

Reading in a digital ecology: University students’ inferential reading comprehension across the social media landscape

Iin Nur Yasinta¹, Sakaria¹, Abdul Haliq¹, Muh. Bahly Basri^{1*}

¹Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: digital ecology; digital platforms; inferential reading comprehension; social media Article History Received: 2026-06-27 Reviewed: 2026-07-12 Accepted: 2026-08-21  License: CC BY-SA 4.0	This study examined differences in university students’ inferential reading comprehension according to the number of social media platforms they used. A quantitative comparative design was employed with 492 students from four universities in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected through Microsoft Forms using a 15-item inferential reading comprehension test and analyzed using descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and Tukey’s HSD post hoc test. Mean scores increased across the 1–3 platform group (M = 9.0385), the 4–6 platform group (M = 9.5818), and the 7–9 platform group (M = 9.7500). The ANOVA indicated a significant overall group difference, $F(2, 489) = 3.561$, $p = .029$, with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .014$). Tukey’s HSD showed a significant difference only between the 1–3 and 4–6 platform groups. These findings suggest that the breadth of social media platform use is associated with inferential reading comprehension, although the association is small and not fully linear. The study highlights the potential value of integrating critical digital literacy into reading instruction in higher education.
*Corresponding Author	Muh. Bahly Basri Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia; m.bahly.basri@unm.ac.id
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INTRODUCTION

University students’ reading practices are embedded in an increasingly complex digital literacy ecology. Social media has expanded the range of textual encounters available to students through posts, comments, discussion threads, short-form news, infographics, captioned videos, and links to diverse information sources (Sugerman et al., 2024; Widyaningrum et al., 2023). Statistics Indonesia (2025) reported that 72.78% of the Indonesian population had accessed the internet in 2024, up from 69.21% in 2023. In addition, Statistics Indonesia (2025) reported that 68.65% of the population owned a mobile phone. These figures indicate that digital access has become an integral part of everyday life in Indonesia and has contributed to the emergence of a new literacy ecology, including among university students who engage with multiple forms of text on social media. Students’ participation across multiple digital platforms therefore raises an important question about how the breadth of social media use relates to higher-order reading abilities, particularly inferential reading comprehension.

Inferential reading comprehension requires readers to construct meaning beyond information that is explicitly stated. At this level, readers must connect ideas, interpret authorial intent, identify relationships among pieces of information, draw on prior knowledge, and formulate logical conclusions from a text (McCarthy & McNamara, 2021; Rice et al., 2024). This ability is particularly important for university students because academic work requires them to process conceptual, argumentative, and multidisciplinary texts. Recent scholarship on the science of reading has emphasized that reading comprehension cannot be explained solely by vocabulary knowledge and decoding; it also involves knowledge, cognitive processes, metacognitive strategies, and higher-order thinking skills (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Medranda-Morales et al.,

2023; Paige et al., 2024). In higher education, inferential comprehension is therefore a key indicator of students' capacity to read analytically, reflectively, and critically.

Previous research has extensively examined the relationship between digital technology and reading comprehension. Some studies have focused on differences between screen and print reading, including the effects of digital devices on concentration, depth of comprehension, and the reading experience (Altamura et al., 2024; Basri et al., 2024; Furenes et al., 2021). Other studies have shown that digital academic reading is shaped by reading strategies, text complexity, metacognitive awareness, motivation, and students' reading habits (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Chang et al., 2023; Habók et al., 2024). In higher education, the challenges of digital reading are also associated with inequalities in opportunity, technology-related distraction, and students' ability to regulate attention when engaging with digital texts (Howard-Gosse et al., 2024; Kuhn et al., 2024).

Research on social media in education has produced mixed findings. Social media can support academic interaction, language learning, access to learning resources, and collaboration among students (Shamsi & Bozorgian, 2022; Ssekiziyivu et al., 2023). At the same time, social media use may be associated with distraction, changes in reading habits, reduced time spent on deep reading, and a tendency toward rapid and fragmented reading (Kolhar et al., 2021; Ngwoke et al., 2024). These contrasting findings position social media as a digital literacy environment that can broaden exposure to texts while simultaneously challenging concentration and depth of information processing.

