

Habitual Scrolling and the Decline in Critical Thinking Skills in the Social Media Era: A Qualitative Study from a Communication Studies Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

habitual scrolling, social media, critical thinking, digital communication, information consumption.

The rapid development of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the way individuals' access and consume information, particularly through social media platforms. One emerging phenomenon is habitual scrolling, a repetitive and often unconscious activity that enables users to continuously consume large amounts of content. This study aims to explore how habitual scrolling practices influence users' critical thinking skills in evaluating digital information. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving 5–10 active social media users aged 18–35 years. The findings reveal that habitual scrolling has become an integral part of daily routines, often performed without clear purpose and driven by platform features such as infinite scrolling and algorithmic recommendations. This behaviour leads to rapid and superficial information consumption, where users tend to skim content rather than engage deeply. Consequently, the ability to critically evaluate information decreases, as users rarely verify sources or reflect on content before accepting or sharing it. The study concludes that habitual scrolling contributes to a decline in critical thinking by promoting fast, intuitive processing over analytical reasoning. Therefore, enhancing digital literacy and encouraging mindful media use are essential to mitigate its negative cognitive impacts.

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in recent decades has brought about significant changes in the way people acquire, produce, and distribute information. The presence of the internet and social media has made it very possible for every individual to be able to access various types of information quickly and easily, through digital devices such as *smartphones* and computers. Social media is now one of the most widely used communication platforms by people in various parts of the world. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and Facebook provide different types of content that can be accessed instantly by each of its users. Through social media, individuals can get information, entertainment, and be able to interact with others in a relatively short time. The ease of access to information through social media has changed people's information consumption patterns. If previously information was obtained through conventional media such as newspapers, television, or radio in the form of short content that appeared sequentially on digital platforms. One of the most common activities that every user does when accessing social media is scrolling, which is a form of scrolling the screen of a digital device to see the content available on social media platforms. This activity allows users to quickly access various content by

simply sliding their device layers. In its development, scrolling activities not only serve as a way to navigate content, but also develop into the habit of using media that is carried out repeatedly without a clear purpose. This phenomenon is known as habitual scrolling, which is the habit of users scrolling through social media content continuously as part of their digital media usage routine. The phenomenon of habitual scrolling is further strengthened by the design of social media platforms that are designed to retain users' attention. Features such as infinite scrolling, notifications, and recommendation algorithms allow users to continue viewing new content indefinitely. This design allows users to spend a long time scrolling without realizing the duration of their social media use. Several studies have shown that intense social media users can affect various aspects of users' cognition, including attention, concentration, as well as the way individuals process information (Parry & Le Roux, 2023). Rapid and repeated exposure to digital content can make every individual become accustomed to the consumption of information that is short and instantaneous. This condition has the potential to affect the ability of individuals to reflect on the information they receive. In this context, the ability to think critically is one of the important aspects that need to be considered. Critical thinking is the ability of individuals to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information rationally before drawing a conclusion (Facione, 2020). The ability to think critically is a very important skill in dealing with the flow of information in the digital era. Social media users are exposed to different types of information with different levels of credibility. Without adequate critical thinking skills, individuals have the potential to passively receive information without evaluating the truth of the information. Nevertheless, a social media environment characterized by rapid and continuous consumption of information can affect the way individuals process information. Users tend to move from one content to another quickly, so the process of reflection on information becomes more limited. Based on these conditions, this study seeks to be able to examine the phenomenon of habitual scrolling in the use of social media and its implications for the ability to think critically for each user in consuming digital information.

Problem Formulation

1. What is the practice of habitual scrolling in the use of social media?
2. How can these practices affect users' critical thinking skills?
3. How do users interpret the information consumed through social media?

The purpose of this study is to understand more deeply the phenomenon of habitual scrolling in the use of social media and its implications for users' ability to think critically in consuming digital information. In particular, this study aims to analyze how the practice of scrolling that is carried out repeatedly and automatically becomes part of the habits of social media users in daily life. In addition, this study also aims to be able to identify how these habits can affect the way users consume, understand, and evaluate the information they find on social media. Through a qualitative approach, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between digital media consumption behavior and users' cognitive processes, especially in the context of critical thinking skills in the era of digital communication. Limitations and Scope of Research

