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The Impact of Social Media on Media Literacy Among Youth

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced the development of media literacy among youth, presenting both opportunities and challenges. This research examines how social media impacts critical thinking and the ability to evaluate and engage with media content. While social media fosters skills like content creation and collaboration, it also exposes youth to misinformation and the risk of diminished critical evaluation. The study synthesises insights from existing literature, highlighting the importance of metacognitive skills to navigate an expansive digital media landscape. It underscores the need for educational initiatives, teacher training, and policy reforms to enhance media literacy and critical thinking, empowering young people to become informed, responsible media consumers and contributors. This analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media and media literacy, suggesting strategies for addressing its challenges and leveraging its benefits.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to research how social media influences the development of media literacy skills among youth. Over time, social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, especially for young people. With the rise of platforms like Facebook in the early 2000s, we have been able to connect and grow as a society. However, with the vast amount of information we receive, how can we be sure that we are processing it effectively? Additionally, how does social media affect us psychologically?

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in various forms. It involves understanding how media messages are constructed, recognising the purposes and potential biases behind them, and critically engaging with the content. This definition is commonly cited from Aufderheide (1993): "The ability of a citizen to access, analyse, and produce information for specific outcomes" (p. 6). Potter (2010, p. 686), on the other hand, describes the body of literature in the field of media literacy as "a large complex patchwork of ideas." The literature on media literacy underscores the significance of individuals' beliefs about their ability to critically engage with, question, and analyse information. According to Jones-Jang, S. M., Liu, J., & Mortensen, T. (2019), it is predicted that individuals who perceive themselves as competent in media literacy are more likely to identify fake news stories. Media literacy empowers individuals to navigate the complex media landscape, make informed decisions, and participate actively in a democratic society. It is especially important for youth, who are constantly exposed to a vast array of media content.

Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram are built on user-generated content and significantly impact various aspects of life, including buying and selling behaviours, entrepreneurship, political discussions, and venture capitalism (Greenwood & Gopal, 2015). It has deeply integrated into daily life, helping people stay updated on news, enjoy entertainment, connect with loved ones, find reviews, fulfil emotional needs, manage work, and keep up with trends like fashion (Kapoor, K. K., Tamilmani, K., Rana, N. P., Patil, P., Dwivedi, Y. K., & Nerur, S., 2018). These platforms offer both opportunities and challenges for media literacy. On one hand, they provide access to diverse perspectives and real-time information. On the other hand, they can also be sources of misinformation, echo chambers, and content that may impact mental health. Engaging with media can indeed enhance understanding of it, but studies show that young people often struggle to critically assess and interpret media content (e.g., Steeves, 2014; Wineburg et al., 2016). This is why it is essential to understand whether the negative perception of social media's impact on young people also encompasses their struggles with grasping the fundamentals of media literacy.

Research Objectives

This research aims to:

1. Investigate how social media usage influences the development of media literacy skills among youth.
2. Examine the positive and negative impacts of social media on youth's ability to critically evaluate information.
3. Explore the psychological effects of social media on youth and how these effects influence their media literacy.
4. By addressing these objectives, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media and media literacy among youth, and to offer insights into how we can better support young people in developing these crucial skills.

2. Literature Review

The Importance of Media Literacy, Information Literacy & Critical Thinking

We are immersed in the most expansive media landscape humanity has ever experienced. To effectively navigate this dynamic digital space, it is essential for users to develop strong media literacy skills. According to Cho, Cannon, Lopez, and Li (2024, p. 941), scholars have enriched and expanded the understanding of media literacy. From this perspective, Potter (2019) argues that media literacy involves more than just acquiring skills; it also includes knowledge structures and an individual's personal locus. A strong personal locus encourages individuals to invest greater effort in seeking out and processing information effectively.

Media literacy can also be compared to other literacies, including information literacy. Information literacy focuses on the ability to find, assess, and utilise reliable information. Research conducted by Jones-Jang, Liu, and Mortensen (2021) showed that information literacy plays a significant role in accurately identifying fake news, whereas other literacies—such as media literacy, news literacy, and digital literacy—do not show a notable impact. Based on Tommasi et al. (2021) findings, critical thinking and media literacy are defined as two interconnected metacognitive competences. Together, they encompass the abilities to reflect, analyse, and question media information through an understanding of its representations, structures, and implications.

