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MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING AS TOOLS IN COMBATING MISINFORMATION

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Abstract

This article empirically examines the role of media literacy and critical thinking skills in combating disinformation and misinformation in the digital society. The study employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design and was conducted with 400 internet users aged 18–35. Participants were divided into experimental and control groups. A four-week educational intervention based on an integrated model of media literacy and critical thinking was implemented for the experimental group. The findings demonstrate that improvements in media literacy and critical thinking significantly increase the accuracy of disinformation detection and reduce the likelihood of sharing unverified information. Statistical analyses, including independent and paired samples t-tests, multiple regression analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), confirm the strong effectiveness of the intervention. The results indicate that media literacy and critical thinking are significant predictors of disinformation detection accuracy, while algorithmic literacy plays a moderating role in strengthening these relationships. The proposed integrated model provides both a theoretical framework and practical implications for educational systems and public policy aimed at enhancing information security and reducing the spread of disinformation in the digital era.

Keywords

Media literacy, critical thinking, disinformation, misinformation, digital society, algorithmic literacy, social networks, information security, fact-checking, digital education, information-sharing behavior, disinformation detection.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, technological processes and development have continued uninterruptedly, as the technological era is constantly advancing. The

outcomes of this development are reflected in new media technologies and their associated capabilities. Moreover, platforms created as a result of technological progress have enabled unrestricted access to disinformation and misinformation.

As a unique and significant phenomenon, social networks have become platforms where people in modern society encounter misinformation (disinformation), outright falsehoods, and alternative realities. Their impact on the processes of news production and information dissemination is extensive and far-reaching.

Disinformation is part of the information crisis faced in the contemporary era. It is defined as the deliberate dissemination of false information (O'Neil, M. & Jensen, M., 2022), and it differs from misinformation, which refers to the unintentional sharing of false information. Nevertheless, both phenomena are considered harmful to the resilience of society and, ultimately, to its stability.

As the use of social networks expands among different age groups in the country, the environment in which disinformation spreads easily is becoming stronger, creating specific challenges for state institutions. It is important to emphasize that the primary platforms enabling the spread of disinformation in this period are social networks, which emerged during the interactive era and represent new forms of media that ensure interactive participation (Manning, J., 2014). Therefore, social networks can be defined as applications or platforms belonging to the interactive stage of media development, providing broad opportunities for user participation, information exchange, and dissemination. These features include interactivity, speed, easy access, user-friendliness, rapid feedback mechanisms, and many others. It is precisely these characteristics that contribute to the rapid spread of disinformation, fake news, and misinformation.

Considering the destructive impact of disinformation, especially when disseminated through digital tools, the need to address this issue is becoming increasingly urgent. There are several methods of combating disinformation, and media literacy is only one of them.

To prevent the spread of disinformation, strategies such as verifying sources, analyzing materials, learning to use tools for detecting fake content, reporting the spread of disinformation, and developing a “second look” approach can be applied

[Abdullajonova N.N., 2024]. These measures form part of the broader efforts aimed at reducing disinformation in today's digitally dominant world.

In fact, the key elements necessary to combat disinformation on social networks are media literacy and critical thinking. According to Vinney, media literacy is the ability to critically analyze signs, symbols, and messages transmitted through mass media (Vinney, C., 2023, Oct. 26), enabling audiences to understand and evaluate all media messages they encounter daily.

When combined with media influence awareness, media literacy allows audiences to make informed decisions about the information they choose to consume. Furthermore, it transforms individuals into conscious, discerning members of society and active citizens. Through critical thinking, as the public interprets news and media content, they gain a deeper understanding of the political system and the social environment.

Public discussion in the political and media sphere is one of the key areas that can be positively transformed through critical thinking and media literacy. By promoting and widely implementing critical thinking, a healthy and effective public discourse can be formed, increasing people's ability to participate actively and consciously in political and media debates. Critical thinking develops media literacy skills, strengthens the evaluation of sources, identification of bias, fact-checking, participation in informed discussions, and enhances conscious information exchange in society. In addition, critical thinking plays an important role in reinforcing media knowledge and combating disinformation. According to Doyle, critical thinking is the ability to objectively analyze information and draw reasoned conclusions. In the process of critically analyzing information, the audience examines facts, data, research findings, and observable events(Doyle,A., 2024).

