

DIGITAL MEDIA HABITS ACROSS GENERATIONS: A STUDY OF MEDIA

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 01-01-2025

Revised : 26-07-2025

Accepted : 31-07-2025

KEYWORDS

Media habits, smartphone, digital native, generational analysis, media convergence

ABSTRACT

This study examines the media consumption habits of residents in Medan City, Indonesia, in response to the widespread adoption of smartphones and internet access. The research applies a quantitative descriptive approach using a survey of 400 respondents across generational categories (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Alpha). Results reveal a dominant reliance on smartphones for accessing media content, with a declining trend in traditional television and radio use. Social media, particularly YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, have become a primary source of information and entertainment, especially among young generations. The study employs uses and gratifications theory and media dependency to analyze generational differences in digital behavior. Findings indicate a significant generational shift toward mobile-centric and socially interactive media patterns, contributing to the understanding of digital audience behavior in an emerging urban context.

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Introductions

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed media consumption patterns globally. In urban centers or developing countries, such as Medan City, Indonesia, access to the internet and smartphones has fundamentally altered how individuals engage with media. The proliferation of new media platforms and the decline of traditional mass media—especially television and radio—highlight the importance of understanding these transitions. This transformation is driven by the broader phenomenon of media convergence, which is an evolutionary process involving the blending of information technology, telecommunications, and media industries. According to Stober (2004) as cited by Lugmayr, media evolution is shaped by three interrelated stages: invention (the shift from analog to digital systems), innovation (the ability to distribute and consume media across various formats), and institutionalization (adaptation within social systems to integrate and normalize these technologies) (Lugmayr, 2016).

These stages are particularly relevant in understanding the digital migration of audiences in Medan, where technological changes have influenced not just individual media choices but also societal patterns of communication. One major consequence of this convergence is the shifting landscape of audience behavior and media economics. As new digital platforms proliferate, the immense popularity of the internet has drastically reshaped how individuals consume media. Media consumption has transitioned from traditional print and broadcast formats to more personalized and on-demand digital formats. This shift has had profound implications for the media industry, which previously thrived on advertising revenues from television and print. Now, a significant portion of that revenue has migrated to digital services like YouTube and Netflix, reflecting not only a change in consumer habits but also a reconfiguration of the industry's economic foundations (Shreesha Mairaru, 2019).

The competition for audience share between conventional television and social media has indeed become a new challenge for the television industry after having held power for a long time. Television must undergo a massive adaptation to retain its audience. Most television programs now come equipped with links to social media, either directly from the television program itself or through companion devices. (Lugmayr, 2016). Many social media platforms have streaming features to reach audiences. Social media is considered more interactive compared to conventional television. Users can view and comment in real-time, sharing videos with other users. Along with the development of communication technology that allows for the use of larger mobile devices. With the rapid shift of audiences from television to social media formats, many advertisers have subsequently focused their activities on social media. The existence of various media platforms is beneficial for the audience. The audience is increasingly gaining rich and engaging media experiences as the media itself becomes more diverse (Lugmayr, 2016).

The role of the internet in influencing consumer behavior has been proven in studies conducted in several countries. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that the ever-evolving digital news media and social media, along with the use of mobile devices, have become the common way for Americans to access news. (Kristen Bialik, Key trends in social and digital news media, 2017). This is further reinforced by research conducted by Mason Walker in 2019, which found that more than 50 percent of Americans use mobile devices rather than laptops and desktop computers to access news. (Walker, 2019). The following year, Stocking also showed that most Americans use YouTube to search for information about anything. (Galen Stocking, 2020).

Companies, including media companies, need an audience to survive. If a company cannot build, engage, and have an audience, then it will fall behind other companies. (Rohrs, 2014, p. 17). The audience for the media has monetary value, so the media needs to maintain the loyalty of its audience. In recent years, the company has only relied on print media, radio, and television to reach the audience. Currently, every company is building a global audience through websites, mobile applications, email, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and other social media. (Rohrs, 2014, p. 18). Additionally, the shift in advertising revenue has made the digital media industry more profitable (Singh, 2020).

