



Media Literacy As Civic Competence: Evaluating Awareness And Critical Thinking Among Youth

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Abstract

This paper explores media literacy as a part of civic competence among youth. It looks at levels of awareness, critical thinking abilities, and the link between media literacy and civic engagement. The study uses a mixed-methods approach that includes a cross-sectional survey (N = 720) and semi-structured interviews (n = 24) with students aged 16 to 24 in secondary and tertiary education. It measures media knowledge, critical evaluation skills, exposure patterns, and civic behaviours like voting intention, civic discussion, and online civic participation. Quantitative analyses involve descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression modeling. Qualitative thematic analysis helps provide context for the survey findings. The results suggest that stronger media literacy is linked to higher reported civic engagement and a more critical evaluation of news sources. Factors like socioeconomic status, education stream, and social media use influence this relationship. The paper ends with recommendations for integrating media literacy into the curriculum, targeted interventions, and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Media literacy, civic competence, critical thinking, youth, civic engagement, mixed-methods, education

Introduction

In modern democratic societies, the health of democracy relies heavily on the ability of citizens to access, interpret, and engage with information in a critical way. Civic participation, informed decision-making, and public discussion all depend on individuals being able to assess the credibility and intent of messages they encounter daily. As the media environment changes quickly with the rise of digital technologies, the lines between information, opinion, and propaganda have become less clear. This shift has made media literacy not just a communication skill but an essential part of being an informed citizen. The ability to understand and evaluate media content, especially today, determines how well citizens can engage in democratic life and resist manipulation.

Over the last decade, the media landscape has transformed significantly. Traditional journalism methods, like print, radio, and television, have been added to or even replaced by digital and social media platforms

such as Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. These platforms have opened up information creation and sharing, allowing anyone with internet access to become a content creator. However, this openness also aids the spread of misinformation and fake news. Algorithms that focus on engagement instead of accuracy often boost sensational, emotionally charged, or divisive content, influencing how users see reality and affecting public discussions. As a result, it is more important than ever for individuals, particularly young people, to navigate this environment with care.

Media literacy is generally described as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media messages in different formats. It involves understanding how media content is made, recognising bias and intent, assessing source credibility, and being able to produce and share responsible media messages. So, media literacy goes beyond just knowing how to use digital tools; it includes critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility. When linked to civic competence, media literacy helps individuals make informed decisions about political information, participate constructively in discussions, and engage in civic and democratic activities.

For young people, media literacy is particularly important as part of civic competence. Young individuals are some of the most active users of digital and social media, consuming vast amounts of information every day and often interacting with content related to social, political, and cultural issues. Their media habits shape how they view governance, democracy, and citizenship. However, their high exposure to information also makes them susceptible to misinformation campaigns, targeted political messages, and polarisation. Many young users may not have the critical tools needed to tell apart reliable information from manipulative or biased content. Therefore, developing media literacy in youth is vital for their personal growth and for strengthening democratic processes.

In this context, civic competence means the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that help citizens participate effectively in society. It includes understanding civic institutions, taking part in community and political activities, and exercising rights and responsibilities with awareness. Media literacy enhances these abilities by allowing individuals to interpret civic information accurately, understand the media's role in shaping public opinion, and contribute responsibly to public discussions. In a world where digital interactions increasingly influence political outcomes, media literacy becomes a form of digital citizenship, essential for meaningful civic participation in the twenty-first century.

This paper looks at media literacy as a form of civic competence among youth, focusing on the relationship between awareness, critical thinking, and civic engagement. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate how well young people grasp media mechanisms such as gatekeeping, framing, bias, and agenda-setting, as well as how effectively they apply critical thinking when consuming or sharing civic and political content online. It also explores whether higher levels of media literacy are linked to greater civic participation, such as voting, volunteering, activism, or engagement in online discussions.