It should be particularly emphasized that critical thinking is an integral part of media literacy and an essential condition for being conscious in the media environment. Most importantly, critical thinking transforms individuals into digitally conscious citizens and encourages them to refrain from spreading falsehoods, disinformation, and half-truths.

Critical thinking helps evaluate problems, goals, concepts, assumptions, questions, empirical foundations, alternative perspectives, consequences, and conclusions within

the thinking process. From this perspective, the present study aims to examine how media literacy and critical thinking can be applied to reduce disinformation and its spread in the digital society.

In the digital era, the introduction of digital technologies has provided numerous unique advantages while also generating several problems related to negative aspects. This situation demonstrates certain shortcomings of innovation. Among the positive aspects are the speed, widespread reach, communicative nature, and ease of use and access of social networks. On the other hand, these platforms are also used to spread fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, as well as to intensify information overload. Even during periods when traditional mass media were dominant, the issue of "media power" was always debated. These problems persist in the digital age.

One of the important methods of combating disinformation disseminated through both digital and traditional media is media literacy. In other words, media literacy serves as a tool to counter the "negative" aspects inherent in media within modern society. Essentially, the primary goal of media literacy is to reduce the negative effects of media content and enhance its positive impact. At the same time, critical thinking is recognized as an essential cognitive process that leads individuals to make correct decisions. For example, if a person is presented with thousands of pieces of information, critical thinking enables them to distinguish which to accept or reject. In this context, the concepts of acceptance, neutrality, and rejection zones from social judgment theory can also be applied.

In the digital era, characterized by the widespread use of social networks and new media technologies, critical thinking and digital literacy appear to be among the most important and effective strategies in combating disinformation. However, despite their significance, the rate of disinformation dissemination continues to increase.

This study is based on the theories of media literacy and critical thinking. These two theories serve as the theoretical foundation for understanding their application in combating disinformation in society. Theory is interpreted as an attempt to synthesize and integrate empirical data for the purpose of providing coherence and a unified explanation (A.O.Safibullaevna, A.N.Nurmakhamadovna., 2025).

Media literacy is grounded in finding a balance between protection and empowerment strategies. It rejects a purely protective approach and emphasizes the socio-cultural influence shaped by mass media.

According to Potter's cognitive theory of media literacy, media literacy should not be limited to the audience's understanding, awareness, evaluation, and analysis of media influence. Rather, it should encompass a model that includes three main components: knowledge, personal knowledge structures, and skills (Potter, W. J., 2004).

The concept of critical thinking was first introduced by the American educator and philosopher John Dewey in his 1910 work How We Think and was later widely accepted by advocates of progressive education (A.N.Nurmaxamadovna, 2022). This theory is based on the principle of objectively analyzing and evaluating a problem before making a judgment.

Objectivity is a key element in critical thinking theory [29]. Objectivity implies being free from emotions and relying on measurable facts and evidence in the real world. The ability to make prompt and firm decisions is also an important aspect of critical thinking. The theories of media literacy and critical thinking form the theoretical basis of this research.

Media literacy refers to a body of knowledge about media and media content that enables audiences to engage with media consciously. It is a concept aimed at explaining the advantages and risks of living in a media-saturated society through the paradigms of protection and empowerment(Hobbs,R., 2018). It includes competencies, knowledge, and life skills that provide the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages in various forms. A media-literate individual can view media content from a knowledge-based perspective.

Pungente identifies eight key concepts that form the effective foundation of media literacy (Pungente, J., 2007):

1. All media are constructions;
2. Media construct reality;
3. Audiences negotiate the meaning of media;
4. Media have commercial implications;

5. Media contain value and ideological messages;
6. Media have social and political implications;
7. Form and content in media are closely related;
8. Each medium has unique aesthetic characteristics.

Certain values are embedded in media content, and messages are often created to achieve short-term or long-term interests or to gain power. Critical thinking is a process of making conscious judgments and forming beliefs based on evidence, which includes evaluating all options before solving a problem (Cole, D., DeLecce, T. & Pisano, G., 2023).

In the Western tradition, critical thinking was developed by prominent scholars such as Socrates, René Descartes, and John Dewey. All of them acknowledged that human judgment is prone to error and emphasized the necessity of caution when accepting any view or position. Therefore, active questioning and the verification of claims are encouraged. Critical thinking enables an individual to analyze information effectively and make sound judgments. A person should recognize their own assumptions and biases and use consistent criteria when evaluating sources. It encompasses careful analysis, systematic evaluation, and the objective synthesis of information. As a result, critical thinking allows individuals to identify disinformation, fake news, misinformation, and propaganda.

