



Digital Legal Culture: Developing the Concept of Legal Culture in the Era of Social Media from a Sociological Law Perspective

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Abstract

The digital era has fundamentally transformed the way legal norms are disseminated, interpreted, and internalized in society. Despite the growing importance of digital communication in shaping legal awareness and behavior, there remains a significant research gap in the sociological study of legal culture, particularly regarding how social media alters the production and perception of law. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the influence of social media on legal awareness and behavior, identifying shifts in legal values under the dominance of digital space, and developing the concept of Digital Legal Culture as a theoretical expansion of Lawrence M. Friedman's legal system theory. Using an exploratory qualitative approach supported by netnography and literature review, this research investigates the transformation of legal culture in the digital age. Findings reveal that social media not only democratizes access to legal knowledge, but also decentralizes legal authority, enabling online communities and influencers to co-construct legal meanings. This results in a participatory, global, and dynamic form of legal culture, marked by phenomena such as "No Viral, No Justice" and the emergence of algorithmic legitimacy. This study contributes a novel conceptual framework, Digital Legal Culture, defined as the values, attitudes, and beliefs towards law that are constructed, contested, and disseminated within digital interaction spaces. The findings offer theoretical and practical insights for scholars and policymakers aiming to enhance legal literacy, reinforce institutional credibility, and ensure justice in an increasingly digitized society.



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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media has become more than a platform for entertainment or communication, it has evolved into a powerful arena that redefines how law is perceived, practiced, and internalized by the public. The phenomenon of “No Viral, No Justice” vividly illustrates how digital virality can become a mechanism of social pressure, potentially altering the pace and direction of legal responses (Harian Bhirawa, 2024; Tarigan et al., 2025). Amid the shifting legal terrain, traditional understandings of legal culture (rooted in analog paradigms) are increasingly inadequate to explain the dynamics of law in a hyperconnected, algorithm-driven society (Flora et al., 2023; Lee, 2025a).

This transformation challenges the relevance of classical sociological frameworks. As society becomes increasingly mediated by digital technologies, the boundaries between formal legal systems and public discourse blur. Friedman’s legal system theory, which comprises legal structure, legal substance, and legal culture (Lesmana, 2022; Wijaya & Kurniawan, 2024), remains foundational but now faces limitations when applied to contexts where legal meaning is co-constructed not only in courts or parliaments, but also in comment sections, trending hashtags, and viral videos (Bhatt, 2024; Carrillo, 2007).

Social media facilitates the decentralization and democratization of legal discourse. Legal information, once the preserve of courts, scholars, and official institutions, is now readily produced and consumed by digital communities, including influencers, digital activists, and even anonymous users (Fefatikha et al., 2023; Kevin & Joe, 2025). This new terrain generates unprecedented access to legal knowledge (Maolana, 2024), yet it also exposes society to misinformation, shallow legal interpretations, and the erosion of formal legal authority (Lee, 2025a; Mulawarman & Nurfitri, 2017).

At the heart of this transformation lies a new conceptual necessity: to understand how legal culture is being digitally mediated. While Friedman (2002) differentiates between internal and external legal culture, the current sociotechnological landscape demands a third space: online legal culture, where legal values are shaped, debated, and negotiated through digital interactions (Kautsar & Muhammad, 2022). This aligns with Rahardjo’s view that law is not static but must be continuously “humanized” and embedded in cultural and social context (Tarigan et al., 2025). Moreover, Wignjosoebroto’s typology, particularly his conception of law as symbolic meaning manifested in social behavior, further underscores the relevance of social media as a legitimate site of legal meaning-making (Agustina, 2023; Lee, 2025c).

This study identifies several urgent research questions: How does social media influence legal awareness and behavior in society? What shifts are occurring in legal values due to the dominance of digital space? How can Friedman’s legal culture theory be expanded to better explain these contemporary phenomena? (Magna & Karisma, 2025; Maolana, 2024).

Thus, the primary objective of this research is to develop the concept of Digital Legal Culture as an extension and theoretical refinement of Friedman’s framework. Using a qualitative exploratory methodology, supported by literature review and netnographic observation of legal discourses on platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram (Adlani, 2023; Lau, 2024), this study aims to (1) Analyze the role of social media in shaping legal awareness and behavior; (2) Examine the value shifts in legal culture in the digital era; and (3) Contribute conceptually to legal sociology by offering a framework that integrates classical theory with the realities of digital society (Cahya et al., 2024; Trisusilo et al., 2024).