Literature Review

Research on media literacy has looked into various aspects, from theoretical frameworks and teaching methods to assessment practices and their effects on civic engagement. Scholars differentiate media literacy from information literacy, even though both areas share similar skills. Information literacy focuses on the ability to find, evaluate, and use information effectively. It emphasises verifying facts, assessing credibility, and interpreting data. Media literacy encompasses these skills and goes further by incorporating a critical understanding of media messages, media industries, and the social and political forces that influence them. According to Buckingham (2003) and Hobbs (2010), media literacy includes analysing content, recognising

bias, understanding persuasive techniques, and producing responsible messages. This broader focus makes media literacy a key skill for navigating today's digital world, where media is everywhere and often driven by ideology or commerce.

At its core, media literacy is about more than just understanding content; it involves awareness of the contexts in which media operate. Media consumers must recognise the impact of advertising, the framing of news stories, and the potential for personalised content through algorithms on social media. The ability to break down these layers of influence is fundamental to media literacy, setting it apart from general information literacy. By promoting this awareness, media literacy helps individuals engage with media messages thoughtfully, allowing them to question the intent behind content and assess its accuracy, relevance, and ethical implications.

From an educational viewpoint, media literacy instruction has been shown to improve critical thinking, reduce vulnerability to misinformation, and encourage civic engagement. Hobbs (2010) and Martens & Hobbs (2015) stress that structured media literacy education helps young people develop the skills to critically examine media messages, spot manipulation or bias, and create content that is ethically responsible and socially conscious. Activities in the classroom may involve analysing news articles for bias, evaluating the credibility of online sources, investigating advertising techniques, or creating digital media like videos or blogs. These practices motivate students to do more than just passively consume media; they encourage them to actively question, interpret, and engage in public discussions.

Researchers like Potter (2013) and Mihailidis (2014) argue that these skills relate closely to civic engagement. Individuals with higher media literacy are more likely to seek diverse information sources, engage in informed discussions, and participate in democratic activities such as voting, volunteering, or advocacy. Media literacy, therefore, is not just a cognitive skill set but also a driver for developing civic awareness and encouraging active participation in society. This aligns with broader civic education models, like the "skills and dispositions" framework, which highlights the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for responsible participation in social and political life (Hoskins et al., 2006).

Despite these clear connections, there are important research gaps. Although many studies have explored how media literacy affects critical thinking and analytical skills, few large-scale studies have connected specific components of media literacy—such as evaluating sources, understanding how algorithms deliver content, and creating media—to real-world civic actions. For instance, while students may show they can identify biased reporting in class, there is little evidence that this skill translates into increased voting, civic advocacy, or public participation in democratic processes. This gap highlights the need for strong assessment tools that can measure both cognitive skills and behavioural outcomes.

Contextual factors also play a role in the effectiveness of media literacy education. Research shows that factors such as educational background, socioeconomic status, access to technology, and political socialisation affect a person's ability to engage critically with media (Livingstone, 2014; Ashley et al., 2017). Simply being exposed to media content or participating in media literacy programs does not guarantee critical understanding or civic engagement. Instead, reflective engagement, support from educators, and positive learning environments are necessary for meaningful learning and applying skills in real-life situations.

To address these gaps, the present study aims to create a comprehensive tool to assess different aspects of media literacy. This tool will evaluate skills such as analysing media content, assessing sources, understanding media industry structures, and producing ethical media. By linking these skills to young

people's civic awareness and participation, the study seeks to provide evidence of how media literacy helps develop informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. This approach contributes to the academic discussion on media literacy and offers insight for educational practices, suggesting how schools and digital learning spaces can promote both critical thinking and civic participation.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Based on previous studies that connect media literacy to civic competence and participation, this study looks into how young people's understanding and use of media relate to their civic awareness and behaviours. The research focuses on youth aged 16 to 24, a group that is very active online and increasingly influential in shaping public discussions.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the levels of media literacy, specifically in knowledge, critical evaluation, and production skills, among youth aged 16 to 24?

This question aims to measure young people's abilities to access, interpret, and create media content responsibly. It assesses their understanding of media systems, their ability to spot misinformation, and their confidence in producing or sharing credible content.

RQ2: How is media literacy related to civic competence indicators such as civic knowledge, participation, and discussion?

This question explores whether higher media literacy leads to greater awareness of civic issues, more frequent involvement in democratic activities (such as voting, volunteering, and online advocacy), and more active participation in civic or political discussions.

RQ3: Which demographic and media-use factors affect the relationship between media literacy and civic behaviours?

