

## Students' Perception of The Role of Change Agents in the Digital Era

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### ABSTRACT

In the digital era, university students are expected to serve as agents of change who can contribute meaningfully to social transformation through the use of technology and digital media. This research explores the perceptions of students from STIA Lancang Kuning Dumai regarding their roles in initiating change via digital platforms. Using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, the study identifies students' understanding of their roles, their digital engagement practices, and the challenges they face. The findings show that students recognize their potential to educate, inspire, and mobilize communities through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. However, challenges such as low digital literacy among the public, resistance to change, and limited technical skills often hinder their impact. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrate strong motivation and adaptability, proving themselves to be resilient and responsible digital actors. Enhancing digital literacy and providing skill-building opportunities are recommended to maximize their role as digital change agents.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this digital era, social media and other online platforms have become important tools for students in organizing and mobilizing social action. Students, as an educated young generation, have great potential to utilize digital technology in driving social transformation and community development. This shows that social media has an important role in the development of social movements among Indonesian students. Social movements carried out through social media can mobilize larger masses, arouse critical attitudes among netizens, and shape public opinion. Social media also acts as a means to find joint solutions and form a collective identity (Anshori & Nadiyya, 2023).

However, the role of students as agents of change in the digital era is not free from various challenges. Students are faced with the complexity of internal and structural challenges, including repression from the apparatus of power and attempts to hijack the state apparatus in building hegemony. This situation places students in a complex political dynamic, where democracy tends to move towards elitism and away from people's democracy (Barung, 2023).

In addition, digital literacy is an important factor in the effectiveness of students' roles as agents of change. Although digital media use is increasing, digital literacy among students is not always comparable. Students as educated people and the millennial generation who deal with various information on social media or online media every day should have good digital literacy skills to prevent the spread of fake news and misleading information (Pratama et al., 2023).

It is time for students to no longer be passive or silent towards the social dynamics that occur. Students must participate in shaping the direction of change in order to create a just and prosperous society. They must play a role as drivers of empowerment in national development, both physically and non-physically. The role of this millennial generation is strengthened by three main functions: as agents of change, social supervisors, and the next generation of the nation. By carrying out these roles, students can make a major contribution to building a better Indonesia in the future (Karisma et al., 2017).

Students are individuals who have strong characters in conveying ideas and concepts that provide solutions to various problems faced today. They act as agents of change in various aspects of community life, such as social, cultural, mindset, economic, and political. Therefore, the benchmark for student success is not only from the academic side, but also from the extent to which they are able to fight for the interests of the wider community. Students are not only required to graduate with a diploma, but are also challenged to bring about real change through the knowledge and experience they have. In this millennial era, students are expected to act as agents of change as well as communication agents, who are ready to face various challenges that arise along with the rapid development of science and technology, especially in Indonesia. (Karisma et al., 2017).

Thus, to maximize the role of students as agents of change in the digital era, it is necessary to increase digital literacy, critical understanding of political and social dynamics, and the ability to utilize digital technology effectively for positive purposes. This will enable students to contribute significantly to social transformation and community development in the digital era (Iskandar et al., 2023).

Based on the observation results, the role of students as agents of change in the digital era raises various views, both from students themselves and the surrounding community. This research is motivated by the importance of understanding **"How students perceive their role as agents of change in the digital era"**. Therefore, this study aims to determine students' views on this role, analyze the extent to which students are able to utilize digital media to drive social change, and identify the challenges they face in the process. In addition, this study also seeks to explore students' expectations for increasing digital literacy, skills development, and environmental support in strengthening their contribution as relevant, innovative, and impactful agents of change in the digital era.

According to Webster's Dictionary (1997), perception is defined as the ability to feel and understand various qualities, objects, or other things through the five senses, awareness, and personal meaning. Perception includes a deeper understanding and intuition about something. In other words, perception is knowledge or understanding that comes from sensory experience and is then formed in a person's mind into a certain concept, idea, or impression. How a person understands their feelings greatly affects this process, so perception is subjective and can vary from person to person. (Harisah & Masiming, 2008).

According to Rahmat (2005), there are a number of personal factors that can influence a person's perception. (Rahmat et al., nd).

- Experience, someone who has experienced a certain situation tends to have a more sensitive perception of similar situations.
- Motivation, the drive to believe that the world is fair is one of the most common forms of motivation that influences interpersonal perception. If someone believes in a "just world," they feel that everything is orderly and balanced.

- Personality , psychoanalysis sees it as projection, which is a person's tendency to unconsciously transfer or reflect his or her own emotions and experiences onto others. In other words, people often judge others based on emotions or personal experiences that are not yet clear.

