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PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY: LITHUANIAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE*

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Abstract. Media literacy is rich and multifaceted (Rosenbaum et al., 2008). Existing literature underscores the importance of promoting media literacy. Media literacy education aims to help young people who are active media consumers improve their interpreting and judging skills and become independent media producers, as well as develop a critical understanding and active participation (Aydemir, Demirkan, 2021). The research attempts to provide documentation of implementing media literacy education in one university community. It focuses on presenting quantitative and qualitative data to gain insights into how particular instructional practices and curricula may help develop students' media literacy comprehension. The case study of implementing media literacy education at a local setting (university) showed that students were highly satisfied with the learning experience. Research results showed that most students could recommend including media literacy subjects in other study programs, defined many gained skills, positively evaluated the topics and recognized the importance of media literacy education.

Keywords: media literacy; media literacy education; digital literacy; critical thinking

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1. Introduction

Being media literate refers to better dealing with the media (Rosenbaum et al., 2008). A media literate person is believed to understand the role of media and other information providers, critically assess the content, and make informed decisions as a user and producer of media content (Koltay, 2011 cited in Jamil et al., 2022). The degree to which a person is media literate influences his/her ability to critically explore complex relationships between information, entertainment, ideologies, and power (Funk et al., 2016).

And it is education that plays a primary role in promoting critical thinking regarding the media or related issues (Rosenbaum et al., 2008). Media literacy education has been identified as a means to enhance the information capacity of individuals. Individuals can learn to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies produced by the media and critically examine and evaluate media content through media literacy education (Kellner, Share 2007). Moreover, media literacy education is believed to help counteract the media's adverse effects (Cheung, Xu, 2014). It refers to empowering to differentiate between fake news and accurate information and combat propaganda "which incites racism, hatred, conspiracy theories, violence, and radicalization" (Jamil et al., 2022, p.61).

Although teens and older students are considered the primary audience in most media literacy education initiatives (Santos et al., 2017), addressing media literacy within higher education is also important. Schmidt (2013) has claimed that university students might not be media literate, and addressing media literacy competencies is a neglected area at the university level. Sengl and Heinke (2023) stress that media literacy initiatives are primarily aimed at education on journalism, but it should be implemented in other educational directions.

This study aimed to explore the implementation of media literacy education in a local setting (university). It was **a case study** using questionnaires and interview analysis to collect data in the field. The research questions focused on reflections from students participating in a newly implemented media literacy course. There was evaluated the effectiveness of the university instructional approach over a one-semester teaching process by collecting data to explore the **research questions**:

- 1) what are students' views on the teaching session they have attended?
- 2) What knowledge and skills do students consider important for a media-literate person?
- 3) What are the students' views on the contribution of study subject? (How media literacy intervention aligns with their perspectives on media literacy).

The study offers insights into how to teach media literacy from a students' perspective.

2. Theoretical background

The definition of media literacy is being "hotly debated" (Jakub et al., 2020). How media literacy is defined depends on the actors and stakeholders involved (De Leyn et al., 2022). It may vary on a very broad understanding of the concept when media literacy is used as an umbrella term encompassing information, digital, critical, and news (Jacub et al., 2020). For instance, The EU Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG) employs an umbrella expression. It defines media literacy as "all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it" (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-literacy>) even though the Romer et al. (2023) research questions the possibility to nurture civic participation by media literacy education. The broad definition refers to the media education approach expanding audiences' understanding of how they communicate and engage with media (Higdon and Huff, 2022). On the other hand, there are also attempts to define the concept more precisely,

separating the terms: "media literacy sees media as a lens or window through which to view the world and express oneself, while information literacy sees information as a tool with which to act upon the world" (Livingstone et al., 2008, Maksl et al., 2017).

One of the quite widely accepted definitions refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages across a variety of contexts/in various forms (e.g., language, moving images, music, sound effects) (Hobbs et al., 2022; De Leyn et al., 2022). Thus, emphasis is made on the foundational competencies (Hobbs et al., 2022).