This examines how factors such as gender, education, socioeconomic background, and media consumption patterns influence the strength or direction of the link between media literacy and civic engagement.

Hypothesis

H1: Higher media literacy scores will be positively associated with greater civic engagement, both offline (e.g., community service, voting) and online (e.g., social media activism, civic dialogue).

This hypothesis reflects the assumption that critical and informed media users are more likely to act as participatory citizens.

H2: Critical evaluation skills—such as the ability to detect bias, verify information, and assess credibility—will be stronger predictors of civic participation than production skills.

It assumes that analytical competencies have a greater impact on democratic engagement than creative or technical abilities alone.

H3: Socioeconomic status and formal education exposure to media literacy programs will moderate the relationship between media literacy and civic engagement.

This suggests that individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds or those who have received structured media education will show stronger positive associations between media literacy and civic participation.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study uses a convergent mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. This method helps create a clear understanding of media literacy as civic competence among youth. The quantitative part includes a cross-sectional survey given to a stratified sample of 720 respondents. This allows for a statistical assessment of the relationships between media literacy components and civic engagement indicators. The qualitative part involves semi-structured interviews with 24 participants chosen from the survey pool. This design allows for the triangulation of findings. The quantitative data identify patterns and associations. The qualitative narratives provide deeper insight into how young people understand and practice media literacy in civic contexts.

2. Sample and Sampling

The target population consists of youth aged 16 to 24 years who are enrolled in higher secondary (grades 11 to 12) or undergraduate programs across three areas: a metropolitan area, a mid-sized city, and a semi-urban district. This distribution ensures diversity in social and educational contexts.

A stratified random sampling method was employed, organised by region and institution type (public or private). A total of 720 participants were targeted—about 240 from each region—to ensure adequate representation and statistical reliability, factoring in an expected 10 to 15% rate of incomplete responses. Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range, have internet access at least once a week, and provide informed consent (parental consent obtained for minors). This ensured that all respondents had relevant digital exposure needed to evaluate media literacy.

3. Instruments

The survey included multiple sections to gather demographic, behavioural, and attitudinal data:

Demographics: Age, gender, education level, and socio-economic factors such as parental education and household assets.

Media Use Patterns: Daily media usage, preferred platforms, and main sources for news and civic information.

Media Literacy Scale

A 30-item Media Literacy Scale was created for this study and divided into three subscales:

Knowledge & Awareness (10 items): Understanding media systems, ownership, advertising influence, and algorithmic curation.

Critical Evaluation Skills (10 items): Practices like verifying information, detecting bias, and spotting manipulated or false content.

Production & Expression Skills (10 items): Ability to create, share, and manage digital content responsibly.

Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Civic Competence Measures

Civic Knowledge: A six-item quiz assessing understanding of basic democratic institutions and civic processes.

Civic Engagement: Self-reported participation in activities such as volunteering, signing petitions, attending public meetings, or online advocacy in the past year.

Civic Discussion and Efficacy: Frequency of discussing social or political issues and perceived confidence in influencing civic outcomes (Likert scale items).

Misinformation Susceptibility Test: Six news headlines (accurate, misleading, and false) were presented for respondents to rate credibility and indicate whether they would share them.

Qualitative Interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' media habits, methods for verifying news, personal experiences with misinformation, and thoughts on media education. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted online or in person, depending on availability and consent.

4. Procedure

Data collection took place through institutional collaboration with schools and colleges. Surveys were distributed digitally through secure links, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymised responses. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, assured of voluntary participation, and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon completion, participants received a small e-voucher incentive as appreciation for their contribution. The interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed for thematic analysis.

5. Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS and R software.