METHOD

This research uses an exploratory qualitative approach to deeply understand the phenomenon of digital legal culture in the context of Indonesian society (Iskandar & Amanah, 2024). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore and understand the meanings attached by individuals or groups to a social or humanitarian issue (Q. A. Siregar et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the exploratory nature of this research aims to uncover new information and understanding about a phenomenon that has not been extensively studied, namely the role of social media in shaping the legal culture of society (Pamungkas et al., 2024).

A literature review was conducted to collect and analyze various literature related to Friedman's legal culture theory, digital communication theory, online social behavior theory, and social constructivism (Palmberger, 2025).

Netnography or digital ethnography is a research method that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to study online cultures and communities (Adlani, 2023; Cocq & Liliequist, 2024). This method was chosen because it allows researchers to observe and analyze social interactions on social media related to legal issues (Lau, 2024). Netnography is conducted by observing and analyzing content, interactions, and discussions on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok related to viral legal issues or those that attract public attention (Arianto & Handayani, 2024). Netnography in this research involves several stages, namely: (1) identification and selection of online communities relevant to the research topic; (2) data collection through participant and non-participant observation; (3) data analysis and interpretation; and (4) validation of findings through triangulation with other data collection methods (Alam, 2019; San José State University School of Information, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Influence on Public Legal Awareness and Behavior

Social media has transformed into a digital social arena that plays a crucial role in shaping the legal awareness and behavior of society. Not only as a medium of communication or entertainment, but its functions as a space for the production and reproduction of legal meanings that were previously monopolized by formal institutions. Through various platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and YouTube, social media provides broader and faster access to legal information. The public no longer must rely on conventional media or formal legal education to understand their rights and obligations as citizens (Maolana, 2024; Kevin & Joe, 2025).

Democratization of Legal Information and the Challenges of Formal Authority

One of the main contributions of social media to the legal culture is the democratization of legal information. Social media has opened access to legal information, making legal issues that were previously confined to academic and professional spaces accessible to the general public, including marginalized groups (Semadi, 2024; Tarigan et al., 2025). Educational content such as legal infographics, viral campaigns, explanatory law videos, and personal narratives about legal experiences allow legal literacy to grow from the bottom up (Kevin & Joe, 2025; Maolana, 2024; Maulana, 2024).

However, this opening of access also presents serious challenges to the accuracy of information and the legitimacy of legal authority. In the traditional system, legal information is conveyed by institutional actors such as courts, law faculties, or mainstream mass media. Now, legal narratives can be shaped by influencers without legal backgrounds, digital activists, or even anonymous accounts. As a result, there

is a decentralization of legal authority—where public perception of what is legally valid and true does not always originate from experts or institutions, but rather from viral popular consensus (Fefatikha et al., 2023). This challenges Friedman’s legal system framework, which positions the substance of law as a product of controlled formal structures and legal culture (Wijaya & Kurniawan, 2024).

Legal Compliance and Ethical Behavior in the Digital Era

The transformation of information does not always correlate with the transformation of behavior. Although the dissemination of legal information has increased, compliance with laws and digital ethics remains a major challenge. Violations of laws and social norms such as the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, cyberbullying, and misuse of personal data are still rampant in the online space (Parwitasari et al., 2022; Mulawarman & Nurfitri, 2017). This phenomenon indicates a disconnect between the circulating legal knowledge and the internalization of legal norms in digital behavior.

The factor of anonymity and the viral nature of social media further exacerbate this gap. The digital space provides a false sense of protection that allows individuals to break the law without feeling monitored or accountable. In this context, digital legal literacy campaigns become important as an effort to shape a legal culture that not only knows the law but also adheres to it in digital practices (D. Siregar et al., 2024). This literacy must include an understanding of communication ethics, evaluation of legal information, as well as the legal consequences of violating online actions.

Social Media as a Catalyst for Justice Mobilization: A Case Study of “No Viral, No Justice”

Social media also plays an important role in the process of justice advocacy and social mobilization. The phrase “No Viral, No Justice” describes a new dynamic where justice is not only achieved through formal legal mechanisms but also through the pressure of public opinion mobilized digitally (Harian Bhirawa, 2024; Tarigan et al., 2025). Legal cases with viral exposure such as Mario Dandy, David Ozora, and Vina Cirebon serve as real examples of how the response of law enforcement agencies can be accelerated or even directed by online public pressure.

This phenomenon implies an informal endorsement of legal urgency by the digital community, which is often faster and more massive compared to conventional legal procedures. Social validation through virality gives rise to a new form of legal legitimacy, called “crowdsourced legitimacy” (Bhatt, 2024). This creates a dilemma: on one hand, it expands access to justice for victims who might be overlooked, but on the other hand, it potentially threatens the presumption of innocence and judicial independence if public pressure shapes the direction of verdicts (Maulana, 2024; Wijaya & Kurniawan, 2024).

