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Deconstructing Digital News: The Dissonance between Students' Language Attitudes and Critical Literacy in the Misinformation Era

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ABSTRACT

The growth of digital news has increased exposure to misleading information and demands students' ability to evaluate news critically. However, the gap between students' attitudes toward journalistic language principles and their critical literacy competence remains underexplored in journalism education. This study examines this gap using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design involving 29 sixth-semester students at STKIP Yapis Dompu, Indonesia. Quantitative data were collected through an attitude questionnaire and a critical literacy test using manipulated news texts. Subsequently, six students were selected for semi-structured interviews and think-aloud protocols. The results indicate that students' attitudes toward journalistic principles were relatively positive, while their critical literacy scores were comparatively lower. The correlation between the two variables was weak and not statistically significant, $r(27) = .13$, $p = .491$. Qualitative findings show that students relied on source reputation, factual information, and headlines, while paying less attention to framing, omitted context, and linguistic manipulation. Theoretically, this study extends research on the attitude–competence gap to critical news literacy in journalism education. Practically, the findings highlight the need to integrate critical evaluation of sources, evidence, language, and context into journalism instruction. The study concludes that positive attitudes toward journalistic principles do not necessarily translate into effective critical news evaluation.

Keywords: Critical Literacy; Digital News; Journalism Education**;** Language Attitudes; Mixed Methods

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital media contributes significantly to the transformation of news production, dissemination, and consumption (Alzubi, 2023). News no longer circulates exclusively through conventional media organizations, but also through social media and various digital platforms that operate based on user attention algorithms. This structural shift stimulates provocative headlines, emotional language, and viral information to achieve a wider reach than information based strictly on accuracy and context (Hastuti et al., 2025; Ramirez, 2021; Sera, 2023). This condition is closely related to what (Himma & Klaassen, 2026) as information disorder, which involves the circulation of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Empirical evidence also indicates that false news spreads farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than true news on social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018). From a psychological perspective, individuals' susceptibility to misinformation is influenced by how they process information and allocate attention to its accuracy (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). This phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when misinformation is presented simultaneously with authentic facts in a convincing news format. Consequently, contemporary misinformation does not merely relate to factual validity, but also encompasses the broader mechanisms of selection, headline codification, citation techniques, and textual contextualization.

Language plays an important role in shaping meaning, communicating perspectives, and influencing how readers interpret information in digital news relations (Okeke, 2025; Tian & Ge, 2024). The evaluation of digital news therefore requires attention not only to the information presented but also to how linguistic choices, headlines, and source attribution shape readers' understanding of news content. This critical evaluation process fundamentally involves two interconnected variables, namely language attitude and critical literacy. Language attitude comprises evaluations, beliefs, and tendencies toward language use, which encompass cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Li & Wei, 2025; Molnár et al., 2026)). In the journalistic realm, this attitude is reflected through assessments of accuracy, objectivity, responsibility, and the linguistic

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appropriateness of news. However, having a positive attitude toward these journalistic principles does not necessarily mean that students possess the ability to critically evaluate how headlines, lexical choices, news sources, citations, and information structures influence the interpretation of news. Conversely, critical literacy requires readers to actively interrogate the position of the communicator, the ideological interests of the text, the inclusivity of the public sphere, and the exclusion of specific information (Dooly et al., 2022; Lim & Darvin, 2026). These dimensions require readers to move beyond recognizing the normative principles of responsible language use toward examining how information is constructed, presented, and interpreted. Thus, language attitude and critical literacy constitute two distinct constructs that cannot be treated as a homogeneous ability.

The operational urgency of this study lies in its direct relevance to students of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at STKIP Yapis Dompu, West Nusa Tenggara, particularly within the Journalistic Practice course. Within this academic framework, students are required not only to produce language, but also to validate sources, construct headlines, and present information. These academic activities involve the application of linguistic and journalistic knowledge in producing and evaluating news content. At the same time, students encounter digital information from local, national, and global sources, which requires them to assess the accuracy, credibility, and presentation of news. This context provides an opportunity to examine whether students' understanding of responsible journalistic language is accompanied by their ability to critically evaluate digital news texts.