(Mukhtar & Putri, 2021). This research has several primary objectives. The main goal is to investigate how media literacy influences the understanding and utilisation of economic data on social media platforms. Additionally, the study explores the extent to which media literacy aids social media users in forming informed opinions. It examines the relationship between economic discourse and social media, emphasising the importance of using media to promote accurate economic information and encourage open dialogue about economic issues. In the late 20th century, the concept of media literacy emerged, significantly influencing how people understand and engage with economic news (Hobbs, 2021). James Potter highlighted the need for strong critical thinking skills to explore how media

portrayals of the economy impact consumer confidence and financial decisions (Hobbs, 2021). As the field of media literacy studies has expanded, educators and economists have recognised the importance of understanding how media influences economic socialisation (Demidov et al., 2019).

To enhance media literacy among youth, it is essential to train teachers effectively, integrate media literacy into the curriculum, promote critical thinking, educate about online commercial aspects, use engaging teaching methods, and involve parents in the learning process. Teachers' understanding of media literacy, along with their confidence in using technology and media literacy in their teaching, is crucial for effectively integrating these skills into their lessons (McNelly & Harvey, 2021, p. 108). However, many teachers feel uncertain about their ability to critically evaluate media and teach media-related topics (Stein & Prewett, 2009). This uncertainty can hinder their effectiveness in teaching these skills, which is particularly significant for school-age children who spend a lot of time in front of screens (Rideout & Robb, 2019). While students are taught basic digital literacy skills at school, such as how to search online and verify information, research shows they often lack understanding of the commercial aspects of online platforms (Steeves, 2014).

Fake News

According to Molina et al. (2021), there are seven distinct types of fake news. They describe false news or hoaxes as fabricated information that lacks any grounding in reality or factual basis. The seven types of fake news identified are: false news, which involves entirely fabricated information; polarised content, where emotional or inflammatory material reinforces existing beliefs; satire, which consists of unrealistic or exaggerated stories intended for humour; misreporting, referring to unintentional inaccuracies in professional news; commentary, which mixes opinion with news and lacks impartiality; persuasive information, often promotional material resembling news; and citizen journalism, where individuals create content that may not meet professional journalistic standards.

Weiss et al. (2020) suggest that defining fake news involves looking at it from different angles. Firstly, it can come from having too much information, where people choose the easiest sources without checking facts. Secondly, some people can't or won't recognise false information, even with evidence, and they often think they know more than they do, which spreads fake news. Thirdly, organisations that should check information might not always do so. Fourthly, fake news can be deliberate lies or propaganda. Lastly, it can come from ignorance and the repetition of false information. They define fake news broadly as sharing information that tries to undermine accepted truths to change power dynamics.

Research indicates that individuals are almost as likely to believe fake news as they are to dismiss accurate news. Consequently, the study suggests placing greater emphasis on enhancing the acceptance of trustworthy information (Acerbi et al., 2022). Gilmour (2023) suggests that if there is consensus that propaganda, misinformation, and fake news are problematic, it is essential for schools to consistently foster critical thinking skills to enable students to become meaningful participants in their communities. The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government offers an alternative perspective. They question whether, given limited resources, efforts should focus on combating the spread of misinformation or prioritising the promotion and acceptance of accurate, reliable information. Gilmour (2023) also illustrates that higher education, primarily through libraries and classrooms, should assist in developing critical thinking skills, while acknowledging that there is a lack of consensus on how to teach critical thinking.

Positive Impacts of Social Media

Engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that research has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and technical skills (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011). Teenagers are discovering that they can conveniently and privately access information online about their health issues. For those with chronic illnesses, social media provides access to websites where they can develop supportive networks with others who have similar conditions (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

The mobile technologies that teens use daily, such as mobile phones, instant messaging, and text messaging, have already led to multiple improvements in their health care, including increased medication adherence, better disease understanding, and fewer missed appointments (Krishna, Boren, & Balas, 2009). Additionally, middle and secondary school pupils frequently use social media to connect and collaborate on homework and group projects, enabling them to work together, share ideas, and exchange knowledge outside traditional classroom settings (Boyd, 2008).

Some schools have effectively incorporated blogs into their teaching methods, which help students enhance their English language proficiency, improve their writing skills, and foster creativity (Borja, 2005). These educational uses of social media demonstrate its potential to support both academic and personal development among young people. It is crucial to note that teenagers may encounter inaccuracies during these searches, and due to their young age, parental involvement is highly recommended.