Public Participation and the Expansion of Legal Democratic Space

Social media also opens space for active public participation in legal discourse and public policy. Not only limited to reactions to viral cases, the public can now voice their aspirations and disagreements with legal products through digital campaigns such as #ReformasiDikorupsi or #TolakOmnibusLaw (Cakradata Team, 2025). Movements like this show that the law is no longer defined unilaterally by the state, but is negotiated together in the digital public space (Lee, 2025b). This participation creates a shift from the position of citizens as passive recipients of the law to active subjects in its formation (Lee, 2025b). This interaction demonstrates the character of digital legal culture that is more horizontal, open, and dynamic. Social media allows legal discussions to become interactive domains, shaping collective awareness, and indirectly influencing policy direction through organized social pressure.

Value Shifts within Legal Culture due to the Dominance of Digital Space

The transformation of legal culture cannot be separated from changes in the social environment that serves as the space for the law's application. In the digital era, especially with the dominance of social media, legal culture is undergoing a profound transition from a normative structure that is hierarchical, local, and procedural to a more global, participatory, substantive, and dynamic form. Legal culture is no longer exclusively monopolized by state institutions and legal experts, but is also socially constructed by the public through digital narratives that develop organically and virally.

From Local to Global: Comopolitanism of Digital Law

The digital era brings significant changes to social norms, including aspects such as lifestyle, communication patterns, and moral and ethical values (Aisy et al., 2025). Before the digital era, the interpretation of law was often limited by local contexts and homogeneous communities. However, social media allows for the crossing of geographical and legal cultural boundaries, creating a global public space that brings together values, norms, and legal practices from various countries. For example, legal issues that were previously domestic can now easily be compared with international practices through digital discourse (AICI UMG, 2024). Campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter in the United States, for example, have also inspired social justice advocacy movements in Indonesia. This process accelerates the formation of a cosmopolitan legal culture, where the values of human rights and universal justice become part of the collective reference of the digital society (Cahya et al., 2024; Kautsar & Muhammad, 2022).

However, this cosmopolitanism also brings risks, namely the fragmentation of legal values. Each country has a different legal structure, and the adoption of cross-border values through social media without understanding the context can create confusion in society regarding what is legal nationally versus what is considered "fair" globally. This creates a dilemma between the universality of justice values and the particularity of legal systems.

From Hierarchical to Participatory: Decentralization of Legal Meaning Production

The digital era marks a shift from a top-down legal culture to a participatory and horizontal model. The authority in defining the law is no longer dominated by judges, academics, or state institutions, but is beginning to be shared with an active digital civil society. Legal discussions can now be triggered by public accounts, influencers, activists, and even ordinary social media users. Online communities have become co-authors in defining the meaning of law (Cahya et al., 2024).

This results in the democratization of legal discourse, namely inclusivity in who has the right to speak and be heard on legal issues. Open public discussions in the digital space can enrich perspectives and strengthen institutional accountability. However, under certain conditions, there also arises a challenge to authority when viral opinions are considered more credible than professional interpretations, or when public discourse is dominated by biased, shallow, or emotional narratives (Fefatikha et al., 2023).

This phenomenon cannot be separated from the role of social media algorithms that create echo chambers, where extreme or populist legal views more easily gain exposure, shifting the deliberative role of law towards the performative (Lee, 2025a). In this context, the production of legal meaning becomes a struggle between institutional power and the power of virality.

From Procedural to Substantive: Felt vs. Formal Justice

The formal legal culture in traditional legal systems emphasizes the importance of legal procedures, which are the stages that must be followed systematically, regardless of the final outcome. However,

in the digital era, society increasingly demands substantive justice, which is perceived as morally and socially fair, without overly considering whether the procedures have been carried out perfectly (Gussela et al., 2024; Kautsar & Muhammad, 2022).

This change is clearly reflected in the phenomenon of “No Viral, No Justice,” where the public feels that justice can only be achieved if a case goes viral enough to attract the attention of the authorities. This shows that justice is no longer determined solely by legal procedures, but by visibility and emotional resonance in the digital space (Tarigan et al., 2025). The judiciary has become an object of public expectation that wants to see results, not just the process.

On the other hand, this substantive approach poses serious risks to fundamental legal principles, such as the presumption of innocence and due process of law. When public opinion shapes a perception of guilt before a court decision, the courtroom can be contaminated by external pressure. This not only threatens the impartiality of judges but also undermines the integrity of the law itself as a rational and objective institution (Bhatt, 2024; Gruce, 2024).

