

The Transformation of Humanistic Values in Education in the Digital Age: An Analysis of the Role of Critical Literacy in Shaping Student Character

Dewi Mutiah¹, Fahmi Muhammad Ilham², Restu Banu Aji³, Iwan Setiawan⁴, Adlan Khoirul Abdi⁵

¹Cirebon College of Health Sciences, Cirebon, Indonesia

²Muhammadiyah University of Cirebon, Cirebon, Indonesia

³Al-Ihya Islamic University of Kuningan, Kuningan, Indonesia

⁴Pamulang University, Banten, Indonesia

⁵Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technology has reshaped higher education practices, particularly in how students access, process, and use academic information. However, this transformation also raises concerns regarding the weakening of humanistic values and students' critical awareness in engaging with digital content. This study aims to examine the transformation of humanistic values in the digital learning environment and to analyze the role of critical literacy in shaping students' character. This research is empirical in nature and applies a qualitative field research approach. Data were collected from 50 university students through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of academic activities. The findings reveal that digital platforms are widely integrated into students' learning processes, with Learning Management Systems (LMS) showing the highest usage rate at 80%, followed by academic search engines (72%) and digital journals (68%). Despite this high level of engagement, students' critical literacy skills, particularly in evaluating source credibility and reflecting on the impact of information, remain underdeveloped. The study also identifies that humanistic values, such as academic integrity, responsibility, and mutual respect, continue to be reflected in students' academic interactions, although they have not yet been fully internalized. These findings suggest that effective integration of digital technology must be accompanied by strengthening critical literacy and reinforcing humanistic values to foster students who are reflective, ethical, and responsible in navigating digital information.

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Corresponding Author:

Dewi Mutiah

Cirebon College of Health Sciences, Cirebon, Indonesia

Email: dmutiah10@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the landscape of higher education, particularly in how students access, manage, and utilize academic information [1]. The integration of digital platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), electronic journals, and academic social media has expanded learning opportunities and enabled more flexible and student-centered learning processes. However, this transformation also raises critical concerns regarding the erosion of humanistic values within the educational process. Education is not merely oriented toward knowledge transfer but also toward the formation of students' character, ethical awareness, and social responsibility [2], [3]. In this context, the increasing dominance of digital technology necessitates a balanced approach that integrates technological advancement with the reinforcement of humanistic values.

The main problem addressed in this study lies in the imbalance between the intensive use of digital technology and the relatively limited development of students' critical awareness and ethical responsibility in engaging with digital information. The widespread circulation of misinformation and students' limited ability to evaluate the credibility of digital sources indicate that access to information is not always accompanied by adequate critical literacy skills [4]. This condition can weaken the reflective dimension of learning, risking a shift toward a purely technical orientation in education. Therefore, higher education institutions face a strategic challenge in ensuring that digital transformation does not diminish the humanistic foundations of education [5].

To address this issue, critical literacy emerges as a relevant conceptual and practical approach. Critical literacy refers not only to the ability to comprehend texts but also to the capacity to analyze meaning, uncover ideological perspectives, and evaluate information within its broader social context. As Freire emphasizes, critical literacy enables individuals to develop critical consciousness and actively engage with social realities. Previous studies have shown that the integration of critical literacy in education can enhance students' analytical thinking, ethical awareness, and reflective capacity in navigating digital information [6], [7]. Moreover, research indicates that incorporating critical literacy into learning processes strengthens humanistic values such as empathy, responsibility, and academic integrity [8].

Despite these findings, a significant research gap remains. Most prior studies tend to examine digital literacy primarily from a technical perspective or focus on critical literacy at a conceptual level without empirically linking it to the transformation of humanistic values in students' academic practices.[9] In addition, limited studies have explored how critical literacy functions as a mediating framework that connects the use of digital technology with the internalization of humanistic values in real educational settings. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by empirically investigating the integration of digital technology use, critical literacy, and humanistic values within the context of higher education [10], [11]

Based on this gap, the research is guided by the following questions: (1) how do students utilize digital technology in the learning process; (2) how are students' critical literacy skills reflected in their engagement with digital information; and (3) how are humanistic values internalized within students' academic activities in the digital age? In line

with these questions, this study aims to examine the transformation of humanistic values in digital-based education and to analyze the role of critical literacy in shaping students' character.

