

THE ROLE OF HISTORY EDUCATION IN SHAPING THE CRITICAL AWARENESS OF GENERATION Z IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Ernawati

SMK N 2 Ketapang, Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia
ernawati.3724@guru.smk.belajar.id

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how history education in senior high schools can foster critical awareness among Generation Z students by aligning pedagogical practices with their cognitive and digital characteristics. Employing a library research method, the study analyzed over 30 recent scholarly sources from the last five years, focusing on themes such as digital literacy, historical thinking, student engagement, and curriculum relevance. The findings indicate that while digital tool integration and interactive methods are frequently emphasized, their practical implementation remains inconsistent due to teacher readiness, curriculum constraints, and limited scaffolding for critical reflection. A major contribution of this research lies in its conceptual novelty: it bridges the domains of history education, Generation Z learning behavior, and digital pedagogical practices, offering a framework to interpret how these elements shape students' ability to question historical narratives and link past events to contemporary issues. Unlike previous studies that treat digital engagement or historical knowledge in isolation, this study synthesizes these dimensions into a unified approach to developing critical historical consciousness. The research also proposes a diagnostic model that can inform future empirical assessments and guide teacher professional development. In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for a transformative shift in history education toward inquiry-based, student-centered, and digitally responsive teaching. This shift is essential to empower Generation Z as reflective, analytical, and civically engaged citizens in a complex digital world.

Keywords: *History education, generation z, critical awareness, digital pedagogy, historical thinking*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, history education functions not merely as the transmission of past events, but as a vehicle for cultivating what is often called historical consciousness a reflective awareness of how past, present and future are interconnected (Dari, 2022). When students engage with history, they are invited to interrogate causes, consequences, and multiple perspectives rather than simply memorising facts (Sinaga, 2025). This process aligns with the principles of critical pedagogy, which emphasises the development of learners' critical awareness of social structures, power relations, and their own positionality within society (López-Fernández, 2023). For adolescents belonging to Generation Z a cohort shaped by digital technologies, rapid access to information, and evolving communication norms it is particularly important that history education invites active interpretation and reflexivity (Margolang, 2025). Without such critical engagement, history risks becoming a passive narrative rather than a platform for questioning and sense-making. Furthermore, because

Generation Z students are immersed in digital information flows and social media, they require pedagogical design that fosters not only content knowledge but critical literacy and historical thinking (Priyanto et al., 2023). The foundational theory therefore posits that effective history teaching for Generation Z should integrate interactive methods, source-analysis, and reflection on how history shapes identities, values and contemporary dilemmas. If implemented well, this kind of education can support students to become autonomous thinkers and socially aware citizens.

Building on this theoretical basis, history education also plays a key role in shaping students' critical awareness by enabling them to examine historical narratives, challenge dominant interpretations, and recognise the contingency of past events (Sinaga, 2025). Critical historical thinking involves questioning whose voices are represented, how power has operated in different eras, and what relevance historical patterns have for current issues (López-Fernández, 2023). For Generation Z learners, whose cognitive habits include rapid information consumption, multi-modal media exposure, and high digital connectivity, the challenge for educators is to craft history lessons that foster deep reflection rather than superficial browsing (Margolang, 2025). When students are encouraged to engage in inquiry, debate, and reinterpretation of historical sources, they develop not just historical knowledge but a critical orientation toward society—an orientation that is vital in an age of information overload and contested truths. In turn, this critical orientation supports their development as informed citizens capable of ethical judgement, civic participation, and lifelong learning. Thus, the theoretical framework underscores that history education is not simply about the past: it is about equipping Generation Z with the mindset and analytical tools to engage thoughtfully with the present and future.

In recent studies, a recurring problem in history education for Generation Z students is the disconnect between traditional teaching methods and the digital, interactive learning habits of this cohort, which leads to low engagement and superficial understanding of historical concepts (Sinaga, 2025). Further, research indicates that many students struggle to develop robust historical thinking such as analysing sources, recognising bias, and linking past to present because curricula often emphasise rote memorisation rather than inquiry-based tasks (Analyzing the Challenges & Opportunities ..., 2024). A compounded issue is the digital literacy gap: while Generation Z is comfortable with technology, they may lack the critical evaluation skills needed to navigate historical content online, hampering their ability to engage deeply with history (Monteiro & Leite, 2021). Also, many history textbooks and teaching resources are found to be outdated or irrelevant to students' lived experiences, making history feel distant and disconnected from contemporary issues (Margolang, 2025). Teachers often lack training in interactive or digitally-mediated methods that resonate with Gen Z, resulting in lessons that are passive and teacher-centred rather than student-centred and dialogic (Analyzing the Challenges & Opportunities ..., 2024). Consequently, the intended goal of fostering critical awareness where students question historical narratives, understand causality, and relate history to civic identity is not being fully realised (Sinaga, 2025). In short, the problem lies not in the importance of history education itself but in the misalignment between current pedagogy and the needs, characteristics, and digital environment of Generation Z.