Although previous studies have examined reading ability in relation to digital literacy, research linking the breadth of social media platform use to university students' inferential reading comprehension remains limited. This gap is important because university students operate in highly intensive digital environments while inferential reading remains central to academic learning. The novelty of the present study lies in using the number of social media platforms as a grouping variable. Its focus on inferential reading comprehension also offers a conceptual contribution by positioning reading as a reasoning process. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine differences in university students' inferential reading comprehension according to the number of social media platforms they used. The findings are expected to provide an empirical basis for developing reading instruction that is more responsive to students' digital literacy practices.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative comparative design to examine differences in university students' inferential reading comprehension according to the number of social media platforms they used. The participants were 492 students enrolled at four universities in South Sulawesi, Indonesia: Universitas Negeri Makassar, Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Universitas Muslim Indonesia, and Universitas Islam Makassar.

The research instrument was administered digitally through Microsoft Forms and consisted of two main sections. The first section collected demographic information and data on social media use, including the number of platforms used by each participant. The second section comprised a 15-item inferential reading comprehension test with a maximum score of 15. Each correct response was scored 1 and each incorrect response 0, with the total score calculated as the sum of correct responses. The test assessed participants' ability to interpret implied meanings, draw conclusions, connect information across sentences or paragraphs, infer authorial intent, and identify logical relationships within a text. An initial item analysis showed that all 15 items had statistically significant item-total correlations ($r = .215-.458$, $p < .001$).

Data were collected online by distributing a Microsoft Forms link to students at the four participating universities. Participants completed the form independently according to the instructions provided at the beginning of the instrument. Response quality was addressed by explicitly instructing participants to work independently and by checking response completeness before analysis. The collected data were then screened for completeness and suitability for analysis, and inferential reading comprehension scores were calculated from the number of correct responses. Participants were subsequently classified into three groups according to the number of social media platforms used: 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9 platforms. Three-platform intervals

were used to create readily interpretable low-, moderate-, and high-use strata while retaining adequate group sizes ($n = 130, 318, \text{ and } 44$, respectively). This classification was used to examine differences in inferential reading comprehension across varying levels of social media platform breadth.

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize inferential reading comprehension scores across the three platform-use groups. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then conducted to determine whether mean comprehension scores differed among the groups. When the omnibus ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference, Tukey's HSD post hoc test was used to identify the specific group pairs that differed significantly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined university students' inferential reading comprehension according to the number of social media platforms they used. Platform use was classified into three categories: 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9 platforms. The analysis comprised descriptive statistics, a one-way ANOVA, and Tukey's HSD post hoc test.

The descriptive analysis showed that the largest group consisted of students who used 4–6 social media platforms ($n = 318$), followed by those who used 1–3 platforms ($n = 130$) and 7–9 platforms ($n = 44$). Descriptive statistics for inferential reading comprehension are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for inferential reading comprehension

Number of Platforms	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Min	Max
1–3	130	9.0385	2.46967	0.21660	8.6099	9.4670	0	13
4–6	318	9.5818	1.96449	0.11016	9.3650	9.7985	2	14
7–9	44	9.7500	1.88167	0.28367	9.1779	10.3221	6	14
Total	492	9.4533	2.11383	0.09530	9.2660	9.6405	0	14

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean inferential reading comprehension score was 9.4533 ($SD = 2.11383$), with observed scores ranging from 0 to 14. Descriptively, mean scores increased as the number of social media platforms used increased. The 1–3 platform group obtained a mean score of 9.0385, the 4–6 platform group obtained a mean of 9.5818, and the 7–9 platform group achieved the highest mean score, at 9.7500.

Differences were also evident in score dispersion. The 1–3 platform group had the largest standard deviation ($SD = 2.46967$) and scores ranging from 0 to 13, indicating greater variability in inferential reading comprehension. The 4–6 platform group had an SD of 1.96449, with scores ranging from 2 to 14. The 7–9 platform group had the smallest standard deviation ($SD = 1.88167$), with scores ranging from 6 to 14. This pattern suggests that students who used a larger number of social media platforms tended to have more stable scores and did not show extremely low performance. Descriptively, broader platform use was associated with somewhat higher inferential comprehension scores, although the differences in group means were modest.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test whether inferential reading comprehension differed across the three social media platform-use groups. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA results

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	31.493	2	15.746	3.561	.029
Within Groups	2162.432	489	4.422		
Total	2193.925	491			

As shown in Table 2, the ANOVA yielded $F(2, 489) = 3.561, p = .029$. Because the p value was below .05, inferential reading comprehension differed significantly across the three groups

defined by the number of social media platforms used. Thus, the breadth of social media platform use was associated with variation in students' inferential reading comprehension.

