



Phenomenological Exploration of Young Adults' Perceptions and Media Literacy Experiences in Identifying Disinformation: Emotional and Social Impacts

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ABSTRACT

Media literacy has emerged as a critical tool in addressing the challenges posed by disinformation, especially in the context of social media. While previous studies have focused on knowledge acquisition and behavior change, the lived experiences of individuals engaging with media literacy programs remain underexplored. This study addresses the gap in understanding how young people internalize and apply the lessons learned in media literacy programs to identify and combat disinformation. Using a phenomenological approach, we explore how participants' subjective experiences influence their ability to navigate disinformation and their perceptions of media content. Through in-depth interviews with 15 young adults who have participated in media literacy programs, the study reveals that participants demonstrated increased critical thinking skills, emotional engagement with the issue of disinformation, and a heightened sense of social responsibility. These findings highlight the importance of addressing not just cognitive skills, but also the emotional and social dimensions of media literacy. The results suggest that media literacy programs can have a profound impact on individuals' media consumption habits and their role in mitigating the spread of misinformation. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on media literacy and offer implications for future research aimed at exploring the long-term effects of media literacy education.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation has become a significant issue globally, particularly on social media platforms. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as "fake news," has prompted widespread concern due to its potential impact on public opinion, political processes, and societal behavior. Disinformation, in particular, involves the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive, and it can influence individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and actions on a large scale (Grotlüschen dkk., 2024). As digital media continues to dominate daily life, the consumption of information through social media platforms has become an integral part of the public discourse. However, the rapid dissemination of content and the ease with which false information can spread have created a need for greater media literacy.

Media literacy, defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms, has gained increasing importance in addressing the challenges posed by disinformation. Understanding how individuals perceive and engage with disinformation is essential for creating effective strategies to combat its spread and mitigate its impact on society. In this context, media literacy programs have emerged as critical tools in educating people, especially younger generations, on how to critically engage with information online. However, the way in which participants internalize and apply the knowledge gained from such programs remains underexplored.

This study emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals engaging with media literacy programs. By exploring the subjective experiences of young people who have participated in such programs, this research aims to shed light on how they make sense of disinformation, the challenges they face in identifying it, and the broader societal implications of their learning (Adams, 2023). The phenomenological approach is particularly suited to this exploration, as it allows for a detailed examination of participants' personal experiences, providing insights into the meaning they attach to their encounters with disinformation and media literacy.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals in relation to disinformation and media literacy has become an increasingly important area of study. As misinformation continues to shape public perception and behavior, it is crucial to understand how individuals, particularly younger generations, navigate the complex media landscape and respond to misleading information. Previous studies have explored media literacy through various frameworks, often focusing on the impact of educational programs on critical thinking or the ability to identify false information. However, these studies have generally relied on quantitative methods that prioritize measurable outcomes, such as knowledge retention or behavioral change, which fail to capture the deeper, personal experiences of individuals interacting with media content.

The challenge in studying the lived experiences of individuals is the inherent difficulty in capturing the nuanced and personal dimensions of their engagement with media. While quantitative methods can effectively measure changes in knowledge or skills, they often overlook the rich, subjective meanings that individuals attach to their media experiences (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). This limitation makes it difficult to fully understand the essence of how people interpret disinformation and how their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors evolve as a result of media literacy education. As a result, previous research in this field has not been able to provide a comprehensive exploration of the internal processes through which individuals make sense of and respond to disinformation.

Phenomenology offers a valuable alternative by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and providing an in-depth understanding of the meanings they assign to their encounters with media. Through a phenomenological lens, this study aims to fill the gap left by prior research by exploring the subjective experiences of participants in media literacy programs. By capturing the personal narratives of individuals and analyzing them within the context of their social and cultural environments, this research seeks to offer a more complete understanding of how media literacy shapes perceptions of disinformation and influences critical media consumption.

While existing studies on media literacy often employ practical, applied approaches—such as measuring the effectiveness of educational programs in enhancing critical thinking skills or identifying disinformation—these methods have inherent limitations in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of participants. Typically, quantitative research focuses on outcomes like knowledge retention or behavioral change, offering valuable insights into the general effectiveness of media literacy initiatives (Lalani & Laine, 2023). However, this approach overlooks the richness of individual experiences and fails to explore how participants personally make sense of their encounters with disinformation or the broader societal implications of their learning. The complexity of how individuals internalize media literacy education, how they apply it to real-world situations, and the emotional or cognitive shifts they undergo remain inadequately understood in the existing literature.

The adoption of phenomenological methods presents a promising alternative, as it allows for a holistic exploration of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of these experiences by delving deeply into the meanings participants assign to their encounters with media content. By utilizing this approach, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive examination of the subjective dimensions of media literacy. This research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how young people process and engage with disinformation on social media, uncovering the complexities of their experiences that are often overlooked by traditional, outcome-focused methodologies.

Previous research on media literacy has largely focused on quantifiable outcomes, such as knowledge gain and behavior change, particularly in how individuals identify disinformation. Studies have shown that media literacy programs can enhance critical thinking skills and media consumption habits, yet they often fail to address the lived experiences of individuals engaging with media content. A significant body of work within phenomenology explores how individuals experience and interpret media messages in the context of their daily lives, yet there is a gap in understanding how these subjective experiences shape their engagement with disinformation (Kresin dkk., 2025). Theories related to media literacy and social constructivism suggest that learning occurs within specific social and cultural contexts, which are often underexplored in traditional research methods. These gaps highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the internal processes individuals undergo when confronted with media content.

