

# Exploring Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills among University Students: A Survey on Their Approaches to Analysing News and Information

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## Abstract

In today's media environment, young people encounter the challenge of navigating an intricate ecosystem filled with misinformation and disinformation. As the digital landscape continues to expand, the ability to critically evaluate news and information has become essential. Media literacy plays a pivotal role in equipping students with critical thinking skills to assess media content, identify biases, and discern credible information from falsehoods. This study investigates the application of critical thinking skills in media literacy among university students through a comprehensive survey. The survey assesses students' tendencies to analyse context, identify dependencies between diverse information sources, and interpret nuances in media content. Results indicate a significant proportion of students actively engage in higher-level critical thinking processes. However, a notable segment remains neutral or less engaged, highlighting opportunities for targeted educational interventions. The findings underscore the importance of fostering media literacy and critical thinking skills within higher education to enhance students' ability to navigate complex media environments effectively.

## Keywords

Media Literacy, Critical Skills, News, Information, Survey, Disinformation

## 1. Introduction

Critical thinking is important for making judgments about sources of information and forming your own arguments, emphasizing a rational and objective approach. As is generally known, critical thinking is referred to the ability to interpret, eval-

uate, and analyse facts and information that are available, to form a judgment or decide if something is right or wrong.

Furthermore, as widely acknowledged, critical thinking implies thinking clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas, analysing assumptions, discerning hidden values, and evaluating evidence. More than just being curious about the world around you, critical thinkers make connections between logical ideas to see the bigger picture. Building your critical thinking skills means being able to advocate your ideas and opinions, present them in a logical fashion, and make decisions for improvement. Critical thinking is about questioning and learning with an open mind.

Media literacy includes the ability to access and analyse media messages, as well as to create, reflect on, and take actions using the power of information and communication. Media literacy is the ability to critically assess, analyse and evaluate media messages across various platforms like TV, social media, websites, and advertisements. It helps individuals recognize biases, misinformation, and the motives behind what they see and hear, enabling them to engage with media more thoughtfully and responsibly.

Media literacy and critical thinking are intertwined. A prerequisite of media literacy is being able to use critical skills, mainly focusing on addressing questions, identifying biases, and forming reasonable arguments thus recognising and evaluating what you read, see, and hear.

ML uses critical thinking especially in the age of online misinformation and disinformation. Using critical thinking in media literacy can empower people to recognize false information and fake news, understand media influence on people's perception and opinions, make decisions based on credible information, choose between what is important and relevant and what is not, be aware of the importance of double-checking of the information. Helping students understand the links between critical thinking and analysing information presented in so many formats, seems to be one of the biggest challenges for teachers, educators, and parents.

## 2. Literature Review

Siegel (1988) associates critical thinking with rationality, understood as effectiveness in achieving goals. What is important to Siegel is that someone who can be called a "critical thinker" does not have specific skills only but is also a certain kind of person (Siegel, 1988: p. 9). He also states that, "the defining characteristic of critical thinking is its focus on reasons and the power of reasons to warrant or justify beliefs, claims, and actions." (Siegel, 1988: p. 22). Siegel also asserts that his notion of critical thinking is able of influencing all educational activities and practice (Siegel, 1988: p. 137).

Thinking critically requires command of fundamental intellectual standards. Critical thinkers routinely ask questions that apply intellectual standards to thinking. The ultimate goal for these questions is to become so spontaneous in thinking that they form a natural part of our inner voice guiding us to better and better

reasoning (Paul & Elder, 2012: p. 92). In forming beliefs, critical thinkers do not passively accept the opinions of others. Rather they think through situations and issues for themselves. They carefully form principles of thought and action and do not mindlessly accept those presented to them (Paul & Elder, 2012: p. 19).

The concept of media literacy emerged at the beginning of 20th century in Europe as a way of acknowledging the set of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind required for full participation in a contemporary media-saturated society. Media literacy constitutes a set of skills that help consumers of media content to think critically by examining the source of the media content through evaluation and analysis to capture what is behind the production of such media content (Alvarman & Hagood, 2000). ML seeks to understand how media content shapes behaviour and values of the society.

