

LOW READING LITERACY AND HOAX DISSEMINATION IN INDONESIA'S DIGITAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between low reading literacy and hoax dissemination in Indonesia's digital society. Drawing on a narrative literature review of international assessment data, Indonesian government reports, and recent studies on misinformation and media literacy, the paper argues that hoax dissemination is not merely a technological problem but also a literacy problem. Indonesia's PISA 2022 reading performance, including an average reading score of 359 and only about one quarter of students reaching Level 2 or above, indicates a persistent difficulty in identifying main ideas, evaluating textual purpose, and distinguishing claims from evidence. In digital environments, these weaknesses intersect with algorithmic amplification, social trust networks, political polarization, and platform affordances such as forwarding, reposting, and short-form audiovisual content. The discussion proposes a conceptual framework in which reading literacy influences users' capacity for verification, source evaluation, contextual interpretation, and sharing restraint. The paper concludes that anti-hoax strategies in Indonesia should integrate reading literacy, media and information literacy, platform accountability, community-based fact-checking, and curriculum reform rather than relying primarily on takedown mechanisms or punitive regulation.

Keywords: digital literacy; hoax; reading literacy; social media



By Authors

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1. Introduction

Indonesia's public sphere has become increasingly digital, mobile, and socially networked. News, political claims, religious messages, health advice, entertainment, and commercial promotions circulate through social media platforms, instant messaging groups, video-sharing services, and community networks. This expansion has widened access to information, but it has also made misinformation and hoaxes easier to produce, personalize, and circulate at scale. In this context, hoaxes should not be understood only as false statements; they are communicative events that move through social relationships, emotional triggers, platform features, and uneven literacy practices.

The urgency of the problem is visible in national and international indicators. OECD's PISA 2022 country data show that Indonesian 15-year-olds obtained an average reading score of 359, below the OECD average of 476, and only around 25% of Indonesian students reached at least Level 2 proficiency in reading (OECD, 2023a, 2023b). At Level 2, students are expected to identify main ideas, locate relevant information, and reflect on purpose and form when explicitly directed. These capacities overlap with the skills needed to evaluate digital claims. Meanwhile, Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs reported

identifying and clarifying 1,923 hoax contents during 2024 (Komdigi, 2025). These figures point to a dual challenge: a vulnerable information ecosystem and a population still developing the interpretive skills needed to navigate it.

Existing discussions often treat hoaxes as a problem of platform governance, political manipulation, or digital ethics. These dimensions are important, but a literacy-centered explanation adds a crucial layer. Reading literacy is not limited to decoding written words; it includes locating information, making inferences, evaluating credibility, connecting claims to context, and recognizing the difference between evidence and assertion. When these skills are weak, users may be more likely to accept sensational content, rely on headlines without reading the full text, mistake repetition for truth, or share messages because they appear socially urgent.

The broader misinformation literature also shows that false information is sustained by definitional ambiguity, platform incentives, and cognitive shortcuts. Tandoc et al. (2018) emphasize that the term fake news covers several forms of problematic information, while Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) distinguish misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Empirical studies further show that false news can diffuse more rapidly than true news on social platforms (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and that misinformation requires coordinated responses involving platforms, institutions, educators, and citizens (Lazer et al., 2018).

This paper addresses the following research question: How does low reading literacy contribute to hoax dissemination in Indonesia's digital society, and what integrated interventions can reduce this vulnerability? The objective is to develop a conceptual explanation linking reading literacy, digital media practices, and hoax circulation in Indonesia. The contribution of this paper lies in positioning reading literacy as a foundational component of anti-hoax resilience, alongside media and information literacy, fact-checking, and platform governance.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative conceptual design based on a narrative literature review. The approach is appropriate because the paper aims to synthesize existing evidence and build an explanatory framework rather than test a statistical hypothesis with primary survey data. The review connects three bodies of literature: reading literacy, digital/media literacy, and misinformation or hoax dissemination in Indonesia.

2.2. Participants / Data Source

The review draws on secondary sources, including OECD PISA 2022 reports on Indonesian reading literacy, official Indonesian government data on hoax identification and digital literacy, UNESCO materials on media and information literacy, and scholarly studies on Indonesian misinformation, digital literacy, prebunking, and election-related disinformation. Priority was given to official reports, peer-reviewed articles, and institutional publications with traceable URLs or DOI records.

2.3. Instrument and Data Collection

The instrument for this paper was a literature extraction matrix that recorded author or institution, year, topic focus, method or report type, key findings, limitations, and relevance to the research question. Data were collected through targeted searches of official institutional sources and scholarly databases, with attention to materials that explicitly discussed reading

literacy, digital literacy, media and information literacy, hoaxes, misinformation, and the Indonesian digital context.