Previous studies have examined students' engagement with misinformation and their ability to evaluate information in digital environments from different perspectives. (Hayatun et al., 2022; Hoe-lian, 2025)) investigated the relationship between critical thinking ability and information literacy in identifying fake news among social media users, rather than students specifically. Orhan (2023) examined university students and found that critical thinking dispositions and new media literacy were associated with their ability to detect fake news. (Brodsky et al., 2021), in particular, examined lateral reading as an instructional strategy to help college students assess the credibility of online information by consulting sources beyond the webpage being evaluated. Their findings indicated improvements in students' use of lateral reading strategies and evaluation of online information credibility. (Subroto et al., 2026) examined the critical reading competence of coastal EFL university students in detecting online deception, highlighting the relationship between their perceived and actual abilities. However, empirical research investigating the specific relationship between students' attitudes toward journalistic language and their actual competence in critically evaluating digital news, particularly within the context of journalism education in regional higher education institutions, remains limited. This gap is important because positive attitudes toward accuracy, objectivity, and journalistic ethics do not necessarily indicate an equivalent ability to identify misleading information or examine how lexical choices, headlines, source attribution, citations, and contextual framing shape the interpretation of news. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the relationship between students' language attitudes and critical literacy competence in evaluating digital news, while also exploring how students interpret and assess news containing information manipulation through qualitative inquiry. The novelty of this study lies in examining the gap between students' attitudes toward journalistic language and their actual critical literacy competence within the context of journalism education in a regional higher education institution.

Based on this background, this study formulates three interrelated research questions: **(**1) what is the relationship between students' language attitudes and their critical literacy competence in evaluating digital news; (2) how do students interpret and evaluate news containing information manipulation; and (3) how do qualitative findings explain the relationship between language attitudes and critical literacy competence identified in the quantitative phase? Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relationship between students' language attitudes and critical literacy competence, explore how they interpret and evaluate manipulated digital news, and explain the quantitative findings through qualitative inquiry. The study focuses on students enrolled in the Journalistic Practice course in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at STKIP Yapis Dompu.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a participant-selection explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design was selected because the study first identified patterns of relationships and gaps between students' language attitudes toward journalistic language and their critical literacy competence through quantitative data, and subsequently used qualitative data to explain these findings

in greater depth. The research was conducted during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, specifically from January to June 2026, at the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program of STKIP Yapis Dompu, West Nusa Tenggara. The research subjects consisted of 29 sixth-semester students enrolled in a single class of the Journalistic Practice course. All students were involved in the quantitative phase through a total sampling technique. Based on the quantitative results, six students were purposively selected to participate in the qualitative phase as a nested sample, based on their score profiles in the two quantitative measures.

Quantitative data collection utilized two instruments. The first instrument was a Digital Journalistic Language Attitude Questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale to measure the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions toward ethical journalistic language use and the fundamental principles of the press. The second instrument was a Critical Literacy Competence Test consisting of complex multiple-choice questions and case analyses based on three mock digital news texts that were linguistically manipulated through clickbait strategies, source misattribution, and information bias. The test was used to measure students' abilities in deconstructing discourse, assessing source credibility, and recognizing bias and information manipulation. The feasibility of the quantitative instruments was examined through expert judgment and pilot testing to obtain information regarding instrument validity and reliability. In the qualitative phase, data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and think-aloud protocols while participants evaluated digital news texts. The study was conducted by strictly observing participant consent and identity confidentiality during data collection, analysis, and publication. A summary of the three mock news texts, including their respective manipulation categories, is provided in the Appendix.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis was used to observe score distributions, whereas inferential analysis was employed to test the relationship between students' language attitudes and critical literacy competence, as well as to identify individual gap patterns based on normalized scores. Pearson's product moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between the two variables. Qualitative data from the interviews and think-aloud protocols were analyzed thematically through data condensation, theme coding and clustering, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Taufik & Hakim, 2026). In the integration phase, the quantitative and qualitative results were connected through a joint display that mapped participant profiles alongside the themes emerging from the qualitative data. This integration was utilized to explain how and why patterns of dissonance between attitudes and competence emerged when students read and evaluated digital news.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employs an explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis was conducted to identify patterns in students' journalistic language attitudes, critical literacy competence, and the relationship between the two variables. These findings were subsequently examined in greater depth through interviews and think-aloud protocols to explain how students evaluate digital news containing information manipulation. The integration of both data types was utilized to understand the gap between the acceptance of journalistic principles and their application in critical news reading.