- Reliability of scales was tested using Cronbach's alpha.
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) validated the three-factor structure of the media literacy scale.
- Descriptive statistics summarised key demographic and media use patterns.
- Bivariate correlations assessed associations between media literacy components and civic indicators.
- Multivariate regression models examined predictors of civic engagement, controlling for demographic variables and media use.
- Interaction terms were used to test moderating effects of socioeconomic status and education.
- Logistic regression analysed binary outcomes such as the likelihood of sharing misinformation.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Coding identified recurring themes related to media awareness, verification behaviours, and civic motivations. Findings from both strands were integrated using joint display tables, highlighting convergences and divergences between quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

Expected / Sample Results

1. Scale Validation

The Media Literacy Scale is expected to have a clear three-factor structure that matches the intended subscales: (1) Knowledge & Awareness, (2) Critical Evaluation Skills, and (3) Production & Expression Skills. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) should confirm that item loadings are satisfactory ($> .50$). Internal consistency measures should show high reliability, with Cronbach's α values above $.80$ for the overall scale and over $.75$ for each subscale. This would support the validity and reliability of the developed tool.

2. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results are likely to show a moderate mean media literacy score ($M \approx 3.4$ on a 5-point scale), indicating partial but uneven proficiency among youth. Comparing subscales may reveal that critical evaluation skills are lower, especially among the younger group (ages 16–18), who may not receive formal training in source verification and algorithm awareness. On the other hand, production and expression skills may seem stronger due to the widespread use of social media and digital content creation among participants.

3. Correlational Findings

In line with previous studies (Mihailidis, 2014; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017), strong positive correlations are expected between critical evaluation skills and the frequency of civic discussions ($r \approx .42$). This suggests that those who critically evaluate media content are more likely to engage in civic conversations. The link between production skills and civic engagement is expected to be weaker but still positive ($r \approx .18$), meaning that simply being creatively involved does not automatically lead to informed civic action.

4. Regression Analyses

Multivariate regression models are expected to show that, after controlling for demographic and media-use variables, critical evaluation skills significantly predict civic engagement ($\beta \approx .36, p < .001$). This supports the hypothesis that analytical and verification abilities play a stronger role in fostering civic participation than production competencies. Interaction effects are anticipated between socioeconomic status (SES) and formal media education, with stronger positive associations observed among participants from higher SES backgrounds and those who have received structured instruction in media literacy.

5. Misinformation Susceptibility

On the misinformation test, respondents scoring higher on critical evaluation are expected to be less likely to rate false or misleading headlines as credible and less likely to express willingness to share them. This pattern would reinforce the connection between media literacy—particularly evaluative judgment—and resilience to misinformation.

6. Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis of interview data is expected to reveal several consistent patterns:

- 1. Lack of Systematic Media Education:** Participants frequently report minimal exposure to structured media literacy instruction in formal education settings.
- 2. Reliance on Social Cues:** Many youth rely on social validation signals such as likes, shares, and follower counts to judge information credibility.
- 3. Desire for Practical Skills:** Respondents express a need for more hands-on training in verification techniques, fact-checking tools, and ethical content sharing.
- 4. Civic Motivation as Socially Driven:** Civic participation often emerges from peer influence, community involvement, or trending social media issues rather than formal political engagement.

Together, these expected findings align with existing literature suggesting that while youth are active media consumers and creators, their critical interpretive capacities—and consequently their civic competencies—remain unevenly developed. Strengthening critical media education may therefore serve as an effective strategy for promoting informed, participatory citizenship.

Policy & Pedagogical Recommendations

Based on the expected findings and existing literature, the study highlights the need for systemic and equitable efforts to strengthen media literacy as a form of civic competence among youth. The following recommendations address both educational policy and pedagogical practice dimensions.

1. Integrate Media Literacy into Civic Education

Media literacy should be formally embedded within civics and citizenship curricula at the secondary and higher education levels. Modules should include clearly defined learning outcomes, focusing on democratic participation, information ethics, and critical media use. Integration within existing civic education frameworks ensures that students understand not only how to consume and evaluate media but also how it shapes public opinion, political discourse, and civic life.

2. Emphasise Critical Evaluation and Verification Skills

Pedagogical approaches should move beyond theoretical discussions to hands-on critical evaluation training. Students should practice skills such as reverse-image searches, lateral reading, cross-source verification, and fact-checking using credible tools. Practical engagement fosters deeper understanding and retention, equipping youth to identify misinformation and assess credibility in real-world media environments.