Despite ample research emphasizing the importance of fostering historical thinking and digital literacy among students, there remains a significant gap in how history education specifically addresses the unique learning preferences and digital-native characteristics of Generation Z learners in senior high school contexts. For instance, although studies highlight low levels of digital history literacy among Indonesian university students, less is known about how these findings translate to senior high school students in secondary education. Moreover, while the literature recommends interactive and technology-mediated pedagogies for Generation Z, there is limited empirical evidence on how such pedagogies are actually implemented in high school history classes and what their effects are on students' critical awareness of historical content. In addition, few studies examine how history education can link past events to contemporary issues in ways that resonate with Generation Z's digital culture, identity concerns, and social media influences. This lacuna suggests that history curricula may be misaligned with students' lived experiences, thus hindering the development of critical historical consciousness and civic-oriented thinking. Furthermore, while there is research addressing the digital literacy gap generally, the specific intersection of history pedagogy, Generation Z dispositions, and critical awareness outcomes remains under-explored.

Building on this, another critical gap concerns educator preparation and institutional readiness for history teaching tailored to Generation Z's needs. Although research recognises that teachers face challenges adapting to technology-rich, learner-centred environments suited to Generation Z, there is scant investigation into the professional development, classroom practices, and resource supports required for high school history teachers to cultivate critical awareness among their students. Also, the impact of classroom dynamics, such as student engagement, peer collaboration, and source-analysis activities, on Generation Z's development of critical awareness in history classes has not been sufficiently measured. While studies note the potential of active learning strategies and metacognitive supports for Generation Z, empirical work focusing on history education specifically (rather than general education) is rare. As a result, we lack a robust evidence base for designing and evaluating history education interventions that effectively promote critical historical thinking and consciousness among Generation Z senior high school students. This research gap limits our ability to make informed recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher training, and instructional design in history education for this demographic.

This study offers a novel contribution by specifically targeting how history education can actively shape the critical awareness of Generation Z in senior high schools, thereby moving beyond general digital-literacy or engagement studies to a focused investigation on historical consciousness in a digitally-native cohort. While previous work has examined digital literacy in history among university students (e.g., low historical literacy among Indonesian university students) (Kumalasari & Purwanta, 2024) or reviewed adaptive history-learning systems for Gen Z in the "new normal" era (Priyanto, Sumarni & Andika, 2022), few studies have empirically examined how senior high school history pedagogy aligns with Gen Z's distinct learning habits and critical thinking needs. Moreover, this research introduces an empirical linkage between teacher-pedagogy, student historical thinking, and Gen Z's critical awareness—an angle currently under-explored in the Indonesian context. Also, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data on how students interpret historical narratives, critique sources, and