Becoming skillful accessor refers to gathering (identifying, locating) and using quality resources (Fry, Seely, 2011). Efficient operation in a new media environment is important due to the challenge of media consumers navigating the large quantity of online information. Using relevant, reliable, and authoritative resources gathered and shared in various media content information helps to meet the information needs. Besides, relevant, reliable information is needed to make informed decisions. Hwang et al. (2021) agree that media literacy education helps to protect from disinformation messages.

Analyzing refers to critically questioning the information that is seen, heard, and used. Enabling the development of criticizing and questioning skills encourages students to think critically about media representations and to move away from oppressive and knowledge transfer-based approaches. Critical thinking and understanding are required to distinguish and decode reality, predominant values, ideologies, and gender representations constructed by the media. Critical thinking and questioning are at the heart of critical media literacy (Aydemir and Demirkan, 2021). Nagumo et al. (2022) stressed that critical thinking and reading of the media can be fostered by media literacy. Critical media literacy supports efforts to unmask biases, hidden agendas, and the economic structures of media representation and information (Friesem, 2019).

Becoming a critical evaluator of media encompasses determining what information is reliable and not and how signs of trustworthiness or credibility cues are exploited (Jacub et al., 2020). It is in line with the attempt to combat the growing tendency of some producers to systematically produce false information, making those online artefacts appear trustworthy (Jacub et al., 2020). It is essential to improve the skills of media consumers to identify false information in the era of "fake news phenomena" (Jacub et al., 2020). Being responsible message consumers encompasses understanding the political, social, and economic contexts in which media messages influence individuals and societies (Hobbs et al., 2022). DiGiacomo et al. (2023) stress that education institutions should play an essential role in supporting the preparation of an informed citizenry. Scifo and Di Maggio (2021) agree and emphasize that it could be challenging for educational institutions.

Creating skills in the context of media literacy education refers to being a responsible message creator and taking action to use the power of communication and information for social good (Hobbs et al., 2022). Furthermore, critical media literacy encompasses the ability to use the media as a tool for social transformation beyond critical text analysis, leading to the teaching of conscious effort towards the improvement of equality and justice, as well as to the creation of a better society (Aydemir, Demirkan, 2021). Critical media literacy education may not be sufficient if students only learn to recognize and analyze problematic media content. Moreover, students should be mentored to become responsible and effective media producers capable of contributing to social transformation (Aydemir, Demirkan, 2021). A further suggestion is to add a social-emotional component, i.e. skills related to observing and applying "netiquette", which refers to using appropriate language online (De Leyn et al., 2022). Learning to create one's own media message is an important step "toward developing interpretive proficiency in a post-truth era" (Friesem, 2019).

"Media literacy is the whole of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow citizens to deal with the complex, changing and mediatized world in a conscious and critical way. It is the ability to use media actively and

creatively, aimed at societal participation.” (Van Audenhove et al., 2018). Activating media literacy competencies is multifaceted, contextual, and situational (Schilder et al., 2016; Wuyckens et al., 2021). The emphasis in media literacy education might range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence (Jacub et al., 2020). Many curricula and suggested methods exist under the banner of media literacy. Media literacy education varies with pedagogical context: what is taught is relative to the demographic and institutional context of the education (Jacub et al., 2020). Hendrix-Soto and Nash (2023) state many difficulties of implementing media literacy curricula and facilitating learning in a digital information landscape. Park et al. (2021) define that customized digital literacy curriculums and technology should be based on different age groups and other aspects.

Activities to improve media literacy skills (accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating) might vary in accordance to subjects and additional specific aims. Sedelmaier et al. (2023) developed competence-oriented learning settings, which could be applied at a university level. Alehpour et al. (2022) research showed that media literacy lesson plan titles should be connected with teacher experience and previous knowledge. In addition to developing media literacy skills, Aydemir and Demirkan (2021) aimed the subjects (pre-service teachers) to notice gender roles and cultural stereotypes presented in media messages, question and criticize gender-related cliches, predominant values, and ideologies in the media, and develop a negative attitude towards and respond to gender inequality in the media. Thus, a gender-integrated media literacy curriculum was designed. However, common features of the media literacy curriculum are attempts through observation, problem-solving, critical thinking, creative thinking and communication.