From Static to Dynamic: Legal Culture in the Fast Information Cycle

The most significant recent change is the shift in legal culture from a static and slow-adapting system to a dynamic and responsive one. Social media creates a cycle of information and opinion that occurs in real-time. As a result, legal issues develop very quickly, often outpacing legislation or institutional responses (Cahya et al., 2024). In this context, society demands that the law remains relevant and adaptive, not only normatively but also communicatively. This creates constant pressure on policymakers and law enforcement to respond to issues quickly, often within a timeframe that does not allow for a mature deliberative process. The law is forced to be responsive to public opinion, not just to legal norms or principles of justice (AICI UMG, 2024). As a consequence, the formal legal structure risks losing epistemic and moral authority if it cannot keep up with the social dynamics shaped by the digital space. On the other hand, delays in responding can be interpreted by the public as indifference, which erodes the legitimacy of the law in the eyes of the digital society.

Friedman’s Legal Culture Concepts’ Evolution for the Social Media Era

Drastic changes in the social ecosystem due to the development of digital technology, particularly social media, demand a new theoretical framework capable of explaining legal dynamics in contemporary society. One of the conceptual responses to this reality is the formulation of the concept of “Digital Legal Culture,” an extension of the legal culture theory formulated by Lawrence M. Friedman. In its original framework, Friedman divided the legal system into three main components: legal structure, legal substance, and legal culture. However, in the current digital context, the dimension of legal culture is undergoing such profound transformation that it demands elaboration and conceptual redefinition more aligned with the actual conditions of society.

Digital Legal Culture as an Expansion of Friedman’s Legal Culture

Digital Legal Culture can be understood as a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes of society towards the law that are constructed, expressed, and disseminated through digital media, especially social media. Unlike internal legal culture and external legal culture introduced by Friedman, Digital Legal Culture introduces a new dimension, namely online legal culture, which is the legal culture that develops and lives in the digital interaction space (Kautsar & Muhammad, 2022; Lesmana, 2022).

In online legal culture, law is not only an object of norms but also an object of narratives, interpretations, debates, and even sarcasm in the digital public space. Legal values are continuously

formed and contested by diverse digital actors, from legal professionals to anonymous accounts. The law no longer exists merely as a text of statutes or judicial decisions, but as content that can be shared, reinterpreted, and viralized by anyone. Thus, Digital Legal Culture is not merely a “new branch” of legal culture, but a completely new social landscape that reshapes how society understands, interprets, and responds to the law. Law in the digital era is not only written in books but also shaped in feeds and timelines.

Redefining the Connection between Structure, Substance, and Legal Culture

Digital Legal Culture also fundamentally reconstructs the relationship between the three components of Friedman’s legal system: *first*, the legal structure (institutions, apparatus, formal legal processes) is now required to be more responsive to digital public opinion. The legitimacy and credibility of legal institutions become more fragile when their existence is criticized or destroyed by viral narratives. *Second*, the substance of law (rules, norms, policies) no longer solely derives from official state texts. Digital discourse is capable of creating new legal interpretations and expectations that drive changes or revisions to formal regulations (for example, the emergence of the urgency for digital privacy regulation or cyber-based violence). *Third*, digital legal culture (values, attitudes, societal legal behavior) becomes a social force that exerts counter-pressure on structure and substance. It not only functions as a “mirror of social acceptance,” but also as an active actor shaping policy orientations and internalized legal norms. These interactions are dynamic, conflictual, and non-linear. Digital legal culture can serve as a participatory bridge that strengthens the legitimacy of formal law, but it can also pose a challenge to legal authority if not managed wisely.

The Importance of Digital Legal Culture in Contemporary Legal Sociology Studies

In the context of legal sociology, the concept of Digital Legal Culture opens up a new area of study on how law functions in the digital society. It highlights that the reality of law is not only shaped by what the law says, but also by how the law is discussed, felt, and practiced in the digital space. This concept also invites us to understand that the power of law now does not only reside in court buildings or parliamentary offices, but also in trending topics, comment sections, and viral videos. Therefore, understanding digital legal culture becomes crucial for developing a legal system that is adaptive, accountable, and upholds the principles of justice.

Theoretical and Practical Implications in Understanding the Concept of Legal Culture in the Digital Era

Theoretical Implications

The development of the Digital Legal Culture concept significantly contributes to enriching legal system theory, particularly in the context of legal sociology in the digital era. At least there are three implicative dimensions that need to be considered, namely:

1. The expansion of Friedman’s legal system theory into the digital dimension. This concept extends Friedman’s legal system theory by incorporating the dimension of digital interaction as a new arena for the formation of legal culture. If in the classical approach legal culture is understood as the latent values and attitudes of society towards the law, then in the digital context, these values are expressive, active, and open on highly fluid platforms. Online legal culture has become an important sub-component that mediates between the structure and substance of law in contemporary reality (Kautsar & Muhammad, 2022; Lesmana, 2022).