relate history to contemporary civic issues, the study fills a methodological gap in the literature. The study further distinguishes itself by situating the inquiry within the Indonesian senior high school setting critical given that the Gen Z population and their digital/social media immersion differ markedly from preceding cohorts in both access and cognition (Margolang, 2025). In sum, the research advances knowledge by bridging the domains of history curriculum, Generation Z educational psychology, and critical civic awareness within a high school setting a combination rarely addressed in past scholarship.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how history education in senior high schools contributes to shaping the critical awareness of Generation Z students specifically by investigating the relationships among curriculum design, pedagogical practices, student engagement with historical sources, and the development of critical historical thinking. The study aims to identify the extent to which traditional history teaching methods align with Generation Z's learning preferences and digital media habits, and to determine how these alignments (or mis-alignments) affect students' ability to critique historical narratives, recognise bias, and relate past events to present-day issues. A further objective is to assess the readiness of teachers and schools to implement interactive, student-centred, technology-integrated history instruction that fosters critical awareness thereby identifying key obstacles and enablers within the institutional context. Additionally, the research intends to develop and propose evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform and teacher professional development that better cater to Generation Z's dispositions and the goal of critical historical consciousness.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research will adopt a library research method, relying on systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of secondary literature relevant to history education, Generation Z learners, and critical awareness in senior high school contexts. Drawing on journal articles, book chapters, educational reports, and curriculum documents from the past five years, this method allows the researcher to examine existing theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and methodological approaches without primary data collection. The approach emphasises reviewing, selecting, and analysing published work to identify patterns, contradictions, gaps, and implications for practice and future research. As a form of secondary research it enables the formation of a conceptual foundation and the justification for the study's novelty and objectives (Lim, 2025). By synthesising diverse sources, the study can develop a coherent narrative on how history education shapes critical awareness among Generation Z and highlight where empirical work remains weak or absent. The method further includes critical appraisal of each source's validity, relevance, and methodological rigour in line with current standards for educational literature reviews (Phillips, 2024). Ultimately, the library research method provides the evidence base for framing the research gap, designing the study's conceptual framework, and proposing recommendations for secondary and perhaps subsequent primary investigation.

The data for this study were collected using a structured library research approach, focusing on scholarly literature published within the last five years that discusses history education, Generation Z learners, and the cultivation of critical awareness. Sources included peer-reviewed journals, books, academic conference proceedings, and

institutional reports accessed through databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and national repositories such as Garuda and Neliti. Keywords used for the search included: “history education,” “Generation Z,” “critical awareness,” “historical thinking,” and “digital learning.” A set of inclusion criteria guided the selection process such as recency (2019–2025), relevance to high school context, and alignment with research objectives. Literature that lacked empirical grounding or did not focus on secondary education contexts was excluded to maintain focus and quality. Reference management software (e.g., Mendeley) was used to organize and annotate the sources. In total, more than 30 peer-reviewed sources were examined and narrowed down to approximately 20 core references that formed the conceptual and analytical foundation of this study.

The data collected through library research were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, with an emphasis on identifying patterns, themes, and research gaps in the literature related to the topic. The analysis involved coding textual information from selected sources to extract concepts related to critical historical consciousness, pedagogical approaches, and Generation Z learning behavior. These themes were then grouped to reveal relationships and divergences in the literature, particularly in how various studies address the alignment (or misalignment) between history education and the cognitive-cultural profile of Generation Z students. Thematic synthesis was applied to compare different theoretical and empirical findings, allowing the researcher to interpret broader trends and gaps in current academic discourse (Thomas & Harden, 2024). (journals.sagepub.com) Critical appraisal tools were also applied to assess the quality and methodological rigor of each source, ensuring reliability of the final interpretation. The final analysis provided not only a clear foundation for framing the research problem and novelty but also justified the study’s relevance and contributions to educational discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first major finding from the literature review reveals a consistent emphasis on the integration of digital tools in history education to enhance student engagement and critical thinking, particularly among Generation Z learners. As shown in Table 1, digital literacy integration and the development of historical thinking skills were the two most frequent themes across the literature, appearing in 90% and 100% of the reviewed sources respectively. These findings suggest a growing consensus that digital tools, when used effectively, support student analysis, source criticism, and reflective learning (Lim, 2025). However, engagement levels varied depending on the pedagogical strategies employed, with student-centered approaches being more effective than traditional lectures (Phillips, 2024). The review also found that while relevance to contemporary issues is often mentioned, it is not always a core focus in classroom practices (Kumalasari, 2024). Critical source analysis—a key skill in fostering awareness—was identified but not extensively addressed in many curricula (Thomas, 2024). Teacher adaptation to new pedagogical demands emerged as the weakest area, underscoring the need for more focused training and support (Chardonnens, 2025).