The audience itself uses media as part of their daily activities. The changes in communication technology have made it easier for people to access information and entertainment wherever they go. The use of media on a personal level is never truly unique, as thousands, even millions of people engage in the same activities at the same time. (Baran, 2012, p. 242). From various studies on media, it is found that humans place media, including its content, to fulfill their needs.

Dynamic changes require media to constantly observe how their audience moves, how the audience adapts to technology in consuming media, which ultimately leads to the formation of new habits. The study of media habits is essential to understanding the importance of grasping the dynamics of media usage patterns that have become habitual. (Schnauber-Stockman, 2016). New media is then considered to provide many conveniences. Publication through the internet makes it easier for people to carry out various activities (Nasib, 2021).

Medan is one of the major cities in Indonesia. According to research from Open Signal, this city is the second city in Indonesia with the highest data access speed, at a rate of 5.5 Mbps. (Jatmiko, Leo Dwi, 2019). The presence of the internet with high data access has led the people of Medan City to have a variety of information sources.

The discussion about the audience is an important and inseparable part of the development of modern communication that has been developed by experts over the past few decades. The changes that occur follow developments such as technological advancements and cultural shifts in society. In recent years, the discussion about the audience has shifted from a conventional audience to a digital audience.

The study of uses and gratifications as well as dependency has evolved alongside the increasing interdependence between media systems, larger social systems, and media audiences. (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 978). This theory develops the understanding that audiences use media based on specific needs and build certain dependencies on media usage. The level of audience dependence on media will influence the extent of their media consumption, along with usage patterns that will be very distinctive for each individual.

Uses and gratifications emphasizes that the audience plays an active role in selecting media, and that media has a more limited effect on the audience. However, in its use, the audience still has varying levels of dependence on it. This dependence can be reflected in their affection, knowledge, and behavior. Individuals who have a high dependence on media will be more concerned about what is presented in the media than those who do not have a high dependence.

This theory is considered to provide a framework for understanding when and how each individual consuming media becomes more or less active in their media consumption, along with the consequences of those levels of activity (West, 2014, p. 389). The use of media by individuals in this theory is assessed as always referring to the different goals of each individual. Uses and Gratifications is considered capable of explaining the differences in motives and reasons for using various media. (Gan, 2017).

In many communication studies, it is discussed how this theory can also be applied to internet usage. (Dhir, 2015). Especially among the younger generation, who tend to consume digital media more often than traditional media. (Saeed, 2021).

With the continuous advancement of the digital era, the media industry will find it easier to reach audiences, where a stronger relationship between the media industry and the audience will provide greater satisfaction for the audience. Media convergence provides multimedia formats, interactivity, personalization, globalization, hypertextuality, interconnectivity, and more instant reporting. (Friedrichsen, 2012, p. 95).

In this regard, uses and gratifications are still considered relevant to be used as an analytical tool in studies related to the development of digital media. The developments and innovations arising from the growth of the internet can be analyzed, particularly due to the interactivity of these devices with the audience. (Baran, 2012, p. 251). Furthermore, Thomas Ruggiero, as quoted by Baran, emphasizes that the technology developed by the internet is closely related to the audience, particularly concerning:

1. The internet's ability to engage the audience in interactivity.
2. The internet's ability to provide a wider menu, allowing the audience to make many choices for consuming media.
3. The internet's ability to give the audience the freedom to determine their media consumption.

Method

The method used is a quantitative descriptive method. Quantitative research method is a method of quantifying data that can be used to make general conclusions. According to Earl Babbie, quantitative methods can make more explicit observations. This method also makes it easier to generalize, compare, and draw conclusions. (Babbie, 2010).

Data collection was conducted through a survey of 400 respondents spread throughout the Medan City area. This number was obtained using the Slovin formula, with a margin of error of 5 percent of the total population of Medan City of 2,455,252 people. The determination of respondents was done by adjusting the percentage of Medan City's population according to the categorization made by Baresfod.