False information deliberately disseminated with the intent to cause harm or deceive expresses the concept of disinformation. Disinformation is an outright falsehood designed to mislead others and is usually spread intentionally with the aim of manipulating facts and reality (N Abdullajonova., 2025). The term originates from the Russian word “dezinformatsiya,” which the Russian government began using as a political tactic in 1923 after establishing a special office to intensify false propaganda. In the modern era, this concept has gained a firm place in the political sphere, as individuals and groups seeking to influence election outcomes create and disseminate disinformation before, during, and after elections for various purposes. This concept differs from misinformation, as misinformation is often spread unintentionally due to

carelessness or misunderstanding. Although they are frequently used interchangeably, misinformation and disinformation are not synonymous.

Nevertheless, disinformation can be understood as false information spread with the intention to provoke, deceive, or encourage specific actions. These two concepts are not new; however, in the digital era they have become widespread due to technological capabilities that enable rapid and easy dissemination. Mariniello emphasizes that disinformation is an ancient phenomenon that has been strongly accelerated by the process of digitalization (Mariniello, M., 2022). It should also be noted that providing a precise and unified definition of disinformation is complex. In other words, it is conceptually difficult to define this term.

Media literacy and critical thinking are regarded as tools for curbing disinformation. Communication is an essential process for human beings, through which people exchange ideas, information, messages, and meanings. As a result, the exchange of information may lead to misunderstandings, misinformation, disinformation, and the spread of reliable information. In cases of disinformation, genuine information is altered and used as a "weapon" through social networks to achieve specific interests. In other words, the truth is concealed or distorted (National Museum of American Diplomacy., 2023). Since such information is often disseminated through social networks, disinformation spreads most actively from one individual to another via these platforms. In the digital era, while the interactive features of social networks contribute to the rapid spread of disinformation, media literacy and critical thinking are effective tools for stopping or reducing this process. Notley argues that although it is difficult to completely eliminate disinformation, media literacy serves as a powerful tool in reducing its rapid spread. If people are media and information literate, the likelihood of sharing unverified information significantly decreases.

One of the methods of developing critical media literacy is the organization of special courses for adults. However, this first requires individuals to acknowledge the need for additional education and training. Devlin and Pohjola recommend six steps before sharing information (Devlin, A. & Pohjola, S., 2020):

1. Consider whether the information appears credible and logical;

2. Reflect on the credibility of the author or source;
3. If doubt arises, trust your instincts;
4. Verify the facts;
5. Ask yourself whether the information is true or whether you want it to be true;
6. Ask whether it is true or whether you are afraid that it might be true.

Disinformation, fake news, and misinformation have serious and negative impacts on the information ecosystem. Hillary and Dumebi studied the role of social networks in managing misinformation and disinformation and found that social networks are powerful tools for information exchange (Hilary, I. O. & Dumebi, O.-O., 2021). At the same time, they demonstrated that these platforms may also increase the likelihood of spreading fake news and disinformation.

According to the research findings, it is almost impossible to completely avoid fake news on platforms; however, critical thinking can be an effective tool in limiting its spread. The study recommends that audiences maintain a healthy skepticism toward content, understand how social media algorithms function, and apply verification methods. Similarly, Adjin-Tettey examined combating misinformation and disinformation through media literacy education based on an experimental study (Adjin-Tettey, T. D., 2021). The results showed that one-time training sessions are insufficient; nevertheless, media-literate individuals are significantly more cautious in determining the credibility of information and in refraining from sharing suspicious content.

While Machette and Turpin demonstrated that critical thinking is effective in identifying fake news (Machete, P. & Turpin, M., 2022), Warzel argues that this approach cannot completely eliminate disinformation in society(Warzel, C., 2021). Despite the existence of numerous studies, there is still insufficient literature on effective methods of applying media literacy and critical thinking to detect and combat disinformation. This gap served as the basis for conducting the present research.