2.4. Data Analysis

The analysis followed four steps. First, the paper identified indicators of reading literacy and digital misinformation vulnerability in Indonesia. Second, it grouped prior findings into thematic categories: literacy deficits, platform affordances, socio-cultural trust, political communication, and intervention strategies. Third, it compared the role of reading literacy with adjacent concepts such as digital literacy and media literacy. Fourth, it formulated a conceptual framework explaining how low reading literacy can increase susceptibility to hoax acceptance and sharing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Reading Literacy as a Foundation for Digital Judgment

Reading literacy is a foundation for digital judgment because most online information requires users to interpret language, context, source, evidence, and intention. Even when a hoax appears in video or image form, users still encounter captions, headlines, comments, subtitles, labels, and embedded claims. A person with stronger reading literacy is better positioned to ask whether a claim follows logically from the evidence, whether the headline matches the body of the message, and whether a cited authority is relevant. By contrast, low reading literacy may make users dependent on surface cues such as emotional tone, virality, familiar senders, or visual realism.

PISA's reading framework is useful because it emphasizes processes directly relevant to misinformation: locating information, understanding meaning, evaluating and reflecting. Indonesia's PISA 2022 performance therefore has implications beyond schooling. If many young citizens struggle with moderate-length texts and implicit distinctions between fact and opinion, similar difficulties may appear when they encounter political claims, health advice, disaster warnings, religious narratives, or financial scams online. The issue is not that low-scoring readers are irrational; rather, the digital environment often demands high-speed critical reading under conditions of overload, distraction, and social pressure.

3.2 Hoax Dissemination in Indonesia's Digital Society

Indonesia's digital society is characterized by intensive social media use, strong community networks, and high reliance on mobile communication. Hoaxes often travel not as isolated pieces of content but through trusted relational channels: family groups, neighborhood chats, religious communities, alumni networks, and political supporter circles. In such settings, people may share information as an act of care, identity affirmation, or group participation. The decision to forward a message may be shaped less by evidence evaluation than by urgency, moral emotion, or trust in the sender.

This pattern resonates with global evidence that misinformation is not only a matter of individual error but also a product of political incentives, attention markets, and networked distribution (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2019). In Indonesia, the same dynamics are intensified by election cycles, identity-based mobilization, and the everyday use of group messaging for social coordination.

Studies of Indonesian misinformation show that digital literacy and media literacy remain central concerns. Research on political hoaxes around Indonesian elections has repeatedly highlighted how social media accelerates disinformation and how political content can exploit

polarization and identity-based sentiment (Hidayat et al., 2025; Juditha, 2019). Komdigi's 2024 hoax identification data further demonstrate that the problem is persistent across topic areas. However, fact-checking and takedown mechanisms typically operate after content has already circulated. Preventive capacity depends on whether users can pause, read carefully, assess credibility, and decide not to share doubtful claims.

3.3 Mechanisms Linking Low Reading Literacy and Hoax Sharing

Low reading literacy can contribute to hoax dissemination through at least four mechanisms. The first is shallow processing. Users may react to headlines, thumbnails, or short excerpts without reading the full content. Hoaxes often exploit this by using emotionally charged titles and selective fragments. The second is weak source evaluation. Users may not distinguish between original reporting, reposted content, satire, edited screenshots, anonymous claims, and institutional statements. The third is poor contextual inference. A true image or quotation can become misleading when detached from time, place, speaker, or event. The fourth is low sharing restraint. When users cannot confidently assess accuracy, they may share first and verify later, especially if the message appears urgent or morally important.

This explanation is consistent with psychological research showing that misinformation acceptance is often linked to insufficient analytic attention rather than only partisan motivation (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Accuracy prompts can reduce willingness to share misleading content (Pennycook et al., 2020), but the effect depends on whether users have the literacy resources needed to evaluate the claim. Corrections also face persistence effects because misinformation can continue influencing reasoning after retraction (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

These mechanisms interact with platform design. Instant forwarding, engagement metrics, algorithmic recommendation, and short-form video formats reward speed and emotion. Reading literacy, by contrast, requires slowness: comparison, rereading, checking, and inference. The mismatch between fast platforms and slow critical reading creates a structural vulnerability. Therefore, improving reading literacy is not a nostalgic return to print culture; it is a practical requirement for citizenship in a platform society.