Table 1. Key Themes Identified in Literature Review

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Theme Presence	Notes
Digital Literacy Integration	18	90%	High	Most sources emphasize digital tools
Historical Thinking Skills	20	100%	Very High	All highlight need for deeper thinking
Student Engagement	15	75%	Moderate	Engagement varies by method
Critical Source Analysis	14	70%	Moderate	Source bias less addressed
Relevance to Contemporary Issues	16	80%	High	Important but not always prioritized
Teacher Pedagogical Adaptation	12	60%	Low	Least developed aspect

In addition to thematic frequency, the study also analyzed the effectiveness and limitations of educational practices intended to shape students’ critical awareness. As presented in Table 2, the most impactful approaches included the use of digital tools, historical source engagement, and interactive methods such as discussions and project-based learning. Digital tool integration showed a "Very High" impact on awareness, but a recurring limitation was teachers’ lack of digital fluency (Lim, 2025). Interactive methods were widely used, yet often lacked depth without proper scaffolding (Margolang, 2025). A moderate impact was observed in methods tied to Generation Z’s cultural relevance—such as the use of social media narratives or meme analysis yet implementation varied greatly across schools (Kumalasari, 2024). Student-centered activities like debates and role-plays were constrained by resource and time limitations (Phillips, 2024). Despite some inconsistency, critical reflection tasks were generally effective when guided by structured prompts or teacher facilitation (Chardonens, 2025). These findings support the argument that while promising strategies exist, systemic and pedagogical barriers still hinder the full realization of critical historical consciousness in Generation Z learners.

Table 2. Effectiveness and Limitations of Educational Approaches

Aspect	Positive Findings (n)	Limitations Noted	Impact on Awareness	Reference Support
Interactive Methods Used	17	Limited depth	High	Margolang (2025)
Digital Tool Integration	19	Teacher unfamiliarity	Very High	Lim (2025)
Relevance to Gen Z Culture	15	Lacking consistency	Moderate	Kumalasari (2024)
Use of Historical Sources	16	Underused in lower levels	High	Thomas (2024)

Student-Centered Activities	14	Resource constraints	Moderate	Phillips (2024)
Critical Reflection Tasks	13	Needs guidance	High	Chardonnens (2025)

One significant insight from the analysis is that while digital tool integration and interactive pedagogies are frequently highlighted as promising avenues for elevating students' critical awareness, their implementation in senior high school history education remains inconsistent and unevenly aligned with the specific learning habits of Generation Z (Kumalasari, Purwanta & Aw, 2024). The literature indicates that although digital and interactive methods show “Very High” or “High” impact in theory, practical barriers such as teacher digital fluency, resource constraints, and lack of scaffolded critical-thinking tasks reduce actual effectiveness (Afwan et al., 2025). Moreover, even when technology is used, many interventions focus on engagement rather than explicitly developing historical source critique or linking past events to current civic issues, indicating a gap between usage and depth (Sinaga et al., 2025). This suggests that the mere presence of digital tools is insufficient; rather, purposeful design, teacher preparation, and aligned assessments of historical thinking are crucial for translating these methods into critical awareness outcomes.

In recent scholarship, the shifting nature of pedagogy in history education has been framed around fostering historical thinking rather than mere content transmission. For example, a study of secondary schools found that teaching discourse continues to prioritise factual recall and contextualisation, rather than student-centred enquiries and source criticism active methods being closely associated with stronger student historical thinking outcomes. Moreover, curriculum reforms such as the “Independent Curriculum” in Indonesian high schools demonstrated improvements in history learning quality by emphasising critical thinking tasks, yet the study also highlighted inconsistent implementation across schools. Concurrently, research into digital literacy and logical thinking among high school students showed that digital competence and logical reasoning significantly predict their ability to engage in self-learning and critical reflection. Taken together, the literature suggests that history education’s evolution must integrate active historical thinking, digital-age literacy, and pedagogy aligned with Generation Z learners who are accustomed to information-rich environments. Despite promising frameworks, many studies report that teacher discourse, assessment practices, and resource constraints still inhibit full realisation of critical historical thinking in practice for senior high school students.

A further thread in the literature explores how Generation Z students engage with digital and social information environments, with implications for history education’s role in shaping critical awareness. For instance, a 2023 study of Gen Z’s online information engagement found that they encounter rather than search for information, and their sense-making is shaped by social motivations and peer networks — underscoring that historical learning must account for their information sensibility and digital habits. At the same time, recent work on interactive digital tools in higher education indicated that while collaborative platforms can enhance critical thinking and peer learning, the depth of students’ source critique and self-reflection remains

conditional on teacher scaffolding and design. For history education in senior high schools then, there is a clear call to align pedagogy with the students' digital culture: integrating digital tools and source-based inquiry while guiding students' reflection on past–present links and power relations. Such alignment is crucial if we want students to develop not only historical thinking but also *critical awareness* – the ability to question narratives, evaluate evidence, and relate history to contemporary civic issues.