Based on this calculation, the following is the percentage of respondents in each generation category:

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents by Generation

Generation	Age Range	Percentage
Post Gen Z	< 9 years	17,04%
Gen Z	10 - 24 years	23,65%
Millennial	25 - 39 years	24,82%
Gen X	40 - 54 years	20,20%
Baby Boomer	55 - 74 years	12,71%
Pre Boomer	> 75 years	1,58%
Totally		100,00%

Result and Discussions

Findings confirm a strong generational shift toward mobile and digital media use. Generation Z and Millennials, as digital natives and digital adopters respectively, demonstrate high dependency on smartphones and social media platforms, aligning with global trends. The results reinforce uses and gratification theory – respondents actively choose digital media to meet specific needs. Additionally, the data reflect media dependency, as smartphone use correlates with functional reliance for communication, information, and productivity. This study contributes empirical evidence from a non-Western context, enriching the understanding of how media behaviors are shaped by generational identity and digital infrastructure availability.

Use of Media Devices

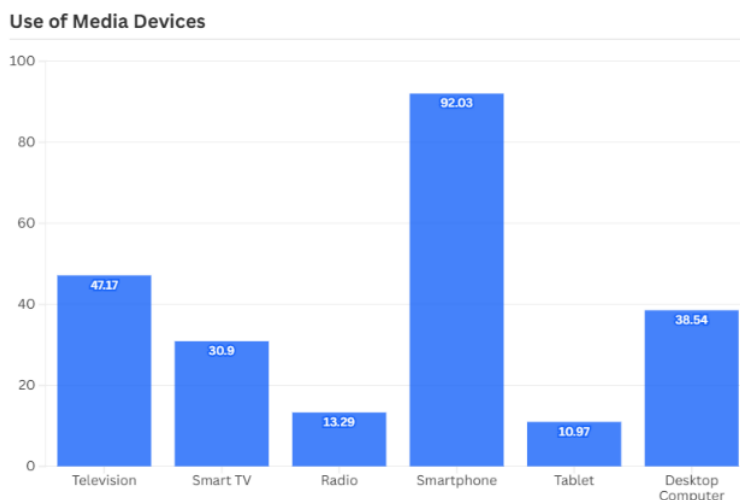


Figure 1: Media Devices Used by Audiences in Medan City

The study results show that most respondents use smartphones for media consumption, with the percentage reaching more than 90 percent. As for television users, although the percentage is quite large, the percentage does not reach 50 percent. There are still respondents who watch television infrequently. This shows that the power of television has started to decline when compared to previous times. Until 2016, television consumption was still high, but internet consumption was also getting higher. The existence of the internet and mobile devices has brought about changes in media consumption in Indonesian society. (Anne Austin, 2016).

The use of radio services is also very low in Medan City. The percentage of respondents who still listen to the radio does not even reach 15 percent. One of the influencing factors is the existence of smartphones that also provide music streaming services so that people's need for radio is also low. The use of smartphones and tablets has not been able to match the function of smartphones, which although small, have complete facilities with high mobility. Radio is generally used only while driving.

The Fall of Television Dominance

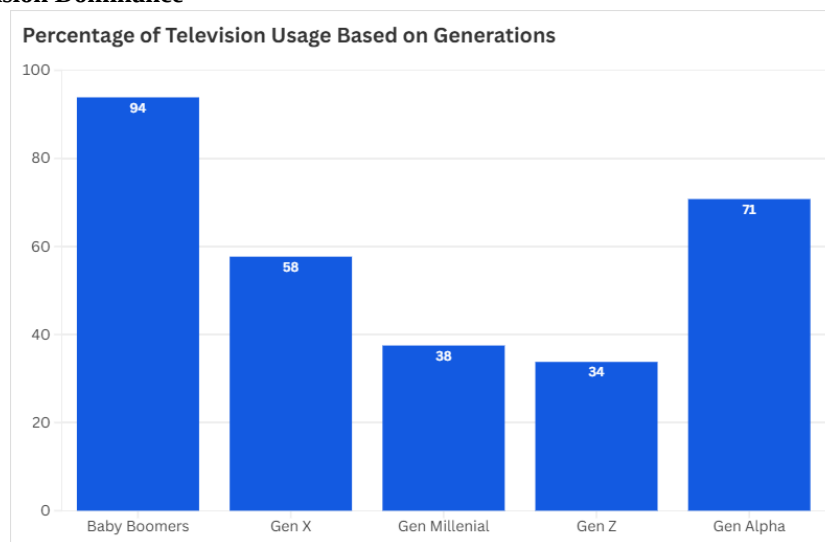


Figure 2: Use of Television as a Media Device in Medan City

The results of the study indicate that three generational groups-Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Gen Alpha still frequently consume television content. Millennials, while still engaging with television to some extent, are increasingly shifting toward smartphone usage. Baby boomers and Generation X belong to the electronic media era, a period when television dominated as the primary medium. In contrast, although Gen Alpha are digital native, their media consumption patterns remain heavily influenced by older generations within the household. Millennials represent a transitional generation between electronic and digital technology; as economically productive individual, they can afford digital devices that align with both their professional and personal needs. Generation Z, as true digital natives, have been shaped by digital technology across nearly all aspects of their daily lives.