The results of the descriptive analysis demonstrate that the mean score for students' digital journalistic language attitudes reaches 82.14 (SD = 4.05), whereas the mean for critical literacy competence is 57.62 (SD = 7.25). The attitude scores range from 74 to 89, while the critical literacy scores range from 45 to 72.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of journalistic language attitudes and critical literacy competence

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Journalistic language attitude	74	89	82.14	4.05
Critical literacy competence	45	72	57.62	7.25

This score difference indicates that students' attitudes toward journalistic language principles are relatively higher than their critical literacy competence. However, both scores measure distinct aspects. The questionnaire evaluates attitudes toward journalistic principles, whereas the test measures news evaluation capabilities. Consequently, a higher attitude score does not inherently indicate the ability to apply those principles in critical reading.

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test demonstrate that the attitude scores ($W = 0.972$; $p = 0.618$) and critical literacy scores ($W = 0.979$; $p = 0.821$) do not show significant deviations from a normal distribution.

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Pearson correlation analysis yields a very weak and non-significant positive relationship between the two variables ($r(27) = .133$, $p = .491$). This result indicates that the study has not yet found adequate statistical evidence regarding a linear relationship between journalistic language attitudes and critical literacy competence.

This finding suggests that students' acceptance of the principles of accuracy, objectivity, and source credibility does not necessarily align with their news evaluation capabilities. To explain this pattern, six students with relatively high attitudes and relatively low critical literacy competence were selected as qualitative participants based on their standardized scores.

Table 2. Profiles of students selected for the qualitative phase

Participant	Attitude Score	Critical Literacy Score	Pattern
M26	85.00	45	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy
M15	86.25	50	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy
M03	82.50	46	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy
M11	83.75	51	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy
M01	80.00	48	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy
M05	78.75	49	Relatively high attitude, relatively low critical literacy

This selection enables the study to examine the strategies students employ when assessing news language, sources, evidence, and context. The six participants represent a nested sample aimed at explaining the quantitative patterns, rather than a sample intended to represent the entire student population.

The qualitative analysis identified five primary themes: acceptance of journalistic principles, limitations in recognizing language manipulation, reliance on source credibility, limitations in considering context and framing, and the gap between normative knowledge and critical application.

First, students understand the importance of accuracy, objectivity, source credibility, and the alignment between headlines and news content. Participant M26 stated:

> *"In my opinion, news must maintain an alignment between the headline and its content. If the headline differs from the content, readers can misunderstand the news."*

This statement demonstrates a normative understanding of the characteristics of high-quality news. However, critical evaluation also demands the capability to examine how headlines highlight specific information and shape reader expectations. This means that knowing journalistic principles does not inherently imply the ability to utilize them to assess how a text constructs meaning. This finding aligns with the theoretical distinction between language attitude and the ability to apply such knowledge in specific situations (Li & Wei, 2025)

Second, students are not always capable of explaining the manipulative functions of lexical choices. Participant M15 expressed:

> *"The words are indeed somewhat exaggerated and seem to be crafted to attract readers' interest. However, if the information is actually inside the news text, I still consider the news to be trustworthy."*

This participant could recognize exaggerated language, yet still regarded the mere presence of correct information as a sufficient justification to trust the entire news piece. From a critical discourse perspective, this response illustrates that recognizing exaggerated lexical choices does not necessarily lead readers to examine how language constructs the representation of an event. (Ali, 2025) emphasizes that language is not merely a neutral means of conveying information; lexical choices can foreground particular aspects of an issue and guide how readers interpret it. In this case, M15 noticed the attention-seeking character of the wording but did not question whether the representation created by that wording was proportionate to the evidence presented in the news text.

This tendency can also be understood through the use of cognitive heuristics in online credibility judgments. (Heide & Lim, 2015) explain that users often rely on accessible cues when assessing online information rather than examining all available evidence systematically. For M15, the presence of apparently correct information in the body of the news appears to function as such a cue, allowing the participant to

maintain trust despite recognizing exaggerated language. Authentic facts can indeed be presented in ways that produce a disproportionate interpretation. From a critical literacy perspective, readers must therefore question not only the factual accuracy of information but also how language choices and informational emphasis shape the understanding of an event (Gaillard et al., 2021; Nash, 2021). The finding points to a distinction between identifying sensational language and evaluating its discursive effect, which is central to critical news reading.