Critical media literacy is an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and news. It deepens the potential of literacy education to critically analyse relationships between media and audiences, information, and power. Along with this mainstream analysis, alternative media production empowers students to create their own messages that can challenge media texts and narratives (Douglas & Share, 2007: p. 2).

The main aim of media literacy is to provide critical autonomy. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence. Some may use media literacy as a vehicle to understand the economic infrastructure of mass media, as a key element in the social construction of public knowledge (Aufderheide, 1993: p. 5). People have become info-obese, as they are bombarded with information in the form of text, audio, image, or video through media. The central role of media in individuals' lives makes media literacy a mandatory skill to possess. In compliance with media literacy, the crucial skill that the new century requires is critical thinking and it is a core element of media literacy (Erdem, 2018: p. 2). Whereas digital literacy is an individual's ability to find, evaluate, and communicate information by utilizing typing or digital platforms using both technical and cognitive abilities (Gilmour, 2024: p. 6).

### **3. New Age Media in the Era of Constant Media Consumption**

New age media is increasingly challenging the way people consume and interact with information. Information overload and over consumption of the news seem to be the main features characterizing the new era of media transformation and modernization. Digital advancements and technological innovations have transformed media's accessibility and engagement transforming it into a more rapidly accessible, instantly updated, personalized, and interactive device than ever before. New age media has been democratized and modernized in the recent years allowing broader participations and fostering interconnected networks thus allowing audience to actively participate, individually create and share the content.

People influencing the audience and the public opinion often rival the traditional media which is currently facing many challenges such as declining audiences, limited interactivity, high-production costs, slower releases evidently being in “desperate” need of new upgraded digital landscapes.

### **A Critical Mind: Students Navigating the Landscape of Information and Disinformation**

21<sup>st</sup> century students are constantly exposing to a vast number of digital platforms easily becoming consumers of both information and misinformation. They own amounts of credible and diverse information. They often create and share their own content, expressing their identity, sharing their personal experiences, and inspiring their peers thus promoting new digital trends. Young people are playing a direct role in developing a new digital culture. In this sense, they are both producers and consumers of a vast amount of diverse, yet not always credible or verified, information.

Without proper fact-checking skills, young people may unintentionally receive or share false or misleading information, which can quickly spread due to social media’s rapid sharing and influencing nature. They may also lack experience or expertise needed to accurately interpret complex topics, leading to the oversimplification or distortion of facts. Without a proper media literacy education young people become more vulnerable to misinformation, disinformation, and manipulative content. Students may believe or spread false information seriously “threatening” their understanding of important issues as well as making choices based on unreliable source. Young people are often more vulnerable to fake news due to high social media use and sometimes limited media literacy. They can easily be influenced by false information because they may lack the skills to evaluate sources critically.

A study by the Council of Europe found that 2/3rds of EU citizens say they identify fake news at least once a week. Over 80% say it is an issue for their countries and for democracy in general. And the students/citizens between the ages of 15 - 30 say they need critical thinking and information skills to help them combat fake news (Council of Europe, 2018).

In a Q&A with Dennis Kovtun the misinformation expert professor at University of Alberta, Timothy Caulfield clearly states that Misinformation is a defining issue of our time. I think it is good news that more and more people, including governments, are taking this battle against misinformation seriously, because that is what is required. Misinformation is killing people. It is destroying our democracy. It is leading to stigma and discrimination. We have got to do pre-bunking – in other words, letting people know that misinformation is out there, we have got to debunk, we have got **to teach critical thinking skills**. We need to teach critical thinking throughout the life course, from kindergarten to elementary school to middle school to high school. And I think it should be taught regardless of what degree you take at university. In some capacity, we need to give people the skills to use critical thinking and media literacy. It has just become so fundamental to our society right now, especially in this incredibly chaotic information environment.

And I also think it needs to be available to adults (Kovtun, 2022).