CP Chaplin said that a role is a function that a person performs in a group or institution, which reflects the responsibility and contribution of the individual in that social scope. In addition, a role is also considered as a behavior or action expected from a person, which reflects his or her character or distinctive nature. In other words, a role determines how a person should behave according to his or her position and identity in an institution or community. (Chaplin, 1981) .

In the book *Educational Administration: Concepts and Practices* by Fred C. Lunenburg and Allan C. Ornstein (2008), According to them, change agents are not just technical actors, but also transformative leaders who bring new directions to institutions. There are several main roles that are indicators of the success of a change agent (Lunenburg et al., 2008) :

1. As an Innovator
2. As a Communicator
3. As a Facilitator of Change
4. As a Leader in Innovation Implementation

## 2. METHOD

This research was conducted at the Lancang Kuning School of Administrative Sciences (STIA) in Dumai City, located on Jalan Gunung Merapi, Bumi Ayu Village, South Dumai District, Dumai City. The informants in this study consisted of five active students of the State Administration study program who actively utilize digital media in social activities and change campaigns. These participants were selected because of their direct involvement in utilizing digital technology to voice aspirations and disseminate positive information in the campus environment and the surrounding community. They have a variety of experiences that can provide a real picture of how students play their role as agents of change in the digital era and the challenges faced in the process.

In this study, the data used consists of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from the results of in-depth interviews with STIA Lancang Kuning Dumai students as the main subjects, in order to explore their perceptions and experiences in carrying out their roles as agents of change in the digital era. Primary data is data collected directly by researchers from primary sources in the field. (Sugiyono, 2013) . Meanwhile, secondary data is used as a complement and reinforcement of information from primary data, which comes from various indirect sources such as books, scientific journals, previous research, relevant literature, official documents, and other digital sources related to this research topic. (Sugiyono, 2013) .

Data collection techniques in this study were carried out through two main methods, namely interviews and documentation. Interviews were used to dig up in-depth information from active students of STIA Lancang Kuning Dumai as the main informants, with the aim of understanding their perceptions of their role as agents of change in the digital era. This technique was chosen because it is able to provide richer and more contextual data, especially when the number of respondents is relatively small (Sugiyono, 2013) . In addition, documentation is also used as a complementary technique to collect physical evidence in the form of writing, photos, screenshots, video recordings, and other documents relevant to student activities in the context of the study. This documentation functions as a supporting source of primary data that can strengthen the results of the analysis (Agave, 2020) .

The data analysis technique in this study was carried out through three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data analysis aims to systematically organize information obtained from interviews and documentation so that it is easier to understand and used as a basis for answering the formulation of research problems. The first stage is data reduction, which is the process of summarizing, filtering, and focusing on important information with the aim of simplifying data to be more focused and efficient in the analysis process. (Sugiyono, 2013) . Furthermore, the reduced data is presented in the form of a structured narrative description, making it easier for researchers to identify thematic patterns and relationships between categories (Sugiyono, 2013) . The final stage is drawing conclusions and verification, where researchers compile interpretations based on the data that has been analyzed, then retest the conclusions with additional evidence so that the research results are credible, valid, and accountable. (Sugiyono, 2013) .

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. The Role of Change Agents in the Digital Era

To become a great, strong, prosperous, and dignified country in the eyes of the world, change must occur. As a group of educated people from various disciplines, students will become an extraordinary social force in carrying out various transformations. In this case, as agents of change, students have the ability to change the world by becoming part of society and helping to solve various problems faced by society. (Istichomaharani & Habibah, 2016) .

Student movements are not only happening on the streets, but also in the digital space. Social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have become important tools for spreading information, organizing actions, and gaining support quickly. By using these platforms, students can voice their desires, invite others to participate, or simply share the progress of the action directly . For example, a group of students used a simple but meaningful approach by raising the issue of sexual violence on campus. They used educational carousel content on Instagram to start an anti-sexual violence campaign. With an attractive visual design, they shared important information such as victims' rights, reporting procedures, and how to create a safe and helpful campus environment , this is not only informative, this content also encourages other students to speak up and be more sensitive to the issue. (Syahputri & Katimin, 2024) .

From the results of the interviews conducted by the author with several students, it can be concluded that they have a fairly broad understanding of the meaning of the role as an agent of change, especially in the context of the digital era. Although they come from different backgrounds, in general they agree that being an agent of change is not just about talking about change, but also about how to make a real contribution through the use of technology positively and responsibly.

One informant said, "*In my opinion, being an agent of change means playing an active role in utilizing technology to create a positive impact.*" He added that he tried to develop digital skills, keep up with technological developments, and use digital platforms as a medium to share knowledge and inspiration. This shows that students are not only consumers of information, but also disseminators of positive values through digital media.