This study employs an empirical qualitative approach through field research involving university students as participants. By directly observing students' academic activities and digital learning practices, this research seeks to provide a more contextual and grounded understanding of the phenomena under study. The expected contribution of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it aims to enrich the discourse on integrating critical literacy and humanistic education in the digital era. Practically, it provides insights for educators and higher education institutions in designing learning models that not only emphasize technological competence but also foster students' ethical awareness, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute to the development of a more balanced educational paradigm that integrates digital innovation with humanistic values.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using field research to obtain an empirical understanding of the transformation of humanistic values in education in the digital age, as well as the role of critical literacy in shaping students' character [12]. Field research was selected as it enables direct interaction with participants and allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences within their academic environment. The research was conducted at Pamulang University and involved 50 undergraduate students. These participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely: (1) active enrollment in undergraduate programs, (2) regular use of digital learning platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and online academic resources, and (3) prior experience in participating in academic discussions involving digital media. This sampling strategy was used to ensure that the selected participants were relevant to the research objectives and capable of providing rich, meaningful data.

Data collection techniques included observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of learning activities related to the use of digital technology and the development of critical literacy [13]. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 selected participants, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, allowing flexibility to explore participants' perspectives in depth while maintaining alignment with the research focus. Observations were carried out over four weeks, covering both in-class and online learning activities, particularly those involving digital platforms and academic discussions. Documentation included students' academic outputs, discussion records, and digital learning interactions. This combination of methods was intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students interpret the use of digital technology and how they internalize humanistic values in their academic practices.

The research procedure was conducted systematically through several stages, including planning, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion drawing [14]. In the initial stage, the researcher identified the research problem and developed instruments, including interview guidelines and observation sheets. During the data collection stage, interviews and

observations were conducted concurrently to capture both verbal and behavioral data. The data analysis process followed qualitative analysis techniques as proposed by Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In addition, this study applied thematic analysis through an open coding process, including categorization and theme development, to identify patterns related to digital technology use, critical literacy, and humanistic values. This approach enabled a more systematic interpretation of qualitative data and strengthened the study's analytical rigor.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, this study employed source triangulation and method triangulation, comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to their involvement. Participants' identities were kept anonymous, and all data were treated confidentially to protect their privacy. These measures were implemented to ensure that the research adhered to ethical standards and maintained the integrity of the data collected.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The use of digital technology has become an integral part of the student learning process in the digital age. On the other hand, critical literacy skills and the internalization of humanistic values also play a role in shaping students' character as they utilize digital information responsibly.

3.1. Results

Field research indicates that digital technology has become an integral part of students' learning activities. Data were obtained through observations, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and questionnaires administered to 50 student participants. The questionnaire was used to quantify patterns of digital technology use and to assess students' critical literacy levels using predefined indicators. The results show that students actively utilize various digital platforms to support both structured learning activities and independent study.

The use of digital technology in the learning process varies across several main platforms. The most frequently used platform is the Learning Management System (LMS), followed by academic search engines, online journals and e-books, educational videos, and academic social media. The distribution of digital technology utilization is presented in Table 1.

The data in Table 1 show that the LMS has the highest level of usage (80%), followed by academic search engines (72%) and online journals/e-books (68%). Educational videos and academic social media are used at 62% and 52%, respectively. These figures indicate that students rely primarily on formal and semi-formal digital learning resources in their academic activities.

Table 1. Utilization of Digital Technology in the Student Learning Process

Type of Digital Technology	Form of Utilization	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Percentage of Use
Learning Management System (LMS)	Accessing materials, submitting assignments, discussion forums	40	7	3	80%
Academic Search Engines	Searching for scientific articles and references	36	9	5	72%
Online Journals and E-books	References for academic writing	34	10	6	68%
Educational Videos	Understanding course concepts	31	12	7	62%
Academic Social Media	Group discussions and material sharing	26	14	10	52%

Students’ critical literacy levels were measured using a questionnaire consisting of four indicators: (1) ability to analyze digital information, (2) ability to evaluate the credibility of information sources, (3) ability to understand the context of information, and (4) ability to reflect on the impact of information. Each indicator was assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates very low ability and 5 indicates very high ability. The scores were then categorized as follows: 1.00–2.00 (low), 2.01–3.00 (moderate), 3.01–4.00 (fairly good), and 4.01–5.00 (high).