#### 4. A Case Study Survey

This study investigates the application of critical thinking skills in media literacy among university students through a comprehensive survey. The survey did not distinguish between different types of media consumption such as TV, social media, or online news. Therefore, it does not provide specific insights into how students engage with or perceive each platform separately. However, it is reasonable to assume that students' media literacy may vary across platforms. For instance, social media often requires a critical eye to identify misinformation and bias due to its fast-paced, user-generated content, which can be less regulated. In contrast, traditional media like TV and reputable online news sites may have more established editorial standards, potentially making it easier for students to judge their credibility. Nonetheless, despite these differences, many students might lack the necessary skills to effectively evaluate sources, regardless of platform, highlighting the need for targeted media literacy education across all media types. This survey assesses students' tendencies to analyse context, identify dependencies between diverse information sources, and interpret nuances in media content. Results indicate a significant proportion of students actively engage in higher-level critical thinking processes. However, a notable segment remains neutral or less engaged, highlighting opportunities for targeted educational interventions. The findings underscore the importance of fostering media literacy and critical thinking skills within higher education to enhance students' ability to navigate complex media environments effectively.

Research questions:

- 1) How do young students assess the credibility of the media sources they consume?
- 2) Are they able to distinguish between factual news and false or misleading information?
- 3) Are students aware of the importance of cross-checking information, and do they practice it regularly? What types of filters do students commonly use when listening to news reports?
- 4) Do students determine which information they receive from media is relevant or important to them?
- 5) How can students as media consumers be better equipped to critically analyse the information they receive?
- 6) How does understanding the context behind news stories enhance in-depth analysis?

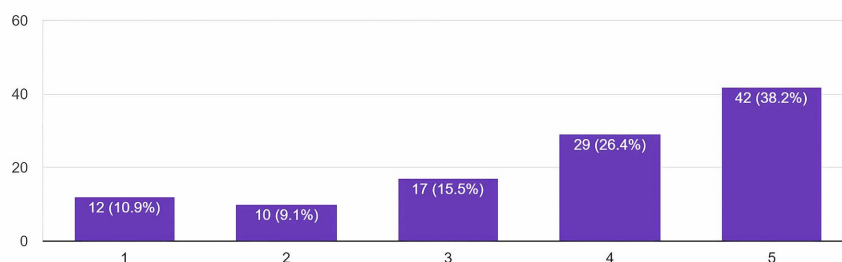
Research subject

A total of 110 students 86 females and 24 males, all aged between 18 and 21 years participated in this study. The students are enrolled in BA study programs of the Faculty of Education and Philology at the University of Korça, Albania. They present a diverse group dedicated to studying education, history, language, and literature. These students are engaged in a range of undergraduate programs

that prepare them for careers in teaching, linguistics, history and communication, fostering a deep understanding of both pedagogical methods and language analysis. They come from diverse demographic backgrounds, with some originating from rural areas and others from urban regions, contributing to a wide range of perspectives and experiences within the learning community. The students answered a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions prepared using Google Forms. Students had to rate in a scale from 1 to 5 to the extent they agree with the given statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The research was completely anonymous, and the results are exclusively used for this study.

I like combining information from different sources

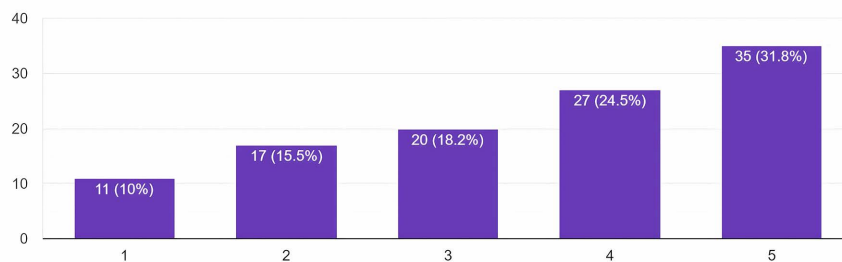
110 responses



The most common response is 5 (strongly agree), with 42 responses (38.2%), indicating a significant portion of respondents enjoy combining information from sources. The least frequent response is 1, with only 12 responses (10.9%), indicating that a smaller percentage strongly disagrees or dislikes combining sources. The data suggest a generally positive attitude toward combining information from different sources. Most respondents tend to agree or strongly agree with the statement, highlighting the importance or preference for integrating diverse information in their cognitive processes.