This structure follows the practice of social and communication research methodologies which explain that the scope of the research determines the focus of the study, while the limitations of the study define the aspects that are not studied in order for the research to be

more directed (Simon & Goes, 2013; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) (Akanle et al., 2020). This research has a scope that focuses on the study of social media use behaviour in the context of habitual scrolling and its implications for users' critical thinking ability in consuming digital information. This study specifically examines the experience of active social media users in scrolling on several popular social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

The focus of the research is directed at how scrolling habits are formed in the practice of daily social media use. What is the pattern of information consumption that occurs in these activities, as well as how each user understands and evaluates the information they find on social media. Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to explore users' subjective experiences in consuming digital information and how the process can relate to their critical thinking skills. The limitation of this research lies in the aspect. First, this study only involved active social media users with high usage intensity, namely individuals who used social media for more than 2 hours per day. Second, this study limited informants to the age group ranging from 18 years to 35 years, because this age group is one of the most active groups of social media users in the digital environment. Third, this study uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, so that the results of the study are not intended to generalize statistically to the entire population of social media users. Fourth, this research focuses more on the perspective of communication science, especially in understanding the relationship between the digital media environment, information consumption patterns, and users' cognitive processes in evaluating the information they receive.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding more deeply the experience of social media users in carrying out *scrolling* activities and its implications for critical thinking skills. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences of social media users related to the habits of using digital media in daily life.

Informant Selection Techniques

The research informants were selected using the purposive sampling technique with the following criteria:

- active users of social media
- using social media for more than 3 hours per day
- aged 18–35 years old
- using a minimum of two social media platforms

The number of informants in this study was 5-10 active social media users.

Research Informant Data Table

Informant Code	Age	Status	Intensity of Use TikTok	Informant Criteria
I1	23	Students	4 hours/day	Active users of TikTok
I2	22	Female Student	3 hours/day	Actively access entertainment content
I3	25	Freelancer	5 hours/day	Scrolling frequently

Informant Code	Age	Status	Intensity of Use TikTok	Informant Criteria
I4	31	Housewives Stairs	6 hours/day	Scrolling frequently
I5	34	Housewives Stairs	5 hours/day	Scrolling frequently
I6	35	Self- employed	2-3 Hours/day	Social media users as a material for finding information and news
I7	35	Housewives Stairs	6 hours/day	Actively access entertainment content
I8	34	Young Entrepreneurs	5 hours/day	Active social media users because their business also uses social media
I9	27	PNS	4 hours/day	Scrolling frequently
I10	35	Police	3 hours/day	Scrolling frequently

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques in this study were carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. These three techniques were used to obtain comprehensive data on the experience of social media users in scrolling activities and how these habits relate to the way they consume and evaluate digital information. In qualitative research, the use of various data collection techniques aims to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied through the perspective of direct participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In-depth interviews were used as the main technique in this study to explore the experiences, views, and interpretations of informants regarding social media use habits in daily life. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can understand how informants interpret scrolling activities, the duration of social media use, and their way of consuming and evaluating information found on digital platforms. In-depth interviews allow researchers to explore the informant's subjective experiences in more detail and flexibly according to the research context (Seidman, 2019).

In addition to interviews, this study also uses observation as a supporting data collection technique. Observations were made to understand the pattern of social media use by informants and how scrolling activities are carried out in the practice of using digital media. Observations in qualitative research aim to provide context to the data obtained from interviews so that researchers can see more directly the behaviour or activity related to the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Another data collection technique is documentation, which is used to complement and reinforce research data. The documentation in this study can be in the form of records of social media use, screenshots of digital activities, or various information relevant to the practice of information consumption on social media. This documentation data helps researchers in understanding the context of digital media use and provides additional evidence to support the results of interviews and observations. The use of these various data collection techniques is

expected to produce richer and more comprehensive data in explaining the phenomenon of habitual scrolling and its implications for the critical thinking ability of social media users.

List of interview Questions:

A. Social Media Use Experience

1. How often do you use social media in a day?
2. What social media platforms do you use the most?
3. In what situations do you usually open social media?

B. Scrolling Habits

4. When using social media, do you often scroll through content without a specific purpose?
5. How long do you usually scroll in a single session of social media use?
6. Do you find it hard to stop when you start scrolling?

C. Information Consumption Patterns

7. When you see information on social media, do you usually read or watch the content in its entirety?
8. Do you often only see the title or part of the content before moving on to other content?