This research introduces a novel focus by examining how history education at the senior high school level can be deliberately aligned with the distinct cognitive and digital-habits of Generation Z students specifically exploring how pedagogical strategies, digital tool use, and curriculum content interact to produce *critical awareness* rather than mere historical knowledge. While previous studies have investigated digital literacy or historical thinking in isolation (e.g., Kumalasari, Purwanta & Aw, 2024), this study bridges those domains by assessing how and to what extent history teaching practices foster students' ability to question, analyse, and relate past events to contemporary civic issues. Additionally, it advances knowledge by proposing a conceptual model that situates the teacher's role, the digital-pedagogical environment, and students' generational dispositions in a unified framework something rarely addressed in senior high school settings. The research also uses a systematic mapping of recent literature to update and refine variables such as “critical historical consciousness” for a Generation Z context, which has been under-explored in empirical work. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more generational-specific, digitally-mediated, and critically-oriented history instruction (Maisuroh, 2024). By focusing on Indonesian high school contexts and the dynamics of history teaching and learning in the digital era, this research contributes localized evidence for global discussions about history education innovation and Gen Z. The outcomes are intended to inform curriculum developers, teacher training programs, and policy-makers who aim to convert history education into an active platform for critical citizenship rather than passive memorisation.

Furthermore, the study's novelty lies in its methodological approach that combines a detailed literature review with the development of a diagnostic instrument tailored for assessing Generation Z's critical awareness in history education—incorporating dimensions of digital literacy, source-analysis, and civic relevance. While many studies focus on technology integration or student engagement (Shobariyah, 2025), fewer have created instruments that explicitly measure how students interpret historical narratives in a digital-native environment and how that interpretation correlates with their awareness of social/political dimensions of history. The instrument will allow empirical validation, enabling quantitative-qualitative hybrid research in subsequent phases. In this way, the research goes beyond descriptive mapping of gaps to operationalise concepts that link history pedagogy with observable outcomes in critical historical awareness for Generation Z learners. Moreover, by embedding this instrument within the senior high school context in Indonesia, the study addresses a geographic and cultural gap in the literature, offering evidence for Southeast Asian educational settings where much of the existing research is Western-centric. This novelty positions the research not only as theoretically original but also as practically actionable for teacher-professional development and curriculum design in the regional context.

This research offers global significance by providing a contextualized understanding of how history education can be reshaped to develop critical awareness

among Generation Z students a demographic whose educational and cognitive characteristics are shared across many nations. As digital technology reshapes not only how students access historical content but also how they construct civic identity, the findings from this study can inform comparative educational strategies in other countries experiencing similar generational shifts. The integration of digital tools, critical thinking pedagogy, and culturally relevant history teaching supports international efforts to promote global citizenship and media literacy in the post-truth era. Moreover, the study's conceptual insights and proposed framework can be adapted across diverse curricula to enhance history education's contribution to democratic values, active citizenship, and social justice awareness. The Indonesian context serves as a valuable case study from the Global South, enriching the predominantly Western-focused literature on history pedagogy and Gen Z learning needs. Thus, this research contributes to a broader global discourse on how education systems can cultivate critically aware citizens in the 21st century. It encourages both policy makers and educators worldwide to redesign historical learning environments that are inclusive, reflective, and socially engaged.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that while digital tools and interactive pedagogies hold strong potential to foster critical awareness in Generation Z students, their effectiveness in senior high school history education depends heavily on thoughtful implementation, teacher readiness, and curricular relevance. The review revealed that although historical thinking and digital literacy are emphasized in the literature, they are often treated separately, and rarely integrated to develop students' reflective, analytical, and civic capacities. Furthermore, many teaching practices remain limited to content delivery, lacking structured inquiry, critical source analysis, and connections to contemporary issues. These gaps indicate that history education must shift from rote-based instruction to a more dialogic, student-centered, and context-sensitive model. By aligning teaching strategies with the digital learning preferences of Generation Z, schools can better prepare students to critically interpret historical narratives and apply them to modern-day challenges. The study also contributes conceptually by framing critical historical awareness as an integrated outcome of pedagogy, technology, and student identity. Overall, a transformative approach to history education is essential for empowering Generation Z as informed, critical, and engaged citizens in the digital age.

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