I am willingly to share the newly gained information

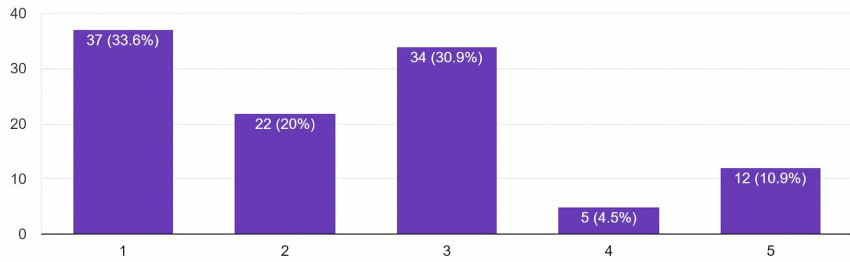
110 responses



56.3% of the responders chose options 4 and 5 indicating a high willingness to share newly gained information. A smaller portion of responders (25.5%) chose options 1 and 2 indicating a lower willingness to share information. This suggests a positive attitude toward collaboration and information dissemination within this group. The data highlight a predominantly pro-sharing mindset, which could be beneficial in educational, professional, or social environments.

In - depth analyses of the information I receive are a waste of time

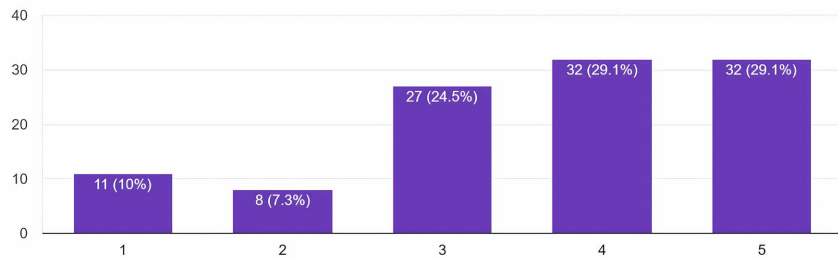
110 responses



17% of the students asked seems to perceive in-depth analysis as a waste of time implying scepticism and indifference. Curiously enough a significant portion (30.9%) demonstrate a neutral stance, indicating ambivalence. The largest percentage of responders agree to the statement to some extent emphasising the importance and benefits of this type of analysis.

I form my impression on the basis of various information that I combine with one another

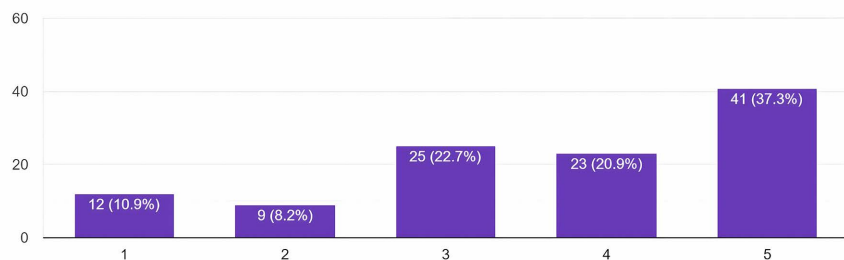
110 responses



Most respondents tend to form their impressions based on multiple sources of information suggesting a preference for not relying on limited source of information. 32 responses indicate a strong tendency to combine information whereas 24.5% show a more moderated view. The minor group that disagrees with this statement sees to rely on single sources of information rather than on a combination probably concerning that several source of information might lead to confusion or misinformation. They might also distrust the combination or find it challenging.