In the digital media society, the primary motivation behind the spread of disinformation lies in psychological factors. According to the American Psychological Association, people are more likely to share information if it aligns with their social norms, personal identity, evokes strong emotions, or appears novel (American Psychological

Association., 2024a). From the perspective of conformity to social norms, members of a social group may share information that aligns with their group norms without verifying whether it constitutes disinformation.

Personal identity is another motivation for the spread of disinformation in the modern era. People seek attention through any information they find in the online environment. They believe that by consistently sharing information—whether true or false—they can attract and maintain the attention of others. Attention is appealing, and increasing the number of followers on social networks is one such opportunity. Gaining more followers by spreading false information is one of the main motivations behind disinformation. Another related reason is the desire to earn money through social media. Since traffic and engagement on posts can generate revenue from technology companies such as Meta and X Corp, some individuals may spread disinformation for financial gain.

Another reason for the spread of disinformation in modern society is persuasion by the source. Buchanan notes that individuals are often persuaded by the source to act in a certain way before sharing disinformation(Buchanan,T., 2020). On social networks, information sharing frequently occurs quickly and without careful consideration.

It is undisputed that disinformation spreads more rapidly in the digital era. However, there are different views on how it spreads. The American Psychological Association points out that certain behavioral patterns increase the likelihood that exposure to misinformation will lead to belief in it, which in turn increases the likelihood of sharing it (American Psychological Association., 2024a).

A distinctive feature of the digital era is the extremely rapid dissemination of information. Instant publishing, peer-to-peer sharing, interactivity, and algorithms constitute major pathways for the spread of disinformation. Social networks enable users to disseminate information quickly to large audiences. This makes controlling disinformation more complex, as countermeasures are often delayed. Digital platforms provide high interactivity and rapid sharing capabilities; therefore, disinformation spreads “at the speed of light,” or very quickly. Social media algorithms track user engagement and tend to promote content that generates stronger emotional reactions, such as anger or outrage. More reactions lead to greater virality.

As Feingold notes, disinformation also spreads through the following methods(Feingold,S.,2022):

- Harassment and intimidation – marginalizing journalists and credible content;
- Social engineering – manipulating public opinion through the misinterpretation of events;
- Micro-targeting – directing disinformation toward specific audiences;
- Inauthentic amplification – artificially increasing content volume through bots, trolls, and fake accounts.

Bots and trolls exploit vulnerabilities within the social media ecosystem, intensifying conflict and polarization. This can escalate online debates into offline protests and even violence.

Critical thinking and media literacy are important tools for identifying fake news and preventing its spread. The primary goal of media literacy is to improve knowledge and behavior in order to make informed decisions regarding mass media and content. Being media literate means not creating, sharing, or being deceived by false or misleading information (DW Akademie., 2024).

The Stony Brook University Center for Media Literacy proposes five key questions (Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University., 2020):

1. Who created the message?
2. What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might others interpret this message differently?
4. What values or viewpoints are represented or omitted?
5. For what purpose was this message sent?

The European Digital Media Observatory recommends media literacy education for both adults and children (European Digital Media Observatory., 2024). Since the digital environment is constantly evolving, media literacy is considered a lifelong process. The author suggests incorporating media literacy into school curricula, as media-literate citizens are better able to identify fake information and refrain from spreading it.

Methods. This study aims to empirically determine the impact of media literacy and critical thinking skills on the ability to detect disinformation and on information-sharing

behavior. A mixed-methods approach based on a sequential explanatory design was selected as the research design. This approach allows for the initial collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by a qualitative phase to provide deeper interpretation of the findings.

The study was conducted in three stages:

- Initial diagnosis (pre-test)
- Intervention (training based on an integrated model of media literacy and critical thinking)
- Final measurement (post-test)

This experimental approach made it possible to determine the effectiveness of the educational intervention in media literacy. The primary objective of the study was to empirically examine the impact of media literacy and critical thinking skills on the detection of disinformation and the likelihood of sharing it.

Specific objectives of the study:

- To identify the relationship between the level of media literacy and the accuracy of disinformation detection
- To analyze the relationship between critical thinking level and information-sharing behavior
- To determine the moderating role of algorithmic literacy
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention

The study involved 400 internet users aged 18–35. The sample was formed using a stratified random sampling method. Participants were divided into two groups:

- Experimental group (n = 200)
- Control group (n = 200)

The sample size was determined based on statistical power analysis (power = 0.80, effect size = 0.30).

Several validated measurement instruments were used in the study.