Based on the questionnaire analysis, the average scores for each indicator indicate that students’ overall critical literacy level falls within the “fairly good” category (mean score range: 3.2–3.8). The highest average score is in the ability to analyze digital information, while the lowest is in the ability to reflect on the impact of digital information. The distribution of these scores is illustrated in Figure 1.

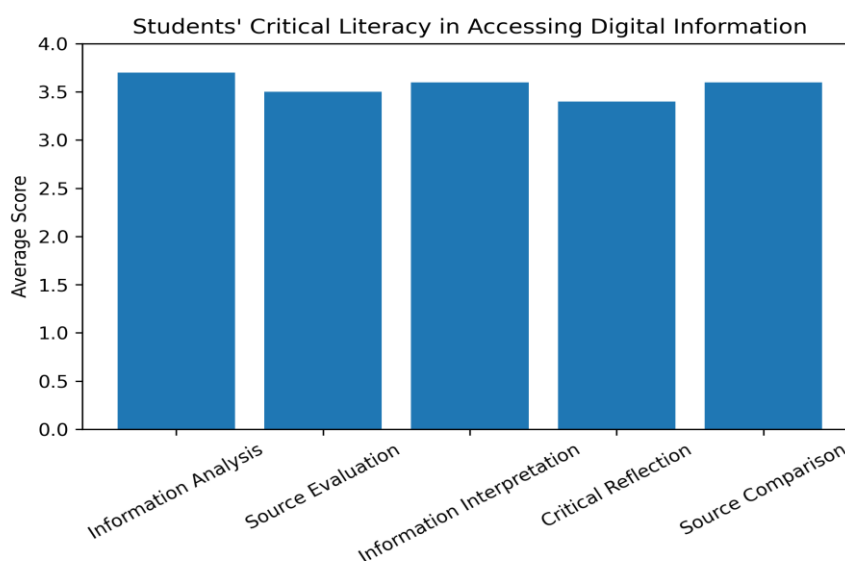


Figure 1. Graph of Students’ Critical Literacy Levels in Accessing Digital Information

The results also indicate that while students demonstrate adequate abilities in understanding and processing digital information, variations exist across different indicators. In particular, the reflective and evaluative dimensions show lower scores than the analytical abilities.

In addition, field observations and interview data reveal patterns related to the internalization of humanistic values in students' academic activities. The observed values include academic integrity, responsibility in the use of digital technology, respect for others' opinions, and ethical awareness in utilizing digital information. Documentation data further show that most students apply citation practices in their academic work and engage in discussions by responding to peers' arguments and sharing relevant references.

These patterns are also reflected in students' academic interactions, both in classroom settings and on digital platforms. Students participate in discussions, exchange information, and engage with learning materials collaboratively.



Figure 2. Student Activities in Academic Discussions and the Use of Digital Technology

Figure 2 illustrates the use of digital devices in supporting academic discussions. The figure shows that digital technology is used alongside interactive learning activities, including group discussions and student information sharing.

3.2. Discussion

The use of digital technology in the learning process reflects a broader transformation in education driven by advancements in information and communication technology. In this context, digital technology encompasses various systems and platforms, including Learning Management Systems (LMS), online academic resources, and digital communication media that support knowledge acquisition and interaction [15]. The findings of this study demonstrate that students actively engage with these digital platforms, particularly to access course materials, search for academic references, and participate in discussions. This

supports previous studies, which argue that digital technology expands learning opportunities and promotes more flexible, collaborative, and student-centered learning environments [16].