The shift in the use of media devices from being dominated by television has also resulted in a shift in viewing trends among respondents in Medan City. This study emphasizes several forms of programs that are often enjoyed by audiences, namely news, infotainment, reality shows, variety shows, and talk shows. The study results show the low frequency of Medan City audiences watching these programs. News programs were only watched by less than 50 percent of respondents. Infotainment programs were watched by less than 25 percent. Even soap opera programs that

are often the prima donna of advertisers because of their high ratings are only watched by around 25 percent of respondents. Reality show programs less than 20 percent, variety show programs less than 30 percent, and talk show programs less than 30 percent.

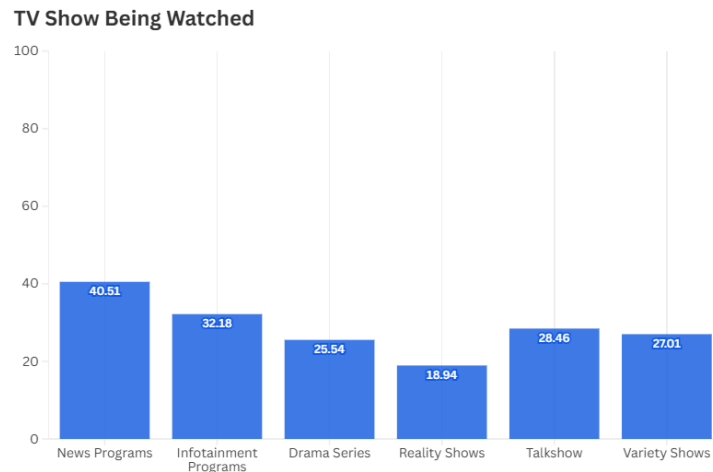


Figure 3: Television Programs Watched by Audiences in Medan City

Among the various programs aired on television, news remains the most frequently watched, with 40,51% respondents indicating regular viewership. News programming continues to serve as the core content of television stations due to the public’s strong demand for credible information, which is often perceived as more reliable than online sources. In contrast, for the entertainment category, television stations face a big challenge from digital services, as digital services provide more entertainment variants than those provided by television. On the one hand, this is a nightmare for the industry, but on the other hand, it is a dream for users (Hilmes, 2020).

Smartphone as the Main Media Device

The use of smartphones as media devices is almost evenly distributed across all generational categories, exception of baby boomers. Generation Z exhibits the highest rate of smartphone usage, with 100% of respondents reporting regular use, followed by Millennials and Generation X, each with usage rates exceeding 95%. Among Generation Alpha individuals, approximately 80% report frequent smartphone use. In contrast, Baby Boomers represent the generation least likely to use smartphone for media consumption, with over 60% indicating that they never use smartphone for this purpose.