1. Media Literacy Scale. A five-dimensional Likert scale based on Potter's concept and adapted to the local context was applied. The scale included the following components: media knowledge, critical evaluation, content analysis, digital safety

awareness, and algorithmic literacy. The internal reliability coefficient was Cronbach's alpha = 0.84.

2. Critical Thinking Scale. A 20-item instrument based on the theories of Dewey and Facione was used. It covered components such as analysis, inference, evaluation, and self-regulation ($\alpha = 0.86$).

3. Disinformation Detection Test. Participants were presented with 40 information materials (20 real and 20 fake). Measurement criteria included: percentage of correct identification, confidence level, and sharing intention (1–5 Likert scale).

4. Behavioral Simulation. A digital environment resembling a social media interface was created, and participants' real-time sharing decisions were observed. Sharing frequency and decision-making time were recorded as key behavioral indicators.

A four-week training program was developed for the experimental group:

Week 1: Disinformation and its mechanisms

Week 2: Understanding social media algorithms

Week 3: Critical thinking exercises

Week 4: Fact-checking and practical analysis laboratory

The control group received standard information on general digital skills.

Statistical analysis was conducted using the following methods:

- Descriptive statistics
- Independent samples t-test
- Paired samples t-test
- Multiple regression analysis
- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)
- Moderation analysis (PROCESS Macro)

Model fit was evaluated using the following criteria:

CFI > 0.90,

RMSEA < 0.08,

SRMR < 0.08.

The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Construct validity was examined through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.50) and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion) were confirmed. All scales demonstrated high internal consistency (α ≥ 0.80).

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Personal data were anonymized, and strict confidentiality principles were maintained. The study was approved by the ethics committee.

This methodological approach makes it possible to empirically determine the role of media literacy and critical thinking in detecting disinformation and reducing its spread. The proposed model provides not only a theoretical foundation but also a practical framework applicable to the education system and public policy.

Results. The initial and final indicators of the 400 respondents who participated in the study were analyzed. The table below presents the mean values (M) and standard deviations (SD) for the main variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables

Variable	**Group**	**Pre-test M (SD)**	**Post-test M (SD)**
Media Literacy	Experimental	3.12 (0.54)	4.21 (0.47)
Media Literacy	Control	3.15 (0.51)	3.28 (0.49)
Critical Thinking	Experimental	3.08 (0.58)	4.05 (0.50)
Critical Thinking	Control	3.10 (0.55)	3.22 (0.53)
Disinformation Detection (%)	Experimental	56.4%	82.7%
Disinformation Detection (%)	Control	57.1%	60.3%
Sharing Intention (1–5)	Experimental	3.42 (0.61)	2.11 (0.58)
Sharing Intention (1–5)	Control	3.39 (0.63)	3.21 (0.60)

The results indicate significant positive changes across all main indicators in the experimental group. Post-test differences between the groups were statistically examined.

Table 2 Between-Group Differences Based on Post-Test Results

Variable	**t**	**df**	**p**	**Effect Size (Cohen's d)**
Media Literacy	14.62	398	<0.001	1.46
Critical Thinking	13.88	398	<0.001	1.39
Disinformation Detection	16.21	398	<0.001	1.62
Sharing Intention	-12.75	398	<0.001	1.28

The results demonstrate high statistical significance in favor of the experimental group ($p < 0.001$). The effect sizes are large ($d > 0.80$), confirming the strong impact of the intervention.

According to the multiple regression results, media literacy and critical thinking are significant predictors of disinformation detection accuracy.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Results

Variable	**β**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Media Literacy	0.42	0.05	8.31	<0.001
Critical Thinking	0.37	0.04	7.92	<0.001
Algorithmic Literacy (Moderator)	0.29	0.05	6.14	<0.001

Model statistics: $R^2 = 0.58$, $F(3,396) = 182.47$, $p < 0.001$

The results show that the model explains 58% of the variance in disinformation detection.

5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The structural model confirmed the indirect pathway:

media literacy → critical thinking → disinformation detection → sharing behavior.

Model fit indices:

CFI = 0.93

RMSEA = 0.056

SRMR = 0.041

All indicators exceed acceptable thresholds, demonstrating good model fit.