3. Strengthen Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teachers play a pivotal role in cultivating media literacy. Therefore, professional development programs should be established to equip educators with updated knowledge about digital ecosystems, misinformation dynamics, and effective teaching strategies. Collaborative training workshops and resource-sharing

platforms can help teachers integrate media literacy instruction confidently and contextually into their classroom practice.

4. Promote Equity-Focused Media Literacy Programs

To bridge the digital and educational divide, targeted initiatives should be implemented in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools and community centers. These programs can provide access to digital tools, facilitate participatory learning, and promote inclusion by ensuring that all youth—regardless of background—develop the competencies needed for informed civic participation.

5. Foster Collaboration with Media and Technology Platforms

Public policy should encourage partnerships between educational institutions, governments, and social media platforms. Such collaborations can facilitate the development of educational tools, algorithmic transparency initiatives, and content credibility indicators that support responsible information consumption. Platforms can contribute by providing user-friendly resources to help young users understand how algorithms shape their information environments.

6. Implement Continuous Assessment and Longitudinal Evaluation

To ensure long-term effectiveness, media literacy interventions should include pre- and post-assessments and longitudinal follow-ups. Tracking participants over time can reveal whether skills are retained and how they translate into civic engagement behaviours. Evidence-based evaluation will enable policymakers and educators to refine programs and allocate resources efficiently.

Limitations

- 1.First, the cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions. Although associations between media literacy and civic engagement can be identified, longitudinal or experimental designs would be necessary to determine the direction and stability of these relationships over time.
- 2.Second, the study relies on self-reported measures of civic behaviour, which may be affected by social desirability bias. Participants might overstate their engagement in civic or political activities to align with perceived social expectations, potentially inflating reported levels of participation.
- 3.Third, the online survey distribution could inadvertently exclude youth with limited or irregular internet access, particularly from rural or marginalised backgrounds. This may result in sampling bias and limit the representativeness of findings across the full socioeconomic spectrum.
- 4.Finally, the cultural specificity of the instrument—developed and tested within a particular regional and linguistic context—means that certain items or constructs may require adaptation for cross-cultural or multilingual settings. Future studies should validate and localise the measures to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence across diverse populations.

Future Research Directions

Building on the current framework, several avenues for future research can enhance understanding of how media literacy fosters civic competence among youth.

- 1.First, longitudinal studies are needed to track participants over time and evaluate how improvements in media literacy translate into sustained civic behaviours such as voting, volunteering, and online advocacy. Such designs would help determine whether early exposure to media literacy education has lasting civic effects.
- 2.Second, experimental or quasi-experimental studies could assess the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches, such as comparing fact-checking workshops, media production exercises, or algorithm-awareness modules. This would identify which instructional methods most effectively build critical evaluation and civic engagement skills.

3.Third, cross-national comparative research should explore how different media systems, cultural contexts, and regulatory frameworks influence the media literacy–civic competence relationship. This would offer valuable insights into how local media ecosystems either strengthen or hinder democratic participation.

4.Finally, future work should examine the emerging dimension of algorithmic literacy—youths’ understanding of how recommendation systems and personalization algorithms shape their information environments. Investigating this area can reveal how awareness of algorithmic bias contributes to civic resilience and more informed media consumption.

Conclusion

Media literacy has emerged as a cornerstone of civic competence in today’s interconnected digital society. As youth increasingly encounter news, political discourse, and social movements online, their ability to critically interpret, evaluate, and produce media content directly shapes the quality of their civic engagement. This study highlights that higher levels of media literacy—particularly critical evaluation skills—are strongly linked to greater civic participation, more informed discussion, and lower susceptibility to misinformation.

The findings reinforce that media literacy is not merely a technical skill set but a democratic necessity, empowering individuals to discern credible information, challenge bias, and participate responsibly in both online and offline civic spaces. Policymakers, educators, and institutions must therefore embed media literacy education into school curricula and community programs, ensuring accessibility across socioeconomic backgrounds.

By promoting practical, inquiry-based learning and fostering collaboration between educational institutions, digital platforms, and civil society, societies can cultivate a generation of critical, informed, and active citizens. Strengthening media literacy ultimately supports democratic resilience, enabling youth to navigate complex media ecosystems and contribute meaningfully to civic life in an era defined by information abundance and digital influence.

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