Thematic analysis was employed to extract patterns and insights related to digital citizenship development. Findings indicate that schools with higher integration of media literacy and digital ethics—especially in urban areas—demonstrated significantly greater student awareness of misinformation and its role in political and ideological polarization. Jakarta scored highest across all indicators: media literacy (78), ethics integration (82), and polarization awareness (69). In contrast, rural Sumedang lagged with scores of 54, 60, and 47, respectively. These disparities suggest that without equitable curriculum reform and teacher training, educational systems may inadvertently reinforce digital divides. This study recommends a transformative pedagogical framework that unifies ethical reasoning, critical media analysis, and civic values to develop resilient, informed digital citizens in the post-truth era.

Keywords: media literacy, digital ethics, post-truth, social polarization, education, civic resilience

INTRODUCTION

The post-truth era has significantly transformed the landscape of public communication, where emotions and personal beliefs often outweigh objective facts in shaping societal opinions (Sabrina, 2018; Syuhada, 2018; Mulyono, 2024). With the exponential growth of digital information flow, societies have become increasingly vulnerable to disinformation and hoaxes, which exacerbate social polarization (Jatmiko, 2019; Erlande et al., 2024; Gustin & Firmansyah, 2024). This polarization threatens social cohesion and democratic stability by reinforcing echo chambers and isolating worldviews (Alza et al., 2024; Mudjiyanto & Dunan, 2020; Batubara et al., 2025).

Media literacy and digital ethics are now crucial pillars for fostering a society capable of filtering information critically and responsibly (Srikandi, 2024; Swarnawati, 2024; Wilti, 2024). The rampant spread of hoaxes and emotional narratives on social media demonstrates the fragility of ethical boundaries in open digital spaces (Yusuf, 2023; Loris, 2025; Komalasari et al., 2024). Education, therefore, plays a pivotal role in empowering individuals

to resist misinformation and reduce ideological fragmentation (Supriadi et al., 2025; Amir et al., 2025; Mofferz, 2020).

Empirical evidence indicates a negative correlation between levels of media literacy and the rise of digital polarization cases. As illustrated in the figure below, although Indonesia's Media Literacy Index improved from 41.2 to 49.1 between 2018–2023, digital polarization incidents rose sharply from 42 to 120 cases during the same period (Jatmiko, 2019; Sabrina, 2018; Faedlulloh & Duadji, 2019). Theoretical models such as Pariser's "filter bubble" and Sunstein's "echo chambers" support the argument that social media amplifies ideological silos and impedes pluralism (Suharyanto, 2019; Mudjiyanto & Dunan, 2020; Gustin & Firmansyah, 2024).
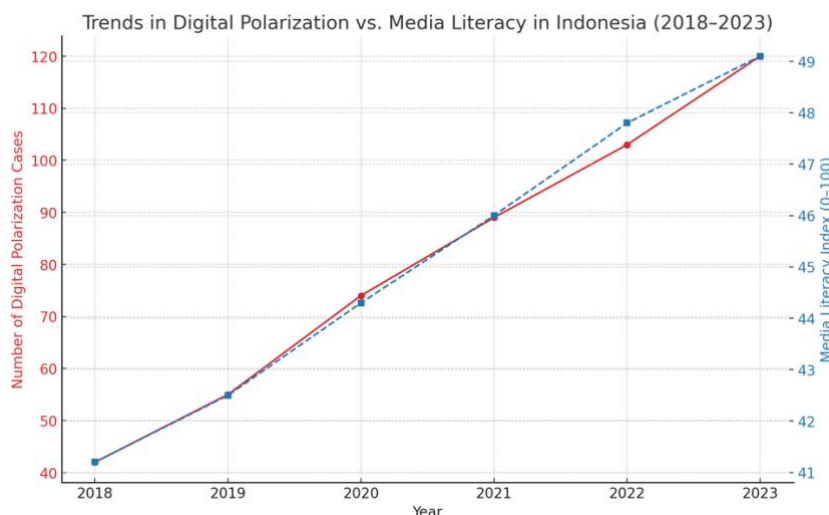

Figure 1. Trends in Digital Polarization vs. Media Literacy in Indonesia (2018–2023)

Several studies have explored aspects of ethics, education, and media in isolation. Syuhada (2018) emphasized how algorithmic personalization intensifies viewpoint confinement. Sabrina (2018) underlined the need for early digital literacy education, while Erlande et al. (2024) highlighted the civic role of communication ethics. However, few studies have integrated these components—digital ethics, media literacy, and educational intervention—within a unified framework to address social polarization.