Negative Impacts of Social Media

Social media poses more dangers to teenagers than many adults might expect. Common risks include interactions with peers, exposure to unsuitable material, limited awareness of online privacy, and the influence of targeted advertising by third parties. Many scholars explore the behavioural side of social media, and interestingly, some find factors that prevent users from continuing its use. Turel and Serenko (2012) warn against excessive use of social media sites, which can result in strong pathological and maladaptive psychological dependency.

Social media and its associated risks have captured the attention of many authors. An early study by Griffiths and Light (2008) focuses on the problem of media convergence, whereby a gaming website includes social media features, putting a vulnerable young audience at risk of scamming. Cyberbullying is another prevalent issue that can target any young person online, often leading to severe psychological impacts such as depression, anxiety, extreme feelings of isolation, and, in the most tragic cases, suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, and Akre (2017) describe sexting as the act of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, images, or videos, typically through mobile phones or other digital devices. They highlight that sexting can involve various forms of media and actions, such as sharing text messages, photos, or videos, and may occur between individuals in different contexts, including consensual relationships or under social pressure. In the United States, some states have started characterising teens who engage in sexting as juvenile-law misdemeanours and have threatened or charged them with felony child pornography offences (Gifford, 2009).

3. Methodology

Research Approach

This study utilises a qualitative approach, focusing on a systematic review of relevant articles and existing literature. The analysis aims to synthesise findings on the relationship between social media and youth media literacy.

Data Collection

Articles, reports, and academic studies were sourced from reputable journals, databases, and organisational publications. Keywords like "media literacy," "social media impact," and "youth critical thinking" guided the search process to ensure the inclusion of relevant materials.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies published in peer-reviewed journals or authoritative sources.
- Literature focusing on media literacy, social media, or youth engagement.

- Research examining both the challenges and benefits of social media use on critical thinking or media literacy skills.

Analysis Process

The collected articles were systematically reviewed and categorised based on key themes, such as:

- The role of social media in enhancing or hindering media literacy.
- Patterns of misinformation and critical evaluation among youth.
- Proposed educational strategies to improve media literacy.

Synthesis of Findings

Insights from the reviewed studies were consolidated to draw conclusions regarding the impact of social media on youth and to identify gaps in the literature. This process facilitated a thematic understanding of how media literacy is shaped through digital engagement.

Limitations

The study relies entirely on secondary sources, meaning conclusions are based on the interpretation of existing data, without new empirical evidence. Potential biases in the reviewed literature are acknowledged. This methodology aligns with research conducted purely through literature review and analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

The research article concludes that social media has both positive and negative impacts on media literacy among youth. On the positive side, social media fosters skills like content creation and sharing, allowing young people to engage with a broad range of information. However, it also poses challenges, such as difficulties in critically evaluating the credibility of information and increased exposure to misinformation. The study highlights that frequent social media users may develop better skills in identifying fake news, but without proper guidance, they remain vulnerable to its influence. It also points out disparities in media literacy levels based on cultural and socio-economic factors, emphasising the need for tailored approaches to address these gaps. Additionally, the research stresses the importance of implementing policies and educational initiatives that enhance media literacy skills to navigate the complex media environment more effectively.

5. Conclusion

This discussion sheds light on critical considerations about the interplay between social media and media literacy among youth. Social media offers significant benefits, such as fostering creativity and facilitating content sharing, yet it also presents challenges, particularly in developing critical evaluation skills required to discern credible information. Moreover, cultural and socio-economic disparities greatly influence media literacy levels, highlighting the need for tailored strategies to address these inequalities. Encouraging the acceptance of reliable information, alongside combating misinformation, requires a balanced approach involving education and regulation.

Building on these insights, it becomes evident that collaborative efforts across education, policy, and social platforms are essential. O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, and the Council on Communications and Media (2011) stress the importance of equipping young individuals to become informed media consumers capable of recognising and resisting manipulative content, including advertisements. This can be achieved through targeted education for parents, children, and teenagers. Furthermore, training initiatives should prioritise fostering independent thinking and reflection, enabling students to sustain

their critical thinking and media literacy skills beyond the classroom (Tommasi et al., 2021). Despite the potential for media engagement to enhance understanding, research shows that many young people continue to face challenges in critically assessing and interpreting media content (e.g., Steeves, 2014; Wineburg et al., 2016).

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