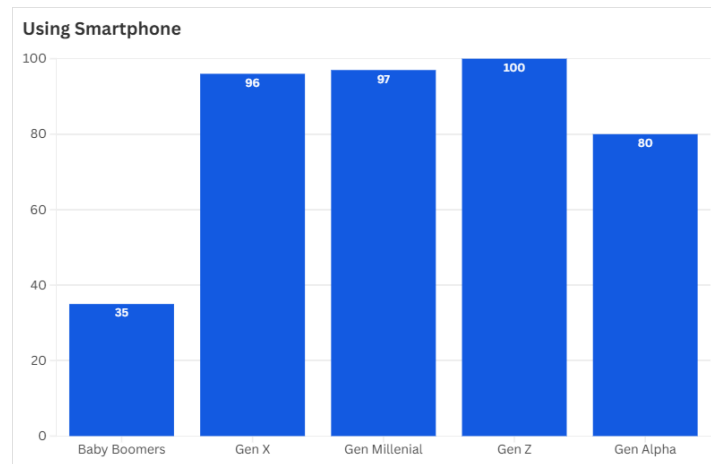


Figure 4: Smartphone Usage for Media by Generation in Medan City

This generation was born from Gen X who, although not native to the digital age, grew up in the electronic age. This generation, although not as fast as Gen Z in using digital media, can still adapt to technological changes. Plus, this generation is a productive generation that is economically more independent. Coupled with the demands of today's digital world, Gen X as a productive group must indeed be able to adapt to digital developments in the world of work. Gen Z and Post Gen Z are natives in the digital era. Called native because this generation was born, grew up, and developed in the era of digital technology. This generation is adept at using smartphone devices to find information, seek entertainment, or support work and learning activities. Smartphones provide varied facilities such as video streaming, music streaming, gaming services, messaging and video calling services, social media access, and so on.

Smartphone Usage

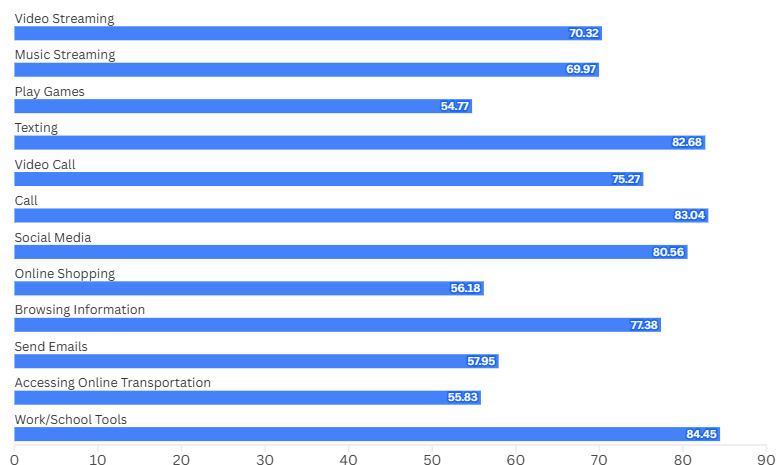


Figure 5: Smartphone Usage Based on Service Features among Medan City Audiences

The study results show that smartphones are a practical choice as a media device. The most common uses of smartphone services are for work/study aids, messaging, social media access, and browsing the internet for information. With so many facilities, it is not surprising that smartphones are the most frequently used media devices.

The situation in Medan City is not much different from the United States. Research from the Pew Research Center in 2017 showed that the use of mobile devices to find news continues to grow (Kristen Bialik, Key Trends in Social and Digital News Media, 2017). The same is true in China, where the internet has changed the information environment (Lyu, 2019). Smartphones, with their instant communication facilities, continuous assistance to individual interests, and ability to keep users connected to the world (Durak, 2018). Studies in Australia also show that smartphones are increasingly powerful and easily accessible to users (Linden et al., 2021; Dewan Pers, 2024). Social Media as the Media Habit of Medan City People

One of the consequences of the existence of digitalization is the emergence of other platforms outside the media commonly used by the public. Apart from television, radio, for example, social media has emerged as an alternative media that not only provides entertainment, but also information for the public. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and so on are often used as sources of information. Especially with the widespread use of smartphones as media devices.

The study results show that the majority of respondents use social media. More than 80 percent of respondents use social media as a media provider of entertainment and information. The most frequent user is, of course, the digital native, Gen Z. The study results show that there are no respondents from the Gen Z category who have never used social media, with a high frequency of use.