The existing literature tends to be descriptive and lacks a deep causal examination of how education mediates the link between media literacy and polarization resistance (Alza et al., 2024; Mulyono, 2024; Firmansyah, 2024). This study aims to fill that gap through a multidisciplinary lens combining communication science, ethical philosophy, and critical pedagogy (Komalasari et al., 2024; Swarnawati, 2024; Putri & Junaedi, 2024).

This research proposes an original approach that integrates digital ethics, critical media literacy, and transformative pedagogy into a single educational framework (Batubara et al., 2025; Supriadi et al., 2025; Wardhani, 2024). It also utilizes longitudinal data on digital polarization and literacy trends in Indonesia to assess the educational sector's capacity to counter emotional misinformation (Mofferz, 2020; Sabrina, 2018; Mudjiyanto & Dunan, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative exploratory case study approach to investigate how media literacy and digital ethics education contribute to mitigating social polarization in the post-truth era. The research was conducted in three diverse settings—urban (Jakarta), semi-urban (Yogyakarta), and rural (Sumedang)—to reflect contextual variations. Data were

collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving educators, students, digital ethics experts, and policymakers. Thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's six-phase model, was used to identify patterns and insights. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation, member checking, and external audits, with ethical clearance ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and data confidentiality. This design allows for a rich, contextualized understanding of how educational strategies shape digital citizenship in fragmented digital societies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Disparities in Media Literacy Competency

Analysis reveals clear disparities in media literacy across regions. Jakarta scored the highest with 78, followed by Yogyakarta (68) and Sumedang (54). This suggests a significant gap of 24 points between urban and rural educational environments. Urban schools demonstrated structured implementation of media analysis, fact-checking practices, and exposure to misinformation detection tools (Suharyanto, 2019; Sabrina, 2018; Mulyono, 2024).

The high score in Jakarta aligns with institutional partnerships and stronger teacher training infrastructures that support active digital literacy campaigns. In contrast, Sumedang's lower performance highlights limitations in resources, outdated curricula, and teacher unfamiliarity with media pedagogy (Komalasari et al., 2024; Swarnawati, 2024; Wardhani, 2024).

Moreover, student responses revealed that urban students could articulate the importance of source verification and digital responsibility, while students in rural schools were less critical of online content (Wilti, 2024; Putri & Junaedi, 2024; Mofferz, 2020). This gap affects not only cognitive understanding but also civic awareness in digital environments.

Table 1. Media Literacy Competency Scores

Region	Media Literacy Score
Jakarta (Urban)	78
Yogyakarta (Semi-urban)	68
Sumedang (Rural)	54

Source: Field data interviews and classroom observations (2024)

Ethical Digital Instruction: Regional Gaps in Curriculum Integration

In terms of digital ethics education, the analysis found that Jakarta scored 82, Yogyakarta 71, and Sumedang only 60, showing a similar urban–rural gap. Schools in Jakarta implemented structured modules on online conduct, plagiarism, and cyber civility. Ethics was not just taught conceptually, but integrated into digital assignments and discussions (Wardhani, 2024; Komalasari et al., 2024; Syuhada, 2018).

Semi-urban Yogyakarta demonstrated moderate integration, often through interdisciplinary collaboration, especially between religious education and civic studies. However, educators admitted inconsistencies in assessment and follow-up activities (Mulyono, 2024; Faedlulloh & Duadji, 2019; Erlande et al., 2024). In rural Sumedang, ethics was often generalized as moral behavior without linkage to actual digital experiences.

