

# Student Perceptions of Criticism Ethics on Instagram: A Case Study of @Medantalk

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** The development of social media as a digital public space has changed the way individuals express opinions, including in the form of criticism. However, not all criticisms submitted meet the rules of communication ethics, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of offensive and unconstructive comments.

**Aims:** This study aims to find out how Communication Science students of the University of Medan Area perceive the ethics of criticism on Instagram social media, especially on @Medantalk accounts which are often a public discussion space.

**Methods:** This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with interview and observation methods. Informants were selected by purposive sampling from active students who use Instagram. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis techniques.

**Result:** The results of the study show that most students have a negative perception of the practice of criticism on social media today. They assessed that many comments were not delivered politely, were not objective, and often contained hate speech.

**Conclusion:** This perception shows the need to increase ethics-based digital literacy among students. In addition, learning digital communication ethics needs to be strengthened so that social media can become a healthy and constructive space for criticism.

**Keywords:** Student Perception, Critical Ethics, Social Media, Instagram, Digital Communication

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of communication and information technology has brought significant changes in social life, including in the way humans interact through social media (Andzani & Irwansyah, 2023; Fauziah et al., 2024; Mashis et al., 2023; Petrov et al., 2024). One of the widely used social media is Instagram, which is not only a means of sharing photos and videos, but also a public space to express opinions and criticisms (Armayani et al., 2021; Marta, 2021). In this context, ethics in communicating is a very important aspect, especially in the midst of the rampant unethical comments on social media (Dewi, 2019; Rinwanto et al., 2021; Setiawan et al., 2022). This phenomenon shows the urgency to research how students as active users of social media interpret ethics in conveying criticism in the digital public space.

However, there is a gap between the ideal practice of ethical communication and the real conditions on the ground. Although the public, including college students, have extensive access to social media, not all of them understand or apply the principles of communication ethics. Many comments are uploaded to platforms such as Instagram accounts that reflect a lack of awareness of the ethics of criticism, such as the use of abusive language or personal attacks. This is contrary to moral values that should be the basis for conveying criticism constructively (Pedi & Nando, 2024; Purwantoro et al., 2021; Que & Najicha, 2024).

Seeing this situation, this research is important to carry out because it provides an opportunity to dig deeper into students' perceptions of the ethics of criticism on social media. Communication Science students were chosen as research subjects because academically they have studied relevant communication theories, so that their opinions can provide a representative picture of ethical understanding in the digital world. In addition, students are also a group of active users of social media who have the potential to shape public opinion (Annisa et al., 2020; Nurrahmi & Syam, 2020; A. Saputra, 2019).

There is a research gap in the study of students' perceptions of criticism ethics on social media, especially in local contexts such as the use of Instagram accounts @Medantalk. Previous studies have focused more on communication ethics in general without specifically linking them to critical practices in specific digital spaces. Thus, this research offers novelty in looking at the dynamics of digital communication from the perspective of students to local accounts that have many followers and often become a space for public discussion.

The selection of the variables of students' perception of the ethics of criticism on social media is based on the consideration that perception plays an important role in determining individual attitudes and behaviors. The perception of whether criticism is ethical or not, is greatly influenced by the background of experience, education, and social values embraced (Efendi & Haryanto, 2025; R. Saputra et al., 2025). Therefore, by examining students' perceptions, we can gain a deeper understanding of how they interpret the ethics of criticism and the extent to which they internalize these ethical values in their daily communication practices.

The purpose of this study is to find out how communication science students of the University of Medan Area perceive the ethics of criticism in the public space of social media, especially on @Medantalk accounts. The contribution of this research not only enriches academic studies in the field of communication, but also provides practical implications in improving digital literacy and ethical awareness for social media users. The results of this research are expected to be a reference for educational institutions, policymakers, and the wider community in creating a healthy and responsible digital communication culture.