To evaluate information, I check many sources

110 responses

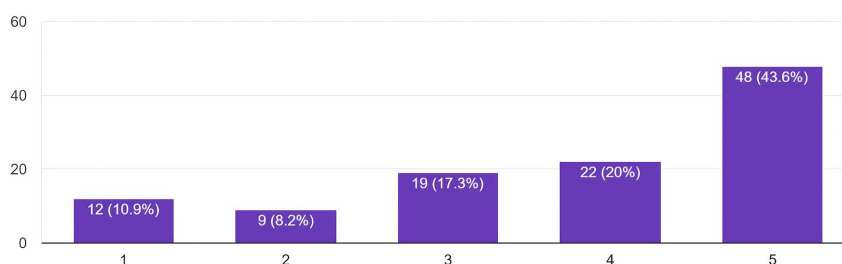


Most students value the practice of checking and double- checking multiply source for verification, which is an encouraging indicator for critical thinking skills use. The majority values double verifications across several sources to ensure

accuracy and reliability. This approach enhances the credibility of the information and fosters a habit of thorough investigation. Only 10.9% feel sceptical about using different sources of information. This percentage aligns with the previous findings, indicating a consistent trend among a minority of students who may find the process of cross-reference unnecessary.

When I am interested in some information, I try to check if it is true

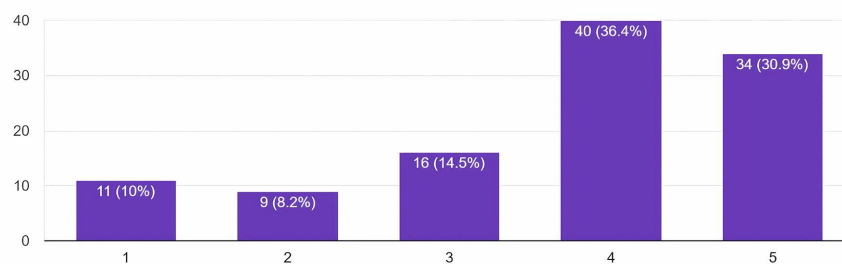
110 responses



Nearly half of the responders almost always verify the information suggesting a high level of attentiveness and a careful approach to information they mostly care about. 17.3% choose a neutral option indicating that they sometimes check the truthfulness of information, but they not do so consistently. Only 10.9% (1) and 8.2% (2) of responses suggest that a smaller group barely checks or has low confidence in verifying information. This choice might have various reasons such as time constrains, lack of trust in sources or a belief that verification is unnecessary. Students often juggle multiple responsibilities, or they may perceive that the sources are unreliable or biased.

I can extract the most relevant part of a news/information

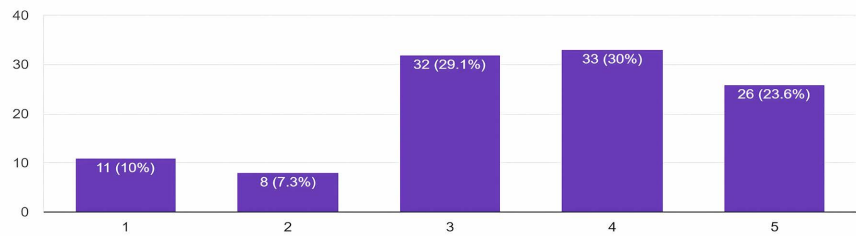
110 responses



Majority of the responders are rated at level 4 indicating high skill and confidence at extracting the most relevant part of the information. A considerable percentage of the students demonstrate themselves as experts on identifying the key information. This might reflect high self-confidence, good media literacy skill or familiarity with analysing the information. Comparatively few responses are given to the levels 1 and 2 (12.2%), they probably consider themselves as less skillful demonstrating less confidence because of lack of training, practice, or experience. Students may have not received adequate instruction on how to critically verify information and thus they may feel uncertain about their skills.