The magnitude of the association was estimated using eta squared, calculated by dividing the between-groups sum of squares by the total sum of squares. The resulting η^2 value was .014, indicating that the number of social media platforms accounted for approximately 1.4% of the variance in inferential reading comprehension. Although the omnibus group difference was statistically significant, the effect size was small. Because the ANOVA indicated a significant difference, Tukey's HSD post hoc test was conducted to determine which group pairs differed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons

Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	SE	p	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
1-3	4-6	-0.54330	0.21891	.036	-1.0579	-0.0287
1-3	7-9	-0.71154	0.36677	.129	-1.5738	0.1507
4-6	1-3	0.54330	0.21891	.036	0.0287	1.0579
4-6	7-9	-0.16824	0.33824	.873	-0.9634	0.6269
7-9	1-3	0.71154	0.36677	.129	-0.1507	1.5738
7-9	4-6	0.16824	0.33824	.873	-0.6269	0.9634

Table 3 shows that the only statistically significant pairwise difference occurred between students who used 1-3 platforms and those who used 4-6 platforms. The mean difference for the 1-3 versus 4-6 comparison was -0.54330 ($p = .036$), indicating that students who used 4-6 platforms had significantly higher inferential reading comprehension scores than those who used 1-3 platforms. The difference between the 1-3 and 7-9 platform groups was not significant ($p = .129$), even though the 7-9 platform group had a higher descriptive mean. Likewise, the difference between the 4-6 and 7-9 platform groups was not significant ($p = .873$). Thus, the 7-9 platform group did not differ significantly from either of the other groups.

The post hoc findings clarify that differences in inferential reading comprehension were not present across all pairwise comparisons. The principal difference was between the low-breadth group (1-3 platforms) and the moderate-breadth group (4-6 platforms). The results therefore do not support a fully linear pattern in which inferential reading comprehension consistently increases as students use more social media platforms. Although the group means increased descriptively, a statistically significant difference emerged only in the transition from 1-3 to 4-6 platforms.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the number of social media platforms used was associated with differences in inferential reading comprehension. Students in the 7-9 platform group had the highest mean and the most stable score distribution, but they did not differ significantly from the other groups. The clearest statistical finding was that students who used 4-6 platforms outperformed those who used 1-3 platforms. The number of social media platforms can therefore be understood as one factor associated with variation in students' inferential comprehension, although its contribution was small and the relationship was not fully linear.

The findings show that the number of social media platforms used by students was associated with variation in inferential reading comprehension. Mean scores increased descriptively across the 1-3, 4-6, and 7-9 platform groups. The one-way ANOVA indicated a significant overall group difference, $F(2, 489) = 3.561$, $p = .029$. However, Tukey's HSD showed that the only significant pairwise difference was between the 1-3 and 4-6 platform groups ($p = .036$). Neither the 1-3 versus 7-9 comparison nor the 4-6 versus 7-9 comparison was significant. These findings therefore do not support a simple linear relationship whereby using more social media platforms is consistently associated with higher inferential reading comprehension.

This pattern is important because it points to a more limited form of group differentiation. Students who used 4-6 platforms demonstrated significantly higher inferential reading comprehension than those who used 1-3 platforms, whereas extending platform use to 7-9 platforms did not produce an additional significant difference. This pattern may suggest that

breadth of platform use has a limited contribution. Once a moderate level of platform use is reached, adding more platforms may not provide further meaningful gains in inferential comprehension.

From a digital literacy perspective, engagement with several social media platforms may broaden students' exposure to diverse forms of text. Students encounter posts, comments, discussion threads, infographics, captioned videos, digital news, and links to information sources. Such textual diversity creates reading experiences that are contextual, multimodal, and socially situated. Barrot (2023) noted that social media has become a language-learning environment that provides linguistic exposure, authentic interaction, and opportunities for informal learning. Aloraini and Cardoso (2022) similarly found that students viewed social media as a potentially useful space for language learning because it provides rapid access to content and interaction. In the present study, students in the 4–6 platform group may have encountered a broader range of digital texts than those in the 1–3 platform group, thereby creating more opportunities to engage with implied meaning.