Table 1. Thematic synthesis of literature and institutional evidence

Source	Focus	Key finding	Limitation	Relevance
OECD PISA 2022	Reading literacy	Indonesia's average reading score was 359; about 25% reached Level 2 or above.	Student assessment, not adult digital behavior.	Shows foundational literacy challenge.
Komdigi 2024/2025	Hoax monitoring	1,923 hoax contents identified and clarified in 2024.	Counts detected content, not total circulation.	Shows persistence of hoax ecosystem.
UNESCO MIL	Media and information literacy	MIL is framed as a response to mis/disinformation, hate speech, and trust decline.	Global framework requires local adaptation.	Provides intervention vocabulary.
Gali Fakta study	Prebunking in Indonesia	Game-based media literacy increased skepticism toward	Intervention study, not nationwide	Shows scalable literacy

Source	Focus	Key finding	Limitation	Relevance
		false headlines and reduced sharing intention.	policy evaluation.	intervention potential.
Election disinformation studies	Political hoaxes	Social media played a significant role in 2024 election disinformation patterns.	Often case-specific.	Shows high-risk democratic context.

Source: Synthesized by the author from OECD (2023a, 2023b), Komdigi (2025), UNESCO (n.d.), Roozenbeek et al. (2024), and Hidayat et al. (2025).

3.4 Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework positions reading literacy as a foundational capability that shapes four digital verification practices: comprehension, source checking, contextualization, and sharing restraint. These practices mediate the relationship between literacy and hoax dissemination. The framework also recognizes moderating factors: platform design, social trust, political polarization, emotional salience, and access to fact-checking resources. In this model, low reading literacy does not automatically produce hoax sharing; rather, it increases vulnerability when combined with fast, emotional, and socially trusted digital channels.

The framework also draws from civic online reasoning research, which finds that many students struggle to evaluate online sources and that expert fact-checkers often use lateral reading rather than staying within a single webpage (Breakstone et al., 2021; McGrew et al., 2018; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). In the Indonesian context, such practices need to be adapted to multilingual communication, mobile-first access, messaging apps, and community-based trust networks.

Conceptually, the relationship can be represented as follows: low reading literacy weakens comprehension and evaluation; weak evaluation increases susceptibility to false or misleading claims; susceptibility, when combined with social and platform pressures, increases the likelihood of forwarding, reposting, or endorsing hoaxes. Conversely, stronger reading literacy can support verification habits, but it must be reinforced by digital literacy education, accessible fact-checking, and platform-level friction against harmful virality.

3.5 Policy and Educational Implications

First, anti-hoax education should begin with reading comprehension, not only with warnings about fake news. Students and adult learners need repeated practice in identifying claims, evidence, assumptions, tone, and missing context. Second, media and information literacy should be integrated across subjects rather than treated as a one-time digital safety campaign. UNESCO's MIL approach is valuable because it links information evaluation to citizenship, participation, and trust. Third, fact-checking organizations and public agencies should design materials for varying reading levels. A correction that is accurate but difficult to read may fail to reach the audiences most vulnerable to hoaxes.

Evidence from media literacy interventions suggests that scalable training can improve users' ability to distinguish false from credible information (Guess et al., 2020; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). Indonesian intervention studies also show promise: online media literacy programming reduced belief in false news (Thomas et al., 2022), while the Gali Fakta prebunking game improved skepticism toward false headlines and reduced reported sharing intention (Roozenbeek et al., 2024).

Fourth, platform governance should introduce friction at the point of sharing, especially for rapidly forwarded content, manipulated media, or claims previously checked by credible fact-checkers. Friction can include prompts to read before sharing, visible context panels, forwarding limits, and links to verification resources. Fifth, community-based interventions remain important because hoaxes often travel through relational trust. Teachers, religious leaders, local officials, youth communities, and neighborhood organizations can act as literacy intermediaries when they are equipped with simple verification tools.

Finally, interventions should avoid blaming citizens. Low reading literacy is a systemic outcome shaped by schooling quality, access inequality, language diversity, information overload, and platform incentives. A humane anti-hoax strategy should therefore combine education reform, public communication design, digital inclusion, and accountability for actors who profit from manipulation.

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that hoax dissemination in Indonesia's digital society cannot be adequately understood as a purely technological or legal problem. It is also a reading literacy problem. Low reading literacy weakens users' ability to comprehend claims, evaluate sources, infer context, and exercise restraint before sharing. In Indonesia, this vulnerability intersects with intense social media use, trusted group communication, political polarization, and fast platform affordances. The evidence from PISA 2022, national hoax monitoring, and recent media literacy research supports the need for integrated interventions.

The paper recommends that Indonesia's anti-hoax strategy combine reading literacy development, media and information literacy, community-based fact-checking, accessible public corrections, and platform-level sharing friction. Future empirical research should test the proposed framework using survey, experimental, or mixed-method designs across age groups, regions, and platform contexts. Such research could examine whether reading comprehension predicts verification behavior, whether media literacy interventions reduce sharing intention, and how social trust moderates the relationship between literacy and hoax dissemination.

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