However, the findings also reveal a nuanced pattern that does not fully align with the optimistic assumptions of prior research. While digital technology facilitates access to information, it does not automatically enhance students' critical literacy [17]. The results indicate that although students show relatively strong abilities in analyzing information, their capacity to reflect on its impact and to evaluate source credibility critically remains comparatively weaker. This finding contrasts with several studies suggesting that increased exposure to digital resources inherently improves higher-order thinking skills [18], [19]. Instead, this study highlights that access alone is insufficient without structured pedagogical support. This contradiction suggests that digital environments may encourage surface-level engagement with information unless accompanied by intentional efforts to develop critical literacy skills.

In relation to critical literacy, the findings confirm that students possess a foundational ability to interpret digital content but still face challenges in deeper evaluative and reflective processes. This aligns with previous research indicating that critical literacy requires more than technical proficiency and involves the ability to assess the ideological and contextual dimensions of information [20]. At the same time, the present study extends these findings by showing that critical literacy serves as an intermediary factor linking digital technology use to the development of students' ethical and reflective capacities. This reinforces the argument that critical literacy should be positioned not merely as a complementary skill but as a central component of digital learning [21].

Furthermore, this study identifies a relationship between the use of digital technology and the internalization of humanistic values in students' academic practices. Humanistic values such as academic integrity, responsibility, empathy, and mutual respect remain evident in students' interactions, particularly in their awareness of proper citation practices and respectful engagement in academic discussions [22], [23]. Nevertheless, an important observation emerges: the presence of these values does not always indicate deep internalization. In some cases, ethical practices appear to be driven more by academic requirements than by intrinsic awareness. This finding adds a critical perspective to previous studies that tend to assume a direct and consistent relationship between digital learning and character development [24].

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of an integrative framework that connects digital technology, critical literacy, and humanistic values. Unlike prior studies that examine these aspects separately, this research positions critical literacy as a mediating construct that links technological engagement with the formation of students' character [25]. This integrative approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how digital learning environments can support not only cognitive development but also ethical and social dimensions of education [26]. Thus, this study enriches the discourse on digital education by emphasizing the importance of balancing technological advancement with humanistic and critical dimensions.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the number of participants and the qualitative nature of the study restrict the ability to generalize results across different populations. Third, the study focuses primarily on students' perspectives, without incorporating insights from lecturers or institutional policies that may also influence the integration of digital technology and humanistic values. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve multiple institutions, employ mixed-method approaches, and explore additional variables to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue [27].

The findings suggest that integrating digital technology in education must be accompanied by deliberate efforts to strengthen critical literacy and humanistic values. Without such integration, the potential of digital technology to enhance learning may not be fully realized. Therefore, higher education institutions need to develop learning strategies that emphasize reflective thinking, ethical awareness, and responsible use of digital information as essential components of student character development in the digital age.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of digital technology in higher education has significantly reshaped students' learning practices, particularly in expanding access to academic resources and supporting interactive learning environments. However, this transformation is not automatically accompanied by the development of higher-order competencies. The findings highlight that while students demonstrate active engagement with digital platforms, their critical literacy, especially in evaluating credibility and reflecting on the broader impact of information, remains insufficiently developed. At the same time, humanistic values such as academic integrity, responsibility, and mutual respect continue to be evident in students' academic activities, although their depth in internalization varies.

The implications of this study emphasize the need for a more balanced educational approach that integrates technological proficiency with critical and ethical dimensions of learning. Higher education institutions should not only focus on optimizing the use of digital tools but also systematically embed critical literacy and humanistic values into the curriculum. This can be achieved through reflective learning models, discussion-based approaches, and the reinforcement of academic ethics in digital environments. Such efforts are essential to ensure that students develop not only cognitive skills but also responsible and ethical behavior in navigating digital information.

This study has several limitations. It is limited to a single institutional context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative design and the number of participants may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences across different educational settings. The focus on students' perspectives also leaves room for further exploration of institutional and instructional factors that may influence the integration of digital technology, critical literacy, and humanistic values.

Future research is recommended to involve multiple institutions, employ mixed methods, and include perspectives from educators and policymakers to obtain a more

comprehensive understanding of this issue. Further studies may also explore the development of specific instructional models or interventions to strengthen critical literacy and the internalization of humanistic values in digital learning environments.

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