3. Research methodology

This research focuses on presenting both **quantitative and qualitative** data. **A case study** explored implementing media literacy education in a local setting (university).

Organizational structure and overview of the study subject. Mykolas Romeris University (MRU) is a social sciences specialized university whose studies and research areas are educational science, economics, humanities, communications, politics, psychology, sociology, and management. University has 5819 students. There are 21 MRU studies programs implemented in English: 10-in the first cycle of studies 17 – in the second cycle.

The study subject under analysis in this study is the “New Media Communication and Journalism in the Era of Disinformation“. It was included as a mandatory course unit of 6 ECTS into the content of the bachelor's degree study program “Communication and Digital Marketing“ taught in both English and Lithuanian language at Mykolas Romeris University. This program covers the topics of communication, marketing, management, design, and creativity that will be useful for working in business organizations or in creative industries. The subject “New Media Communication and Journalism in the Era of Disinformation“ was taught in the third semester (autumn) of the study program and aimed to develop students‘ skills of media literacy, such as critical engagement with media content, information and visual verification, content development for social media tools and others, applying conventional and new tools and mediums, using case studies from Lithuanian and world practice.

The study subject resulted from a cooperation partnership with IREX – in 1968, a nonprofit organization committed to global development and education was founded. The organization provides innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, foster pluralistic civil society development, and reduce conflict. The study subject was implemented under Irex's "Media Literacy in the Baltics" grant program. Irex also provided the material for the course Learn to Discern (L2D) and training for the lecturers on discerning disinformation from reliable information within the current media landscape.

Course guidelines. The curriculum was designed by 2 educators contributing with individual expertise. The main topics of team lecturing are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The curriculum topics of “New Media Communication and Journalism in the Era of Disinformation“ subject

DEVELOPED SKILLS	Accessing	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating
MAIN TOPICS	The specifics of new media and journalistic practice in the post-truth era		Conditions for misleading information: the conflict	
including	Media business models, ownership, the work of journalists and editors, editorial policy, news and media content creation		The theory of the conflict, the examples of conflicts in society,	
Subtopics	Professional social media accounts, vloggers, bloggers and podcasts. Algorithms and echo chambers.		The psychological aspects of confronting opinions.	
	Targeted intentions: fake news, conspiracy theories, slander, cyber-attacks, stereotypes, hate speech, cyber-bullying, computational propaganda (trolls, bots, account hacking and blocking).		The cultures of argumentation and fights	
	Fact-checking, investigative journalism, ethics, information sources. Privacy issues in social media.		Conflict resolution skills: how to de-escalate conflict interaction.	

Data collection instruments:

- 1) participants’ course evaluation (feedback on the course);
- 2) participants' opinions provided during the interview.

Students’ feedback was collected using an institutional questionnaire titled “Questionnaire regarding the quality of teaching the subject of the studies“. It is one of the institution-created quality assurance indicators. University seeks to ensure that there is appropriate and timely quality control. Analyzing students’ feedback is intended to safeguard the teaching-learning processes. The institutional questionnaire examines student satisfaction levels on the courses and is administered to each student after the course is delivered and the exam is passed.

The quantitative questionnaire addresses six aspects, such as

- 1) general information about a respondent;
- 2) opinion on the content of the study subject, objectives and results;
- 3) opinion on applied methods of teaching and learning;
- 4) opinion on the evaluation criteria of the subject;
- 5) opinion on the material and tools for independent studies of the subject;
- 6) general evaluation.

There is also a space left to write comments at the end of each section. There is also an open-ended question due to the students’ recommendation of the study subject to others.

To measure the satisfaction levels of the participants with their overall learning experience of the study subject utilize a five-point Likert scale (5 - fully agree, 4 - agree, 3 - neutral, 2 - disagree, 1 entirely disagree). Data is

being collected anonymously. The questionnaire is completely voluntary and did not alter students' activities, classes, or the assessment process. The responses are collected via an online system. Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequency distributions).