Third, news evaluation relies heavily on source reputation. Participant M03 stated:

"If the reporting organization is well-known, I trust it more. Especially if the same news has also been published by other media outlets."

Media reputation can serve as an initial consideration, but it does not guarantee that every claim is presented comprehensively and contextually. Similarly, identical coverage across multiple media outlets does not necessarily constitute independent verification if all outlets refer to the same initial source. This finding reflects the use of reputation as a heuristic in online information evaluation: readers may treat the familiarity or institutional standing of a media organization as an indicator of credibility. However, such reliance differs from lateral reading, in which readers leave the webpage being evaluated and consult other sources to establish the credibility of the publisher and the information itself (Macedo-rouet et al., 2021)

The distinction is important because the presence of the same report across several outlets does not automatically establish that the information has been independently verified. M03's response therefore suggests that students recognize the relevance of media reputation and cross-media comparison, but do not consistently distinguish repeated publication from independent corroboration. Source evaluation must consequently extend beyond recognizing institutional names to tracing primary sources, examining supporting evidence, and assessing the basis of a claim.

Fourth, students tend to center their attention on the explicitly stated facts and do not consistently examine omitted information. Participant M01 stated:

"I focus more on whether the written information is true or not. If the facts are correct, I do not necessarily think about other information that was not included."

A similar tendency was observed when Participant M05 evaluated the use of data:

"If there are numbers or data like that, in my opinion, the news is more convincing. I usually look at whether there is data to support the statement."

Both statements demonstrate that the presence of facts and numbers forms the basis of assessment, whereas the adequacy of evidence, context, and the structural arrangement of information are not always examined. This pattern is relevant to framing theory, which emphasizes that the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality can shape how an issue is understood, while other aspects may be marginalized or omitted (Borah, 2011). M01's response illustrates this limitation: attention is directed toward whether the stated facts are correct, without necessarily considering what relevant information has been excluded. M05's response reveals a related tendency to treat numerical data as a sign of credibility, although the presence of numbers alone does not establish the adequacy, relevance, or representativeness of the evidence.

(Subroto et al., 2026) similarly draw attention to the need to examine students' actual critical reading competence when evaluating online deception, rather than relying solely on their perceived ability. The present findings extend this concern by showing how attention to factual statements and numerical evidence can coexist with limited consideration of selection, omission, and framing. Critical reading must therefore pay attention not only to what is stated, but also to how information is selected, positioned, and framed (Gaillard et al., 2021; Nash, 2021).

Fifth, the gap between normative knowledge and critical application is evident in students' verification strategies. Participant M11 stated:

"Usually, I check the same news in other media outlets. If several media report it, I am more convinced that the information is correct."

Comparing media coverage is a useful initial step, but it remains inadequate if different outlets merely repeat information from the same source. This distinction is central to lateral reading, which requires readers to move beyond the original webpage and investigate the source, evidence, and corroborating information through independent sources (Macedo-rouet et al., 2021). Although M11 demonstrates an awareness that news

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should be checked against other reports, the participant's strategy appears to rely primarily on the number of outlets carrying the same information. This differs from professional fact-checking practices, which require claims to be traced to their original sources and assessed against verifiable evidence.

The response therefore indicates that students understand the importance of verification, but have not yet applied it systematically. The issue is not simply whether students compare reports, but whether they can determine the independence and evidential basis of the sources being compared.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that the primary issue is not an absence of knowledge regarding journalistic principles, but rather a limitation in transforming that knowledge into evaluation strategies. These findings are related to prior research on students' competence in detecting fake news, which emphasizes the role of critical thinking dispositions and new media literacy (Hayatun et al., 2022; Hoe-lian, 2025). However, the present study extends this discussion by shifting attention from students' ability to identify misinformation to the relationship between their attitudes toward journalistic language and their actual practices when evaluating digital news. The participants generally recognized principles such as accuracy, source credibility, and the importance of supporting evidence, yet their responses revealed limited attention to lexical manipulation, omitted information, and independent source verification. This finding suggests that positive attitudes toward journalistic principles should not be treated as sufficient evidence of critical literacy competence. In this study, the gap becomes visible in how students evaluate news language, sources, evidence, and context.