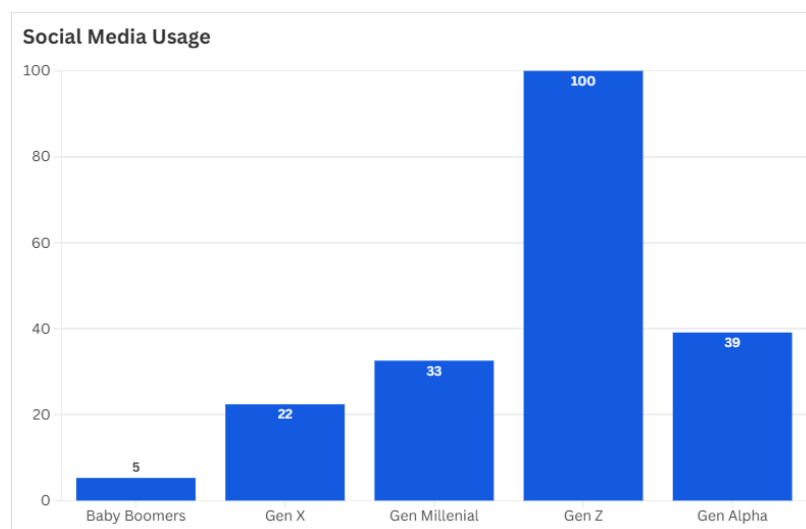


Figure 7: Social Media Usage by Generation in Medan City

Youtube, WhatsApp, and Instagram are the most widely used social media platforms with high frequency in Medan City. As for the currently popular platforms such as TikTok, it does not seem to be used at a high frequency.

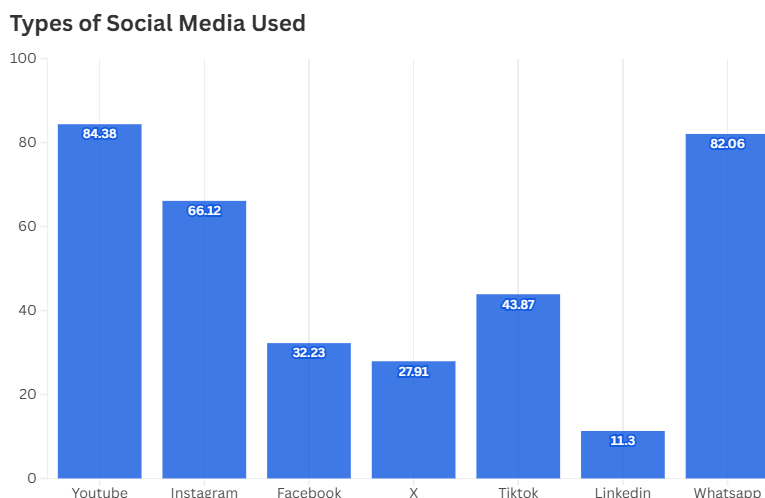


Figure 8: Social Media Used by Audiences in Medan City

Conclusion

There has been a shift in media habits among people in Medan City. This shift began with the emergence of digital technology which was then widely used by the community. Electronic media that used to be powerful, such as radio and television began to be eliminated by the existence of smartphones that dominate as the most complete, easy, and varied media device. This illustrates the condition of the audience in Medan City as a digital audience. Generational differences influence media choices, where the younger generation (Generation Z and Alpha) relies heavily on digital platforms, while older generations (Baby Boomers) remain partially engaged with traditional media. These shifts emphasize the relevance of digital audiences studies in Southeast Asia and highlight the ongoing transformation of media habits in response to technology convergence.

Most people in Medan City have maximized the use of smartphones, no longer solely as a means of communicating and exchanging messages. Smartphones are well maximized as a tool to find information, entertainment, and even work or study tools. With its lightweight and mobile nature, smartphones have not been displaced, even by devices that have better sharpness such as tablets. The massive use of smartphones has led to other consequences, such as the use of social media, which is no longer just a space for self-actualization, but also a source of entertainment and information. This situation makes the position of conventional media increasingly unpopular.

In the concept of uses and gratification, the audience is considered to have the independence to choose which media can satisfy the needs and motives of the audience. Medan City audiences then choose to use digital devices considering that these devices are more friendly to use, coupled with the high mobility of the audience. The existence of smartphones can then provide information or entertainment anytime and anywhere. One thing that cannot be provided by electronic devices that are now even labeled conventional.

The level of media dependency varies from audience to audience. The baby boomer generation, for example, still relies on media such as television compared to digital media. This condition is different from Gen Z who were born as natives in the digital era. In fact, it is not only Gen Z who then depend on digital devices, but Gen X and Millennials inevitably have to adapt to existing technological changes which then give birth to new habits in using media. With its interactive nature, wider variety of menus, and breadth of content that provides flexibility in determining media consumption, it has created digital media habits in Medan City audiences.

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