2. The bridge between traditional legal theory and digital social reality. Digital Legal Culture becomes an analytical bridge that connects traditional legal theory, which tends to be oriented towards formal institutions and written norms, with rapidly and non-linearly evolving social phenomena in the digital space. In this case, sociology of law is no longer sufficient to merely observe behavior towards the law, but must also examine the social production of law that occurs in online interactions.
3. Contribution to the strengthening of social constructivism theory in law. This concept also enriches the understanding of legal sociology from a constructivist perspective. Law is no longer considered an objective entity that is simply accepted by society, but rather as the result of a collective social construction through discourse and digital interaction. The meaning of law is contestable and depends on who voices it, in what context, and how algorithms reinforce that narrative (Lee, 2025c; Trisusilo et al., 2024).

Practical Implications

The concept of Digital Legal Culture is not only relevant at the theoretical level but also has direct implications for legal policy, public education, and legal professional practice. Some important points that can be elaborated include:

1. Development of digital legal literacy in society. Legal awareness in the digital era is not just about knowing the regulations, but also about the critical ability to sift through, interpret, and respond to legal information freely disseminated on social media. Therefore, it is necessary to develop policies for digital legal literacy education on a massive and systematic scale. This literacy material includes: digital rights and obligations, online interaction ethics, and understanding the legal consequences of actions in the digital space (Maulana, 2024; D. Siregar et al., 2024).
2. Legal reform to respond to the dynamics of the digital social landscape. The emergence of digital norms that are not accommodated within the positive legal system demands regulatory reform and adaptation of legal institutions. For example, regulations on digital defamation, personal data privacy, cyberbullying, AI misuse in legal communication, and the boundary between expression and hate speech. In addition, law enforcement agencies also need to develop rapid response mechanisms to viral issues without sacrificing the principle of due process of law.
3. Adjustment of legal institution communication strategies. Legal institutions should start viewing social media not just as a threat, but as a strategic communication channel with the public. Transparency and accountability of law enforcement agencies can be strengthened through active and measured engagement in the digital space. The presence of legal institutions on social media can also serve as a credible source of legal information and combat misinformation.
4. A new understanding for legal practitioners regarding digital public perception. For practitioners such as judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, it is important to understand that public perception of the law is not only shaped by court decisions but also by the viral narratives accompanying those processes. Therefore, there is a need for awareness of “symbolic politics” in the digital space, including its impact on the legitimacy of legal processes, the reputation of institutions, and the position of clients in public opinion (Bhatt, 2024; Thornhill, 2025).

The need for interdisciplinary and data-driven legal research. Another practical implication is the urgency to develop legal research based on digital quantitative and interdisciplinary approaches, such as big data analysis of social media, modeling public opinion on legal issues, and the use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) to map dominant legal narratives. This will strengthen the legal capacity to read social dynamics more accurately and responsively.

CONCLUSION

This research has critically examined the intersection between law, society, and digital technology, emphasizing how media social platforms have become a dominant arena in which legal awareness, attitudes, and behaviors are shaped. Drawing upon Friedman's legal system theory, this study identifies that the traditional binary of internal and external legal culture is no longer sufficient to capture the complex dynamics emerging in the digital age. The concept of Digital Legal Culture is thus introduced as an expansion of Friedman's model, one that includes a third dimension (social media legal culture).

Empirical findings from netnographic observations and theoretical synthesis demonstrate that social media not only facilitates rapid dissemination of legal information, but also plays a crucial role in constructing public meaning around justice, legitimacy, and rights. The study reveals several transformative shifts from hierarchical to participatory legal communication, from procedural to substantive expectations of justice, and from static to dynamic legal norms that adapt to real-time digital discourse.

The study underscores the relevance of social constructivism in explaining how digital communities collaboratively produce, reproduce, and contest legal meanings. The findings also show how the viral nature of social media can pressure legal institutions into responsiveness, posing both opportunities and risks for due process and the independence of legal authority.

In conclusion, Digital Legal Culture offers a robust theoretical lens to understand the evolution of legal culture in the digital era. This concept is not only academically significant but also practically essential in guiding the development of legal literacy initiatives, responsive regulatory frameworks, and inclusive legal practices. Future research may further explore comparative models across different legal systems and investigate algorithmic governance as an emergent force shaping legal consciousness in the 21st century.

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