The quantitative and qualitative results are integrated through a joint display to explain the relationship patterns discovered in the first phase. The following table converges the statistical results with the evaluation strategies that emerged from the qualitative data.

Table 3. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Supporting Evidence	Integrative Interpretation
Relatively high attitude (M = 82.14)	Students understand the principles of accuracy and the alignment between headlines and content	M26: *"News must maintain an alignment between the headline and its content."*	There is a normative awareness of journalistic principles.
Lower critical literacy (M = 57.62)	Students recognize emotional language but experience difficulty explaining its manipulative functions	M15: *"...crafted to attract readers' interest."*	Knowledge regarding journalistic principles has not always developed into critical analysis.
Very weak and non-significant correlation (r(27) = .133, p = .491)	Evaluation relies heavily on source reputation and the presence of data	M03: *"...well-known organization"*; M05: *"...there are numbers or data..."*	A positive attitude is not automatically followed by critical evaluation capabilities.
Six participants demonstrate relatively high attitude and relatively low critical literacy patterns	Verification and attention toward context are not yet systematic	M11: *"...check the same news in other media"*; M01: *"...if the facts are correct..."*	Dissonance primarily reflects a gap between normative knowledge and critical application.

Note: Quotes in the table are summarized from the excerpts displayed in the qualitative description.

This integration demonstrates that the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative patterns. Students accept journalistic principles, but they do not always utilize them to examine language manipulation, sources, evidence, and context. Thus, the dissonance in this study is more accurately understood as a gap between normative knowledge and critical application.

This interpretation must be limited to the available evidence. The non-significant correlation does not prove that the two variables are completely unrelated; rather, it indicates that this study has not yet found adequate evidence of a linear relationship between them. Furthermore, since the qualitative participants were selected based on specific dissonance profiles, their findings serve to explain the investigated cases and cannot be directly generalized to the entire student population.

The findings of this study indicate the need for a journalistic pedagogy that connects news production with critical news analysis. It is insufficient for students to merely learn how to write headlines, select sources, and utilize data; they also need to examine how these elements shape reader understanding. A practical sequence for the Journalistic Practice course could begin with students identifying the language and framing used in a digital news report. They could then conduct lateral reading by leaving the original webpage, checking the publisher, and tracing the claim to its primary source. The next stage would require students to compare the evidence presented across independent sources, identify relevant information that has been omitted, and assess whether numerical data support the claims being made. Finally, students could rewrite the news report or its headline and explain how their editorial choices affect the representation of the event.

This sequence is consistent with the emphasis on lateral reading as an instructional strategy for evaluating online credibility and with critical literacy approaches that connect textual analysis to the examination of representation, power, and meaning. Such activities can help students move beyond recognizing journalistic principles toward applying them in the critical evaluation and production of digital news. This approach is particularly relevant to students in Indonesian Language and Literature Education programs because it strengthens their ability to examine how language constructs and communicates meaning.

This study possesses limitations as it was conducted within a single class consisting of 29 students, with six participants in the qualitative phase selected based on specific dissonance profiles. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all Indonesian Language and Literature Education students. The utilization of mock digital news texts also does not fully represent the complexity of information within actual digital platforms. Future research could involve multiple higher education institutions, employ actual news from diverse platforms, and test the effectiveness of learning designs that integrate news production with critical evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students' attitudes toward journalistic language principles are relatively higher than their critical literacy competence in evaluating digital news. Students understand the importance of accuracy, objectivity, and source credibility, but they are not yet fully capable of assessing how lexical choices, headlines, evidence, framing, and context influence the meaning of news. The relationship between attitudes and critical literacy competence was also found to be very weak and non-significant. These findings indicate a distinct gap between the normative understanding of journalistic principles and their actual application in critically reading news. Theoretically, this study contributes to critical news literacy research by highlighting the gap between students' attitudes toward journalistic language principles and their application in evaluating digital news. These findings reaffirm the importance of journalistic pedagogy that is oriented not only toward news writing skills, but also toward the capability to evaluate information critically. Students need to be trained to trace primary sources, examine evidence, compare media coverage, and identify framing and omitted contexts. This type of learning can assist students in applying journalistic principles more reflectively when dealing with digital information.

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