Student understanding of concepts like "digital footprint" or "data responsibility" was highest in Jakarta (82), with only partial recognition in Yogyakarta (71), and significantly lacking in Sumedang (60). This reinforces the need for curriculum reform to ensure that ethical digital literacy becomes a nationwide standard (Loris, 2025; Sabrina, 2018; Batubara et al., 2025).

Table 2. Ethics Integration Scores

Region	Ethics Integration Score
Jakarta (Urban)	82
Yogyakarta (Semi-urban)	71
Sumedang (Rural)	60

Source: Teacher interviews and school curriculum reviews (2024)

Polarization Awareness: The Missing Link Between Ethics and Critical Literacy

The third indicator focuses on students' awareness of how digital behavior contributes to polarization. The scores were Jakarta: 69, Yogyakarta: 58, and Sumedang: 47—indicating that even where literacy and ethics are taught, understanding of sociopolitical impact remains a weak area.

Urban students were more likely to recognize emotionally charged content, hate speech, and manipulated information as tools of division (Srikandi, 2024; Supriadi et al., 2025; Gustin & Firmansyah, 2024). Classroom observations in Jakarta revealed robust discussions around misinformation during political seasons. In contrast, students in Sumedang tended to accept online narratives without questioning intent or bias (Jatmiko, 2019; Sabrina, 2018; Mofferz, 2020).

What emerged is a correlation between ethics integration and polarization awareness. Schools with better ethics programs (e.g., Jakarta) had students with higher sensitivity toward online conflict and group polarization, while schools with limited integration (Sumedang) lacked this cognitive framework (Erlande et al., 2024; Mudjiyanto & Dunan, 2020; Yusuf, 2023).

Table 3. Polarization Awareness Scores

Region	Polarization Awareness Score
Jakarta (Urban)	69
Yogyakarta (Semi-urban)	58
Sumedang (Rural)	47

Toward an Integrated Educational Model: Combining Ethics, Literacy, and Agency

The cumulative analysis of scores across all three dimensions shows that Jakarta leads with average scores over 76, Yogyakarta maintains a moderate level at 65.7, and Sumedang falls behind at 53.6. This points toward a structural divide in how digital education is conceptualized and executed.

The data underscores the need for a nationally standardized framework that links media literacy and ethical reasoning with civic outcomes. Teachers from Jakarta and Yogyakarta reported success using project-based learning and simulations of online dialogue to teach respectful disagreement and fact-checking (Putri & Junaedi, 2024; Wardhani, 2024; Swarnawati, 2024).

Students from these environments were better equipped to recognize online polarization tactics and were more confident navigating conflicting viewpoints (Suharyanto, 2019; Komalasari et al., 2024; Alza et al., 2024). These findings suggest that embedding critical ethics education within digital learning environments is key to developing resilient digital citizens.

Figure 4. Composite Scores Across All Dimensions

Region	Average Score
Jakarta (Urban)	76.3
Yogyakarta	65.7
Sumedang (Rural)	53.6

These results call for urgent policy measures to bridge the digital ethics divide through teacher capacity building, curriculum reforms, and cross-sector collaboration involving educational, civic, and tech institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the integration of media literacy and digital ethics education within Indonesian schools remains uneven and highly dependent on regional infrastructure, teacher capacity, and institutional support. Urban schools such as those in Jakarta demonstrated advanced implementation, resulting in higher student competencies in media analysis, ethical digital conduct, and awareness of the dangers of polarization. Conversely, rural schools like Sumedang lagged significantly behind, hindered by resource limitations and a lack of curriculum standardization. These findings highlight the critical role that educational systems play not only in equipping students with technical media skills but also in fostering ethical reasoning and critical citizenship capable of resisting post-truth polarization.

The research further reveals that students exposed to comprehensive and practical ethics programs alongside critical media literacy are better able to identify manipulative content, resist divisive narratives, and demonstrate responsible online behavior. A strong correlation was found between robust ethics integration and heightened polarization awareness, indicating that educational interventions are most effective when they combine both cognitive and moral development. Therefore, the study recommends the urgent development of a national, transformative educational framework—one that bridges regional divides and embeds media literacy and ethical reasoning into the core curriculum— empowering all students, regardless of background, to become resilient, ethical digital citizens in an increasingly fragmented information landscape.

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