## METHOD

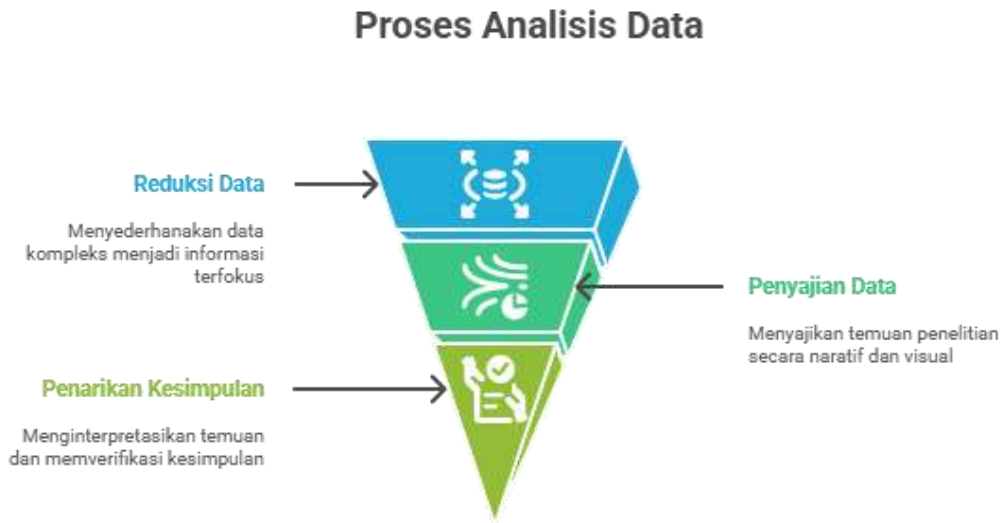
This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to describe students' perceptions of criticism ethics in the public space of Instagram social media, especially on @Medantalk accounts. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand in depth the subjective meaning given by students to the phenomenon of digital communication and criticism ethics that emerge on social media. This design is relevant to explore students' personal views and experiences in interacting in an open and dynamic digital space (Doyle et al., 2020; Turale, nd; Yusanto, 2020).

Participants in this study are active students of the Communication Science Study Program, University of Medan Area who actively use Instagram and understand the dynamics of criticism on social media. Participants are selected selectively based on their involvement in discussions or comments on the Instagram platform, in particular those who have read or responded to posts from @Medantalk account. Students are chosen as subjects because they are considered to have a relevant academic background and have the potential to provide an in-depth perspective on ethical issues in digital communication.

The population in this study includes all Communication Science students of the University of Medan Area. The sampling method used is purposive sampling, where the researcher deliberately selects informants who are in accordance with the research objectives. For data collection, the researcher used open-ended interview guidelines as the main instrument. Because the approach used is qualitative, no scoring system or psychometric measurement is used. The validity and reliability of the data are guaranteed through source triangulation techniques and techniques, which strengthen the validity of the findings.

The main instrument in this study is the semi-structured interview guidelines, which contain open-ended questions about students' perceptions of critical practices on social media. Some examples of questions in interviews include: "What do you think about the language style of netizens' comments on Instagram?", "How do you interpret ethical criticism in the digital space?", and "What distinguishes constructive criticism from personally offensive?". In addition, the researcher also used observation sheets as an additional instrument to record comment activities that appeared in @Medantalk account uploads.

The research procedure is carried out in several stages, ranging from planning, data collection, to analysis. The initial stage involves the preparation of interview guidelines, research licensing, and the determination of informants. Data collection was carried out through direct interviews and observation of interactions on social media. The research was conducted from December 2022 to January 2023, with flexible times adjusted to the participants' schedules. The entire process is carried out systematically so that the data obtained is relevant and in-depth.



Once the data is collected, the analysis process is carried out using the interactive analysis technique of the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawback. (Kase et al., 2023; Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, n.d.). Data reduction: Filtering out important information from interviews and observations, Data presentation: Arranging data in the form of narratives and categorization tables, Conclusion drawing/verification: Interpreting the data within the framework of the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) theory to explain the relationship between the stimulus (criticism content), the organism (students), and their response to the ethics of criticism. (Muza et al., 2025; Rahmat Abidin & Abidin, 2021).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The results of the study show that most Communication Science students at the University of Medan Area have a negative perception of unethical comments on @Medantalk Instagram account. They assessed that many of the comments in the column contained elements of hatred, sarcasm, and even insults that should not appear in the digital public space. Students realized that these comments reflected a low level of ethical awareness on social media.

Some students said that they understood the importance of delivering criticism politely and objectively. However, in practice, they also feel that freedom of expression is often mistaken for freedom of insult. This is exacerbated by a social media culture that tends to be permissive towards rude comments, as long as they get a lot of likes or are considered funny by other users. This shows the tension between ethical idealism and the reality of social media algorithms.