I like to collocate different opinions and compare them with each other

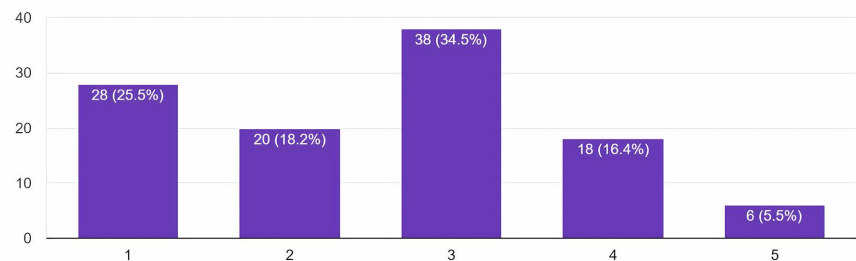
110 responses



Majority of students responding have selected alternatives between 3 and 4 suggesting that they prefer engaging in comparing opinions. The tendency of evaluating diverse perspective is relevant for nearly 54% of participants. A smaller segment of about 17% excludes the possibility of comparing. This group may prefer to rely on single sources probably because they lack confidence on their analytical abilities or they may have a preference for straightforward information.

I do not remember much of what I hear or listen

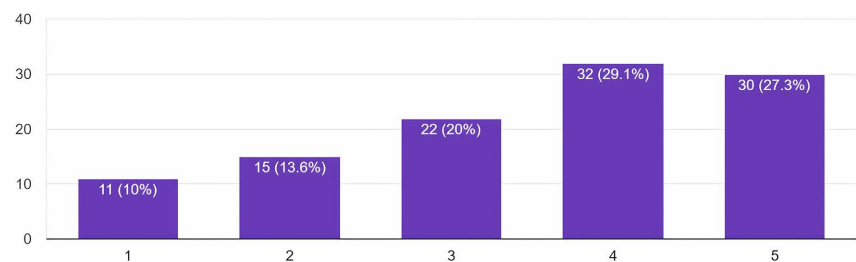
110 responses



Majority of the responses are clustered under the level 3 suggesting that students show a neutral stance on the statement. This percentage indicates that the participants do not perfectly remember or that they do not pay enough attention to. 25% of the responders strongly disagree with the statement reporting low degree of forgetfulness. Yet many people admit that they forget a good portion of what they hear probably because they lack engagement or interest. Students may not be concentrated or attentive to the information they hear. When the information seems not interesting or relevant is less likely to be processed deeply, resulting in forgetfulness.

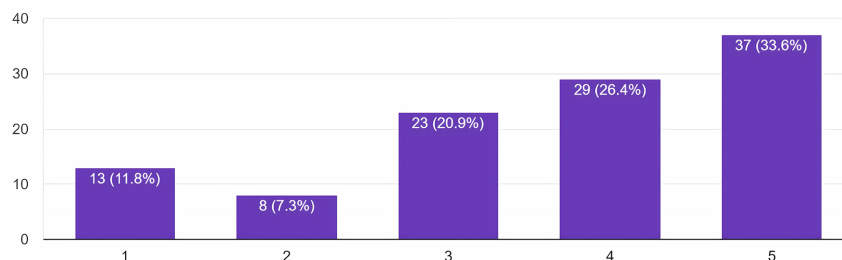
When I listen to some news, I am researching for a relationship between the information it contains and other news I have listened

110 responses



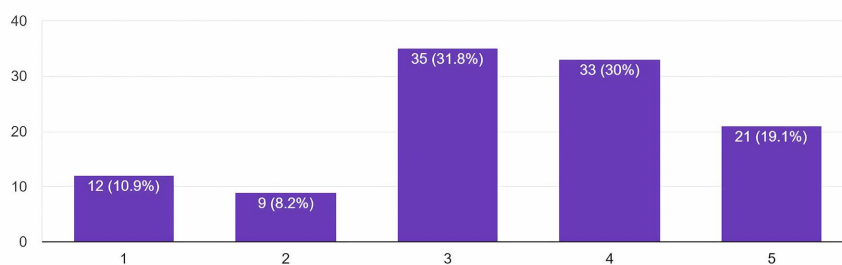
Most responders agree or strongly agree with the statement indicating a tendency of comparing new information with that previously heard. Their responses demonstrate a deep and analytical listening and perceiving approach. Approximately 23.6% show minimal or no tendency to make relations between present or past information. This choice may be explained by difficulties in making connections, less interest or engagement with the context, restricted background information or knowledge.