Questions of face-to-face interviews with students were focused on their understanding of media literacy and its importance, the most interesting/relevant topics, personal skills gained from the course and presentations, creative assignments, improvements and recommendations of this course to students from other programmes.

The content analysis method examined the students' views on the study subject they attended. Content analysis reveals and compares worldviews, attitudes, prejudices, and ideas. Similar data are gathered around common themes. In the last content analysis stage, the findings were interpreted by considering the relationships between the themes obtained from the data. Furthermore, the quotes from students' views were presented as the closest natural equivalent of the source during translation.

The participants in this study were second-year students enrolled in the Institute of Communication during the Autumn term of the 2022-2023 academic year. The total enrollment is 100 students. The quantitative study group consists of 61 students. In the group, the number of female students (79%) is higher than that of male students (21%). This is consistent with the gender profile of those studying social sciences in Lithuania. The qualitative study group consists of 12 students, 4 male and 8 female.

4. Results and discussion

Quantitative Research Results. Students reported a high level of satisfaction with the learning experience. As shown in Table 2, the overall satisfaction of the course is high. Almost 90 percent of respondents reflected that they were satisfied with the quality of the course (fully agree with the given statement).

Table 2. Evaluation of “New Media Communication and Journalism in the Era of Disinformation“ subject learning experience

Aspects of evaluation	High level of satisfaction percent (fully agree with it)		
	An average	Evaluations of Separate items	
Satisfaction with course content	87.3	At the beginning of the term, the programme of the taught subject, the schedule of the classes, the results of the studies, and a list of compulsory and optional literature are clearly defined	85.5
		The requirements, defined at the beginning of the studies, did not change throughout the studies	86.6
		The lecturer is tolerant; they never discriminate against attitudes, nationality, clothing style, gender etc.	87.7
		Communication with students is performed in a professional and proper manner	87.7
		The established schedule is followed (the classes start and end on time, all the classes/seminars/exercises, etc., take place)	88.9
Satisfaction with methodology of lectures	87.8	The teaching of the themes of the subject is consistent and clear	88.9
		The material of the studies is provided in such a way that the taught subject is interesting to the students	88.9
		The selected study methods help to understand the subject	87.77
		The tasks of independent work help to join theory and practice	87.77
		Independent thinking is encouraged to express one's own opinion, analyze, discuss and criticize things	88.9
		Options are created to choose how to complete independent tasks (for example, to select a topic and introduce it creatively, etc.)	87.77
Attention is paid to the complicated issues for students by giving additional time to	84.83		

Satisfaction with the evaluation criteria of the study subject	86.7	The procedure, methods and criteria of the evaluation of learning outcomes are explicit from the beginning of the studies of the subject, and they are followed	85.5
		The accumulative evaluation system is applied for the evaluation of the learning outcomes	88.9
		The deadlines for completing the works are real	84.83
		It is enough time allocated for comment on the works completed by the students	87.77
		The information about advancement is always available during all the studies of the subject	84.36
		Academic dishonesty (violation of the principle of fair competition, copying from somebody else, plagiarism or other dishonesty in relation to the assessment of learning outcomes) is not tolerated	88.9
General evaluation	87.8	The knowledge and skills acquired during the lectures on this subject will be useful for me	87.77
		I am satisfied with the quality of the content (topics) of the study subject	87.77
		I am satisfied with the quality of teaching the study subject	86.63
		I would recommend employing the teacher of this subject for next study year	88.9

Qualitative Research Results. Interviews with the students were based on analyzing their approach to media literacy and its importance, the most interesting/relevant topics and personal skills gained from the course, and recommendations of this course to students from other programmes.

When analyzing answers about how students can define media literacy, the ability to identify media types and content, connection with media types, and specific competencies were mentioned. Media literacy's importance was expressed by considering information purpose, credibility, and objectivity towards information (see Table 3).