Some students also admitted that the lack of education about digital communication ethics is the main cause of low ethical awareness, especially in delivering criticism. They consider that material on communication ethics should not only be taught in theory in lectures, but also integrated in social media practice, especially for Communication Science students. This is important so that students are not only media users, but also agents of change in creating a healthy digital public space.

From the results of observations on @Medantalk accounts, the researcher noted that in every controversial upload, the majority of netizens' comments contained criticism that was not accompanied by a solution, tended to attack personally, and was not based on data. SARA nuanced comments, hate speech, or body shaming are often found, especially in uploads related to public figures. This corroborates the opinion of informants that the Instagram comment space is not yet a healthy dialogue space.

To clarify these findings, the following table is presented with a table of students' perceptions of criticism ethics:

Table 1. Category of Student Perception of Criticism Ethics on Instagram Social Media

Not.	Category Persepsia	Number of Informants (N=6)	Description of Findings
1.	Positive and Constructive	2	Assessing the importance of polite and objective criticism
2.	Neutral/Critical Selective	1	Recognizing the importance of ethics, but assessing context
3.	Negative towards current practices	3	Consider netizens' comments tend to be unethical

The table above shows that most college students have a negative perception of the current practice of criticism on Instagram. They hope that there will be regulations, education, or strengthening digital literacy to improve communication culture in the digital public space. This indicates the need for synergy between educational institutions, the media, and state policies in instilling media ethics from an early age to the younger generation, including students.

## Discussion

The results of this study show that social media, especially Instagram, has become a very active digital public space, but has not been fully used ethically in conveying criticism (Badel & Baeza, 2021; Fatimah, 2025; Lisa & Irma, 2025; Toscano, 2017). Students' negative perceptions of unethical comments reflect that there is an urgent need to improve ethical digital literacy, especially among young users such as college students (Kurniawan & Sarah, 2023; Rahim & Indah, 2024; Rosmayanti et al., 2025). These findings are a warning that without a good understanding of communication ethics, social media can be a fertile ground for hate speech, hoaxes, and social polarization.

This research makes an academic contribution to the study of digital communication, especially in the context of critical ethics in social media. In contrast to previous studies that were more general on communication ethics, this study provides local contextual data through a case study of popular @Medantalk accounts in North Sumatra. Another contribution is the use of the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) theoretical approach which helps map how social media content (stimulus) affects students' perceptions (responses) as organisms in the communication process (Ghatak & Singh, 2019; Pratiwi et al., 2023; Stuart Scott, 2024; Samuel Frederik Tuhumury, n.d.).

This research has several limitations. First, the limited number of informants (only six people) makes the results not generalizable for the entire student population. Second, the object of the study that focused on only one Instagram account (@Medantalk) limited the variety of context and the type of criticism that could be analyzed. Third, the qualitative approach, although in-depth, is not equipped with quantitative data that can strengthen the generalization of findings.

For further research, it is recommended to involve more informants from different study program or university backgrounds to gain a broader perspective. In addition, a mixed-method

approach can be considered so that qualitative findings can be reinforced with quantitative data. In educational practice, Communication Science lecturers are also advised to integrate digital ethics learning in a practical and contextual way, for example by analyzing real comments on social media so that students are used to applying communication ethics in their digital lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that Communication Science students of Medan Area University have diverse perceptions of the ethics of criticism in social media public spaces, especially on the @Medantalk Instagram account. Most informants consider that the current practice of criticism tends to be unethical, characterized by the use of abusive language, personal attacks, and the lack of constructive arguments. This reflects the low awareness of the importance of communication ethics in the digital space.

This finding shows the tension between the ideals of communication ethics learned academically and the reality of social media characterized by algorithmic culture and the popularity of controversial comments. Students' perception of this phenomenon is influenced by their theoretical understanding, as well as their direct experience in interacting on social media. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen ethics-based digital literacy, both through higher education curricula and public campaigns that emphasize the importance of wise, polite and responsible communication in the digital space.

### **STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION BY THE AUTHOR**

FN as the main author is responsible for designing the study, collecting and analyzing data, and preparing the initial manuscript. EJ acts as the main supervisor who provides theoretical and methodological direction, as well as evaluates the substance of the study thoroughly. Meanwhile, AA as the second supervisor also provided critical input on the structure of the manuscript and helped sharpen the analysis in the discussion of research results. The collaboration of the three ensures that the quality and integrity of this research is maintained academically and ethically.

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