I pay attention to the contexts, nuances, and overtones of the news I hear  
110 responses



The most common responses are at the levels 4 and 5 indicating that the participants are attentive to the details beyond the basic content. It seems that they deep value and understand the news. On the other side almost 19.1% of the participants seem to underestimate details or subtle news implying a superficial interpretation. A considerable percentage remains neutral, implying that they might sometimes pay attention but not consistently.

I like to find dependencies between seemingly different information/news  
110 responses



A significant portion of responders actively look for dependency between information, enjoying finding connections thus engaging in critical thinking interpretations. Yet a large number (35 participants) prefer neutrality. This group may be open to explore dependencies but only occasionally. A smaller subset of around 20% shows less engagement, interest or value placed on analysing interdependent relationship between news or information.

## 5. Key Findings

The data collected indicate that majority of responders hold a positive attitude toward combining information from multiple choices. This suggests that many

students recognize the value of synthesizing diverse information, like viewing it as a beneficial approach to comprehensive understanding and critical thinking. Yet there is a minority that strongly disagrees with the possibility of checking information from different sources highlighting resistance or dislike toward multiple source integration, probably out of concern that this process may lead to confusion or misinformation. A primary factor contributing to this perception may be related to individuals' worries that comparing various sources might lead to conflicting information, making it harder to discern the truth. Trust issues also may play a role, students may have limited confidence in the reliability of multiple sources, preferring to stick to familiar or authoritative references. Lack of digital literacy skills may hinder their ability to effectively evaluate and synthesize information from different sources, leading to frustration or hesitation about the process. Comfort with existing information might also lead to reluctance, as changing habits can feel uncomfortable or threatening. Most respondents demonstrate attentive, analytical listening and a tendency to connect new information with prior knowledge, reflecting a deep engagement with content. However, a notable minority shows limited connection-making or superficial interpretation, which may hinder their understanding. As the analysis of the data collected indicate, a significant group enjoys identifying dependencies and connections, indicating strong critical thinking and curiosity in understanding relationships between pieces of information. A considerable number of individuals proactively seek out relationships and dependencies within information, reflecting strong critical thinking skills and a curiosity-driven mindset. They favour deep analysis over superficial understanding, which can lead to more nuanced insights and well-rounded perspectives.

To effectively enhance media literacy skills among university students, a comprehensive approach can be implemented by integrating multiple strategies. This includes attending interactive workshops and seminars that focus on critical analysis, fact-checking, and recognizing bias. Embedding media literacy modules within existing curricula would also be contribute. Digital literacy campaigns utilizing posters, social media, and events can raise awareness and foster engagement. Assignments that require students to critically analyse news articles, social media content, or advertisements further reinforce these skills. Students may also be given the possibility to attend online modules and simulations which offer accessible, self-paced learning. Participating in discussions on media ethics, and the impact of misinformation in social life may also reinforce a deeper understanding and promote responsible media use. Students may also create their own media content critically reflecting on the media production process and the messages conveyed.

## **6. Conclusion**

In an era dominated by rapid information dissemination through social media, digital platforms, and online news sources, media literacy and critical thinking

have become fundamental skills for students. Media literacy and critical thinking are crucial for empowering students to navigate the digital world in a more responsible and accurate way. Education in media literacy is essential to enable them to identify and challenge misinformation effectively. One of the primary goals of media literacy education is to enable students to identify and challenge misinformation effectively. Encouraging students to question sources, cross-check information, and seek multiple perspectives is vital for fostering a more critical approach. Instead of passively accepting information, students should be guided to analyse who is sharing the content, what their purpose might be, and what context surrounds the data. Enhancing skills such as critical thinking, contextual awareness, and active engagement could help bridge the gaps, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding across all groups. Promoting these skills is essential for cultivating more informed and thoughtful consumers of information. Using critical thinking skills encourages students to question the validity of the data they encounter and to seek collaboration from multiple perspectives. By integrating media literacy and critical thinking into education, we cultivate informed citizens who can participate actively and responsibly in democratic societies.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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