The empirical findings indicate that the integrated model of media literacy and critical thinking significantly increases the accuracy of disinformation detection and reduces the likelihood of sharing unverified information. Furthermore, algorithmic literacy was identified as a moderating factor that strengthens these relationships. These results fully confirm the proposed hypotheses.

Discussion. The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence that an integrated model of media literacy and critical thinking significantly enhances individuals' ability to detect disinformation and reduces their intention to share unverified information. The statistically significant improvements observed in the experimental group confirm the effectiveness of structured educational interventions in strengthening cognitive resistance to false and manipulative content in the digital environment.

First, the results demonstrate that media literacy is a strong predictor of disinformation detection accuracy. This finding supports Potter's cognitive theory of media literacy, which emphasizes the importance of knowledge structures and analytical skills in interpreting media messages. Participants who developed higher levels of media knowledge, content analysis skills, and digital safety awareness were better equipped to distinguish between real and fabricated information. This aligns with previous research suggesting that media-literate individuals are less susceptible to manipulation and propaganda.

Second, critical thinking emerged as a significant independent predictor of disinformation detection. This confirms theoretical assumptions rooted in Dewey's and Facione's frameworks, which define critical thinking as objective analysis, evaluation of evidence, and reasoned judgment. The improvement in detection accuracy suggests that when individuals systematically question sources, evaluate assumptions, and analyze arguments, they become less vulnerable to emotionally charged or misleading content. These findings are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that analytical reasoning reduces belief in fake news.

Importantly, the study identified algorithmic literacy as a moderating factor. Understanding how social media algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging or

sensational content appears to strengthen individuals' resilience against disinformation. This finding expands existing literature by highlighting that media literacy in the digital age must include not only content evaluation skills but also awareness of technological and algorithmic mechanisms that shape information exposure. Without this awareness, users may remain vulnerable to algorithm-driven amplification of misleading narratives. The structural equation model confirmed the indirect pathway from media literacy to sharing behavior through critical thinking and disinformation detection. This suggests that media literacy does not directly reduce harmful sharing behavior; rather, it operates through cognitive processes that enhance evaluation and detection capabilities. In other words, improved cognitive filtering leads to more responsible information-sharing decisions. The relatively high explained variance ($R^2 = 0.58$) indicates that the integrated model accounts for a substantial portion of individual differences in disinformation detection.

The large effect sizes observed across variables further strengthen the argument for implementing structured media literacy programs in educational settings. Unlike one-time informational campaigns, the four-week integrated intervention produced measurable behavioral change. This supports arguments in the literature that sustainable competence development requires systematic and practice-based training rather than isolated awareness initiatives.

Despite these positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of young adults aged 18–35, which may limit generalizability to older populations. Second, although behavioral simulation was employed, real-world online environments are more complex and dynamic. Third, long-term retention of skills was not measured, and future research should investigate whether the observed improvements persist over time.

Future studies may explore cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal effects, and the integration of artificial intelligence–based fact-checking tools into media literacy training. Additionally, examining emotional regulation and cognitive biases as mediating variables could further enrich understanding of resistance to disinformation.

Overall, the results confirm that combating disinformation requires a multidimensional approach combining media literacy, critical thinking, and algorithmic awareness. Educational institutions, policymakers, and civil society organizations should prioritize the integration of these competencies into curricula and public programs. Strengthening cognitive resilience at the individual level represents a sustainable strategy for enhancing information security and democratic stability in the digital era.

Conclusion. The findings of this study confirm that media literacy and critical thinking are essential competencies for strengthening resilience against disinformation in the digital era. The integrated educational intervention significantly improved disinformation detection accuracy and reduced the intention to share unverified information among participants. Media literacy and critical thinking were identified as strong predictors of detection accuracy, while algorithmic literacy played a moderating role that enhanced these effects.

The structural model demonstrated that cognitive competencies indirectly influence responsible information-sharing behavior through improved analytical evaluation and detection skills. These results provide empirical validation for the theoretical integration of media literacy and critical thinking frameworks.

The study highlights the necessity of systematic and practice-oriented media literacy programs rather than one-time informational campaigns. Educational institutions, policymakers, and civil society organizations should prioritize the development of integrated digital competence models that combine cognitive, analytical, and technological awareness skills.

Strengthening media literacy at both individual and institutional levels represents a sustainable strategy for enhancing information security, protecting democratic discourse, and reducing the societal impact of disinformation.

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