The Tukey HSD results also caution against assuming that greater platform breadth automatically leads to better inferential reading. Although the 7–9 platform group recorded the highest mean score (9.7500), it did not differ significantly from either of the other groups. Using many platforms may not necessarily correspond to high-quality literacy activity. Students may use multiple platforms primarily for entertainment, rapid communication, short-form video consumption, or other activities that place limited demands on deep text processing. Lambton-Howard et al. (2021) emphasized that the educational effects of social media depend heavily on the context of use, users' perceptions, and the design of the activities undertaken.

The significant difference between the 1–3 and 4–6 platform groups may be interpreted in light of the possibility that moderate digital exposure provides textual variety without necessarily intensifying attentional fragmentation. Students who use 4–6 platforms may encounter sufficiently diverse reading experiences in terms of text types, language styles, and communication patterns, while still being able to manage attention more effectively than those who engage with a very large number of platforms. Galindo-Domínguez et al. (2025) showed that social media use in higher education may be associated with critical thinking when accompanied by metacognition, self-regulation, and problem solving. Abd Halim et al. (2024) likewise emphasized that social media can support critical thinking in online learning when it is structured around reflective activities. The difference observed in the 4–6 platform group may therefore reflect the potential value of sufficiently broad digital literacy experiences rather than the number of platforms alone.

Inferential reading comprehension is a higher-order reading ability that requires readers to connect explicit and implicit information, draw conclusions, identify logical relationships, and interpret authorial intent. On social media, inferential processing may occur when users interpret the context of a post, infer meanings in comments, recognize implied intent or irony, evaluate an author's position, and connect information across sources. Samiei and Ebadi (2021) showed that inferential comprehension can develop in digital learning environments that allow exploration and reflection. Wang (2023) also found that collaborative online learning can enhance reading skills and self-regulated learning. The present findings are consistent with these perspectives, particularly in the 4–6 platform group, which achieved significantly higher scores than the 1–3 platform group.

Differences in standard deviations and minimum scores provide additional context for the group pattern. The 1–3 platform group had the largest standard deviation and the lowest minimum score, whereas the 7–9 platform group had the smallest standard deviation and the highest minimum score. This suggests that students with broader platform exposure tended to show more stable performance. Nevertheless, the greater stability of the 7–9 platform group was not sufficient to yield significant pairwise differences. Descriptive and inferential findings should therefore be interpreted together: broader platform use was descriptively associated with higher means and lower variability, but the only statistically significant pairwise difference occurred between the 1–3 and 4–6 platform groups.

This pattern can also be considered through the lens of social reading. Pianzola et al. (2020) showed that social reading platforms such as Wattpad support reader interaction through

comments, responses, and conversations surrounding a text. Pianzola (2022) further explained that digital social reading enables readers to construct meaning through social engagement. On social media, students do not read texts only as isolated objects; they also read other users' responses, assess conversational context, and construct meaning from interactional dynamics. Such activities may support inferential processing because readers must interpret meanings that are not always explicitly stated.

The multimodal dimension of social media is also relevant. Social media combines verbal text with images, audio, video, emojis, symbols, hyperlinks, and comments. Readers must integrate these representational modes to construct meaning. Delgado et al. (2022) showed that comprehension from text and video is influenced by reading ability and learning strategies, while Carcamo (2025) found that infographics can support the development of multimodal literacy among EFL students. In the present context, students who used 4–6 platforms may have encountered multimodal texts more frequently than those who used 1–3 platforms. Such exposure may increase flexibility in meaning-making, including when students are required to interpret inferential information in written texts.

Social media, however, may also pose risks to reading depth. Digital platforms often encourage rapid movement between content, immediate responses, and divided attention. Dontre (2021) identified technology as a potential source of academic distraction, particularly when users struggle to regulate attention. Martin et al. (2025) likewise showed that digital distraction can disrupt learning and requires preventive strategies. From this perspective, the nonsignificant difference between the 4–6 and 7–9 platform groups may indicate that using a very large number of platforms does not necessarily improve the quality of comprehension. The quality of reading activity, depth of engagement, and self-regulatory ability may be more important than the sheer number of platforms used.

The eta-squared value of .014 further supports this interpretation. The number of social media platforms accounted for only about 1.4% of the variance in students' inferential reading comprehension, indicating that most of the variation was attributable to other factors. These may include reading habits, reading strategies, reading interest, prior knowledge, academic ability, types of text read, purposes for using social media, and the quality of digital interaction. Orellana et al. (2024) emphasized that university students' reading comprehension is related to both academic demands and reading habits. Lee et al. (2022) also showed that technology can support literacy development when it is integrated into appropriate instructional designs. The number of platforms should therefore be treated as one indicator within students' digital literacy ecology rather than as a primary determinant of inferential comprehension.