D. Evaluation of Information

9. How do you determine whether information on social media is trustworthy or not?
10. Have you ever shared information on social media without checking the truth first?

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique in this study uses an interactive analysis model proposed by Miles et al., (2014). This model was chosen because it is able to explain the process of qualitative data analysis systematically through stages that take place continuously during the research process. Data analysis in this model is not only carried out after all data is collected, but takes place simultaneously from the data collection process to the drawing of research conclusions. The data analysis process in this study includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

At the data reduction stage, the researcher carried out the process of selection, focusing, and simplifying the data obtained from the results of in-depth interviews with the informants. Data that are not relevant to the focus of the research are set aside, while data related to the phenomenon of habitual scrolling, information consumption patterns, and the process of evaluating social media users' information are maintained and categorized based on certain themes.

The next stage is data display. At this stage, the data that has been reduced is systematically arranged in the form of a descriptive narrative, thematic matrix, and category grouping that makes it easier for researchers to understand the patterns of relationships between data. The presentation of this data aims to help the interpretation process so that researchers can see the trend of social media users' behavior patterns in scrolling activities and how these habits are related to the way they consume and evaluate information.

The last stage is the drawing of conclusions and verification. At this stage, the researcher conducts an interpretation process of the findings that emerge from the research data to understand the meaning contained in them. The conclusions obtained are not final at the initial stage, but continue to be verified during the research process through re-checking the existing data. This process aims to ensure that the research findings have a good level of

validity and consistency in explaining the phenomenon of habitual scrolling and its implications for the critical thinking ability of social media users.

Through these analysis stages, this study seeks to identify patterns of social media use behaviour, understand informants' subjective experiences in consuming digital information, and explain the relationship between habitual scrolling habits and users' tendency to evaluate information in the social media environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Social Media Use by Informants

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with the informants, it was found that social media has become an integral part of their daily activities. Most informants admitted to using social media regularly in various situations, such as when they were waiting, resting, or when they felt bored. The social media platforms most often used by informants in this study were Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The three platforms were chosen because they provide a wide range of content types that can be accessed quickly and easily through digital devices. Most informants stated that they opened social media several times a day. The duration of social media use also tends to be quite high, with an average usage of between three to five hours per day. Social media use activities are generally carried out through smartphone devices that allow users to access digital platforms anytime and anywhere. In addition, the informant also stated that social media is often used as a means to fill free time. In some cases, informants admitted to opening social media spontaneously without having a specific purpose. This activity usually starts by opening a social media app and then looking at the various content that appears on the *feed* page. This phenomenon shows that social media has become part of the routine of using digital technology in daily life. This habit also reflects changes in people's information consumption patterns that increasingly depend on digital platforms.

The Formation of Habitual Scrolling Habits

One of the main findings in this study is the emergence of *habitual scrolling* habits in the use of social media. Based on the results of the interviews, most of the informants admitted that they often did continuous scrolling activities when using social media. This scrolling activity is usually done by scrolling the screen of a digital device to see the various content that appears on the *feed* page. Informants explain that they often scroll through content without a specific purpose and only follow the flow of content that appears automatically according to the user's algorithm on social media platforms. Some informants stated that scrolling activities are often done spontaneously when they have free time or leisure. In many cases, informants confess that they have no specific purpose when opening social media and only want to see the content available on the platform. In addition, some informants also revealed that scrolling activities often last longer than they expected. They often don't realize how much time they've been spending scrolling through content on social media. This phenomenon shows that scrolling activity has evolved into an automatic media use habit. In this context, these habits are not always consciously carried out by users, but rather become part of the routine of using digital media. The design of social media platforms also has an important role in shaping these habits. Features like *infinite scrolling* allow users to keep seeing new content indefinitely. In

addition, the recommendation algorithm used by social media platforms also displays content tailored to user preferences so that users are constantly interested in seeing the next content.

Fast Information Consumption Patterns

The findings of the study also show that habitual scrolling habits affect the way informants consume information on social media. Most informants admitted that they rarely read or watched the content in full when accessing social media. In contrast, informants tend to see content at a glance before moving on to other content. Some informants even stated that they often just read the title or look at the image contained in a piece of content before deciding to scroll to the next content. This rapid pattern of information consumption shows that social media has encouraged the formation of short and instant reading habits. The information presented in the form of short content also makes users more accustomed to the consumption of information that does not take long to understand. In addition, the presence of different types of content in one platform also makes users have a large selection of information that can be accessed in a short time. This causes users to move from one content to another more often without doing a deep understanding of the information they receive.