The importance of critical thinking and encouraging innovation was also emphasized by another informant. He believed that students should be able to utilize technological innovations to create real solutions to problems faced by society. I believe that agents of change must be active, creative, and sensitive to the problems they face. Another informant stated, "*We have many tools to make changes in this digital era, it's just how we use them.*"

There are also informants who interpret the role of change agents as an effort to encourage mutual progress in the organization or the closest environment. He said that it does not have to have a big impact immediately, but every small step that brings improvement, if done consistently, can be part of the change process. Several informants also said that this role requires students to be able to use information wisely, not be easily fooled by hoaxes, and can be an example in building a healthy digital environment.

When asked about the most effective platforms for making changes, most respondents named TikTok and Instagram as the most influential media. One student said that "TikTok is currently very effective because it has a lot of users, especially teenagers. Information can spread quickly, especially if the content is relatable and interesting." He also said that the FOMO ( *Fear of Missing Out* ) culture among users makes messages more quickly captured and shared.

Meanwhile, Instagram is considered a platform that supports visual campaigns in a more structured way. Several respondents mentioned features such as *Story* , *Reels* , and *Carousel Post* as creative media to build a narrative of change. One respondent said, "*Instagram is effective because it can be reposted by friends, so the content can spread more widely.*" This shows that the power of social networks plays a major role in spreading positive messages.

#### B. Challenges Faced by Students in Carrying Out Their Role as Agents of Change Through Digital Media

Our lives are almost inseparable from technology in this modern, highly digital era. Technology can now help humans move faster, work more efficiently, and access data anytime and anywhere. Now it seems like the world is in our hands. However, behind all the convenience, technology has its weaknesses. Information that is easily found can be misleading if not filtered carefully. In addition, there are ethical issues on the internet, technology addiction, and the spread of hoaxes. This is a dilemma experienced by many people, including students (Arlina et al., 2023).

Studying is clearly the main task as a student. But more than that, students also play an important role in the life of the country and nation. They are called agents of change; they are expected to bring change to the wider community and themselves. Students are future leaders. It is not surprising that those who are required to think critically, creatively, and visionarily have the ability to read and contribute to the changing times. (Arlina et al., 2023).

The results of interviews conducted by the author with several students show that although digital media offers many opportunities to voice ideas and encourage social change, there are many real challenges they face when using it. These challenges come from various sources, including technical, social, and personal.

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges is the low digital literacy in society. Several informants said that even though they have tried to convey correct and educational information, not everyone can understand, let alone receive it well. *"Many people are still technologically illiterate,"* said one informant. He added that often the messages he conveys are interpreted differently or even considered unimportant. This makes the process of spreading ideas slower because the audience is not ready to receive information digitally.

Another challenge that arises is negative comments or insults that often arise when students voice sensitive issues. One informant said that he once received bad comments when uploading educational content about sexual violence. Even though his intention was only to raise awareness, not to corner any party. This shows that the digital space is not always friendly to voices that try to bring about change, even from among students themselves.

In addition, resistance to change is a significant obstacle. Students are considered "not good enough" to discuss big issues. Several students stated that simply because of their status as students, their voices are often dismissed or not taken seriously. Furthermore, limited digital skills are also a barrier. Not all students have mastered how to create engaging visual content, construct the right narrative, or understand how social media algorithms work. One informant said that he often struggles to design eye-catching content, even though it is important for the message to be well received by the audience. Lack of training or access to technical knowledge is a barrier that makes their steps feel slow.

One of the students said that he tried to help small business owners in his neighborhood to understand how to market products through social media and *e-commerce platforms*. *"Initially, I helped create sales accounts and taught them how to post products,"* he said. However, he admitted that the challenge lies in the lack of digital understanding from the business owners themselves, so the mentoring process does not always run smoothly. This reflects that the challenges do not only come from students, but also from the environment that is not ready to accept digital-based changes.

Another informant said that he actively shares credible information and tries to correct hoaxes on social media, especially in family groups. He said, *"Sometimes when I clarify hoax information, people think I'm a know-it-all."* This shows the challenges in the form of social resistance. And lack of digital literacy, even in close environments. Students in this case are not only required to convey information, but must also be prepared to face rejection and misunderstanding.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that students of STIA Lancang Kuning Dumai are aware of their role as digital change agents who can contribute to social transformation through digital platforms. They actively use media like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to educate, inspire, and

mobilize their communities. Despite facing challenges such as limited digital literacy in society, resistance to change, and technical skill gaps, the students demonstrate strong motivation and adaptability. To strengthen their impact, efforts to enhance digital literacy and provide continuous digital skill development are essential.

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