The Tukey HSD findings are also central to the study's contribution. The results do not merely show that students using more platforms obtained higher descriptive means; more importantly, they identify a significant difference between low and moderate platform breadth. This pattern suggests that a certain degree of platform diversity may be associated with richer digital literacy experiences, whereas moving from moderate to high platform breadth does not produce a further significant difference. The study's novelty thus lies in conceptualizing the number of platforms as an indicator of the breadth of digital literacy exposure while demonstrating that its association with inferential comprehension is limited and not fully linear.

The findings have pedagogical implications for reading instruction. Educators can incorporate social media texts into inferential comprehension activities, particularly texts that require learners to interpret implied meanings, evaluate information, and draw conclusions. Classroom tasks can involve the analysis of posts, comments, digital news, discussion threads, infographics, and captioned videos. Questions can focus on authorial intent, logical relationships among ideas, information that requires verification, and argumentative positions embedded in a text. Luan et al. (2020) identified media literacy as an important competence in language learning. Social media can therefore serve as a bridge to academic literacy when its use is guided critically and purposefully.

Overall, the study indicates that the number of social media platforms used is associated with university students' inferential reading comprehension, but the relationship is limited. A significant difference was found only between the 1–3 and 4–6 platform groups. Although the 7–9 platform group achieved the highest mean and the most stable score distribution, it did not differ

significantly from the other groups. These findings reinforce the view that social media cannot be classified simplistically as either a barrier to or a support for literacy. Its literacy potential depends on the type of activity, the quality of the texts encountered, the purpose of use, self-regulation, and students' ability to process information critically. Inferential reading instruction in higher education should therefore integrate critical digital literacy so that students can use their social media experiences as opportunities to practice reasoning, interpretation, and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This study found differences in university students' inferential reading comprehension according to the number of social media platforms they used. Descriptively, mean scores increased from 9.0385 in the 1–3 platform group to 9.5818 in the 4–6 platform group and 9.7500 in the 7–9 platform group. The one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant overall difference, $F(2, 489) = 3.561$, $p = .029$. However, the eta-squared value of .014 showed that the magnitude of the association was small. Tukey's HSD further indicated that the only significant pairwise difference was between the 1–3 and 4–6 platform groups ($p = .036$); the 1–3 versus 7–9 and 4–6 versus 7–9 comparisons were not significant. The number of social media platforms was therefore associated with inferential reading comprehension, but the relationship was not fully linear. Moderate platform breadth emerged as the clearest point of differentiation relative to low platform breadth. These findings suggest that reading instruction in higher education should integrate digital literacy more deliberately. Social media texts can be used as materials for practicing the interpretation of implied meanings, evaluation of information, integration of ideas, and drawing of conclusions. Future studies should examine additional variables, including duration and frequency of social media use, types of content consumed, intensity of academic reading, digital reading strategies, and levels of digital distraction, to provide a more comprehensive account of the relationship between social media use and inferential reading comprehension.

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Author Contributions

I.N.Y. contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and preparation of the initial manuscript draft. S. contributed to the study methodology, interpretation of the findings, and manuscript review. A.H. contributed to the methodology, data interpretation, and critical revision of the manuscript. M.B.B. contributed to the conceptualization, formal data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and manuscript writing and revision. All authors reviewed, approved, and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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About the Authors

Iin Nur Yasinta is a lecturer at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. She holds a Master's degree in Education, and her research interests include reading literacy, language learning, and digital reading practices. Email: iin.nur.yasinta@unm.ac.id

Sakaria is a lecturer at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. He holds a doctoral degree and specializes in Indonesian language education, with research interests encompassing reading instruction, literacy, and technology-enhanced language learning. Email: sakaria@unm.ac.id

Abdul Haliq is a lecturer and the Head of the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. He holds a doctoral degree, and his research interests include language learning, academic writing, digital literacy, and artificial intelligence in education. Email: abdul.haliq@unm.ac.id

Muh. Bahly Basri is a lecturer at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. He holds a Master's degree in Education, and his research interests focus on Indonesian language education, reading literacy, reading comprehension, and digital reading. Email: m.bahly.basri@unm.ac.id