This rapid pattern of information consumption is in line with the characteristics of social media that emphasize the presentation of short and visual content. Content in the form of short videos, images, and short texts becomes more attractive to users because they can be consumed quickly. However, the rapid pattern of information consumption also has implications for the way users understand information. When information is consumed at a glance, the process of understanding the content of the information becomes more limited.

The Impact of Habitual Scrolling on Information Evaluation

The study's findings show that habitual scrolling habits also influence the way informants evaluate the information they find on social media. Most informants admitted that they rarely check the truth of information in depth when they see content on social media. In some cases, informants stated that they focused more on the content of the content that caught attention rather than examining the source of the information. Informants also admitted that they rarely conduct additional searches to ascertain whether information is true or not. This condition shows that the process of evaluating information often becomes limited in a social media environment characterized by rapid information consumption. Users are more likely to move on to the next piece of content rather than taking the time to analyze the information they've seen. Additionally, social media algorithms that display content based on user preferences can also influence how individuals perceive information. The content that appears on the *feed* page is usually tailored to the user's interests, making them see information that aligns with their views more often. This situation can reduce the likelihood of users seeing a different perspective on an issue. As a result, the process of evaluating information becomes increasingly limited because users are only exposed to certain types of content.

Decreased Critical Thinking Tendency

One of the implications that arises from habitual scrolling habits is the decreased tendency of users to think critically about the information they find on social media. Critical thinking is the ability of individuals to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information rationally before drawing a conclusion. This ability is very important in dealing with the flow of information in the digital era because not all information circulating on social media has the same level of credibility. However, the results of the study show that the habit of consuming

information quickly can affect the user's thought process. Informants tend to process information at a glance without conducting an in-depth analysis of the content of the information. This condition can make it easier for users to receive information without evaluating its truth. In some cases, informants also admit to having shared information on social media without first checking whether the information is true or not, often informants do it only because the content sent is based on what they like and also interesting according to them, and there are also send content because there is interesting or important information. This phenomenon suggests that a social media environment characterized by rapid consumption of information can affect the way individuals process information. The process of reflection on information becomes more limited because users focus more on content consumption than on the process of evaluating information.

Analysis of Research Findings in the Perspective of Communication Science

The findings of this study can be analyzed using several communication theory perspectives. In the perspective of Media Ecology Theory, communication technology not only functions as a means of conveying messages, but also as an environment that shapes the way humans think and interact with information. Social media as a digital communication environment has different characteristics from conventional media. Social media platforms allow information to be presented quickly and continuously through scrolling activities. These characteristics can affect the way users consume and understand information.

In addition, in the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, excessive exposure to information through social media can increase the cognitive load of users. When individuals receive too much information in a short period of time, their cognitive capacity can become so limited that they tend to process information quickly without conducting in-depth analysis.

The findings of this research can also be explained through Dual Process Theory which explains that humans have two different thinking systems, namely the fast-thinking system (*System 1*) and the analytical thinking system (*System 2*). The social media environment dominated by the consumption of fast content through scrolling activities tends to encourage the use of System 1 in the user's thought process.

As a result, the process of evaluating information that requires in-depth analysis becomes less frequent. This can affect users' critical thinking skills in dealing with various information circulating on social media.

CONCLUSION

The development of digital communication technology has changed the way individuals' access and consume information, with social media being the main source that encourages the emergence of habitual scrolling habits, which are the activity of automatically scrolling content without a clear purpose. Based on qualitative research, this habit has become part of a user's routine that is often triggered by boredom or entertainment needs, as well as reinforced by platform design such as infinite scrolling, notifications, and recommendation algorithms. As a result, users tend to consume information quickly, shallowly, and fragmentarily without conducting an in-depth evaluation of the credibility of the source. This phenomenon can be explained through the perspectives of Media Ecology, Cognitive Load Theory, and Dual Process Theory, which show that excessive exposure to information

encourages the use of a quick (intuitive) thinking system rather than an analytical one. Overall, habitual scrolling not only reflects changes in digital behaviour, but also has an impact on information consumption patterns and users' critical thinking skills, so individual awareness, platform design innovation, increased digital literacy by educational institutions, and the development of advanced research to understand this phenomenon more comprehensively are needed.

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