Table 3. Category – approach on media literacy and its importance

Subcategory	Empirical study statements (indicators)
Approach	“(…) Media literacy is identifying different media types and messages they send.” [E1]“(…) an expanded conceptualization of literacy that includes the ability to access and analyze media” [E2]; “When we speak of media, it encompasses print media, such as newspapers, magazines and posters, and theatrical presentations, tweets, radio broadcasts” [E3]; “(…) ability to create, reflect and take action, using the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world” [E4]; “(…) is not restricted to one media” [E6, E8, E11]. “Set of competencies essential for work, life, and citizenship.” [E12].
Importance	“Being able to understand these various forms of information with an ability to make sense of what is presented is a key” [E4]; “It is important when using various forms of media to consider the purpose of the information you are viewing, the credibility of the source, and the conclusion about the viewpoint or position being presented.” [E7]; “Given the technological developments in the past few years, we are bombarded by images, views, write-ups, and videos that seek to sway us to a particular way of thinking. Therefore, readers or viewers need to view the media objectively to find out or analyze what is being presented.” [E8]; “In a perfect world, both sides of every argument or depiction would be presented, and we would be able to make informed decisions based on the information we receive in the media; however, most often, people create media to influence you in one particular way, and we need to recognize this.” [E11]

After analyzing the results of the most interesting/relevant topics and personal skills gained from the course, an ability to conduct research and use communication and digital marketing, presentation skills as the most valuable for the informants could be defined. Most stated that all topics are relevant and interesting (see Table 4)

Table 4. Category –the most interesting/relevant topics and personal skills gained from the course

Subcategory	Empirical study statements (indicators)
Gained skills	“(…) it helps the students to independently research and learn in the field of communication and digital marketing achievements, new media and other emerging technologies, trends, and prospects of Lithuania and the world” [E5]; “ (...) understanding the principles of self-help and the ability to adapt them to ensure continuous development in a changing socio-economic environment“ [E7]; “Ability to socially make use of communication and digital marketing creatively with virtual work environments in defending the universal values of human rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of information.” [E6]. “Confidence to publicly present your research work with the tools and resources acquired from the lectures and seminars.“ [E10].
Topics	“All topics of the subject’s lectures“ [E6, E7]; “an independent study of the chosen topic by preparing a presentation, and a creative task in a group” [E8]; “Conflict resolution and critical thinking topics. [E1, E2, E3, E4, E9, E10, E12]

The results showed that students were willing to recommend the course – most of them stated that it could be included in other study programs' curricula (see Table 5).

Table 5. Category – recommendation of this course to students from other programmes

Subcategory	Empirical study statements (indicators)
Main recommendation arguments	“(…) it helps and assists to be able to name and explain key discourses and views surrounding new media and their relation to old/mature media” [E1]; “(...) to be able to understand and explain the influence of new media on different groups of customers“ [E5, E6]; “ (...) course can be recommended to all study programs students.“ [E3, E4, E5, E7, E9, E10, E12]; “Mostly course can be recommended to other communication, education, information technologies, management related study programs.” [E1, E2, E6, E8, E11].

Conclusions

The analysis of the scientific literature showed that the definition of media literacy can be connected with critical understanding, communication and engagement with media, creation of media messages, using reliable resources. Critical thinking can be defined as the most common competence gained by media literacy education. After completing media literacy courses, students should not just detect misinformation but also be able to produce trustworthy content. There are many curricula and suggested methods for teaching media literacy, and it can be challenging to customize.

The case study of implementing media literacy education at a local setting (university) showed that students were delighted with the learning experience of “New Media Communication and Journalism in the Era of Disinformation“ subject. Satisfaction with course content, methodology of lectures, evaluation criteria of the study subject and general evaluation reached almost 90 percent satisfaction. Interviews with the students also showed positive results – most students could recommend including this subject in other study programs, they defined many gained skills, positively evaluated the topics and recognized the importance of media literacy education.

The study's novelty is based on evaluating media literacy-connected subjects from the university students' point of view. Both media literacy and media literacy education are under-researched areas in Lithuania. Still, there

have been just a few studies addressing their importance, reflecting upon pedagogy and curriculum development from different perspectives, and exploring educational initiatives.

Limitations of the study - the study examined the implementation of media literacy education at a local setting (university) in Lithuania, and the conclusions cannot necessarily be applied to other cases.

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