To address these gaps, a phenomenological approach has been chosen for this study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of participants. Phenomenology provides a means to examine the essence of individuals' lived experiences, focusing on the meanings they attach to their encounters with disinformation. By adopting this approach, the study seeks to explore how young people interpret and navigate the complexities of disinformation in a digital age, offering insights that are not captured through traditional outcome-based methodologies. This method will allow for a richer, more authentic understanding of the ways in which media literacy programs influence participants, going beyond surface-level knowledge to delve into deeper cognitive and emotional shifts.

The structure of this article is organized to guide the reader through the entire research process. Following the introduction, the paper provides a detailed background on the context of disinformation and media literacy, followed by a clear explanation of the phenomenological approach and its suitability for this study (Albaladejo-Ortega dkk., 2024). Data collection and analysis processes, including thematic and hermeneutic analysis, are outlined to explain how the lived experiences of participants were interpreted. The results are presented through an exploration of key themes derived from the data, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings. The article concludes with a summary of the study's contributions and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach, which focuses on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences from their own perspectives. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to uncover the essence of human experiences related to media literacy, particularly in understanding how participants interpret and engage with disinformation in social media (Samy-Tayie dkk., 2023). This approach is especially relevant for answering the research question, as it allows for a deep exploration of subjective experiences, highlighting the meanings participants attach to their encounters with media content. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to interpret these experiences, which involves understanding the meaning of these experiences within the context of participants' lived realities and social environments.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who had recently participated in media literacy programs. The inclusion criteria specified individuals aged 18-25, as this age group is highly active in social media and is often targeted by disinformation. Participants were required to have participated in a formal media literacy program aimed at improving their ability to identify misinformation online. The exclusion criteria ruled out individuals who had prior professional training in media literacy or those who had not actively used social media platforms in the past year (Jamil & Alazrak, 2023). A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, with an equal distribution of gender (7 males and 8 females), and an average age of 21 years.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, allowing for a more personalized and intimate exploration of participants' experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment to ensure participants felt at ease sharing their thoughts. The interview guide was developed to elicit rich, descriptive responses, focusing on participants' perceptions of the media literacy program, their experiences with disinformation, and how their understanding of media content had evolved (Krylova-Grek & Korniyaka, 2023). The guide was based on existing literature but was adapted to ensure it addressed the specific aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely used method in phenomenological research. The analysis process began with reading and re-reading the transcriptions to immerse in the data. Then, key themes were identified through systematic coding, where units of meaning were extracted from the transcripts. These units were grouped into initial categories, which were refined into core themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' experiences (Macarrón Mániz dkk., 2024). The analysis followed a hermeneutic approach, which involved interpreting these themes within the broader social and cultural context of media consumption. Software such as NVivo was used to assist in organizing and managing the data, although the primary focus was on the qualitative interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Austin dkk., 2023). The data collected were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. All procedures adhered to international ethical standards for research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and privacy throughout the study.

RESULTS

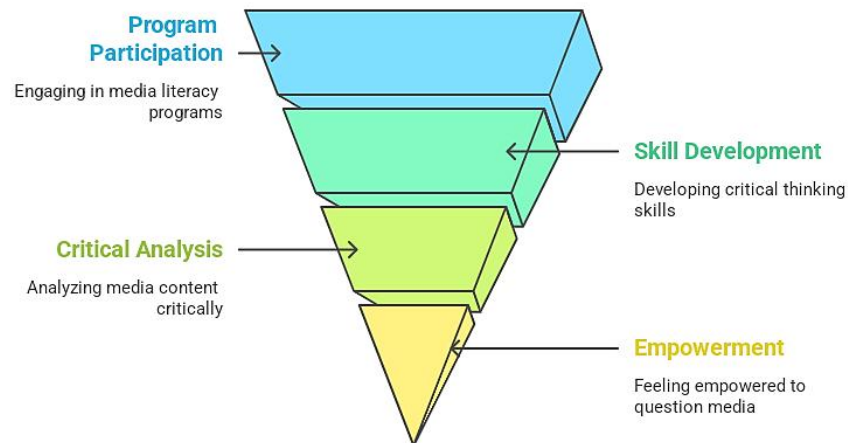
The Impact of Media Literacy Programs on Identifying Disinformation

One of the most significant findings of this study relates to how young people perceive the role of media literacy programs in recognizing and combating disinformation on social media. Many participants shared their experiences of how the program enhanced their critical thinking skills, particularly in distinguishing between credible and unreliable information. As one participant, a 22-year-old university student, expressed:

"Before the media literacy course, I would often believe things I saw on Facebook without checking. Now, I immediately question the source and look for more reliable information. It's like I've learned how to spot the red flags."

This theme underscores the transformative nature of media literacy programs in shaping the critical media consumption habits of young people. Participants frequently mentioned feeling empowered by the ability to engage more thoughtfully with digital content. They articulated how the program helped them analyze the intent behind media messages, often citing examples of misinformation they had previously encountered.

Transformation Through Media Literacy



The Role of Social Context in Media Literacy Reception

Another theme that emerged from the data was the influence of participants' social environments on how they internalized media literacy lessons. Social context, including peer influence and family discussions, played a pivotal role in reinforcing or challenging the messages conveyed in the media literacy program. One participant reflected on the difference between what they learned in the program and how it was received in their family:

"At home, when I try to talk about fake news, they just brush it off, like 'everyone does it.' But after the course, I can explain more clearly why it's important not to share unverified information. It's hard, but I'm more confident in having those discussions now."

This theme reveals the complex dynamic between individual learning and social reinforcement or resistance. Despite the program's emphasis on critical media consumption, the support (or lack thereof) from the surrounding social circle significantly influenced participants' ability to apply their new knowledge in real-world contexts.

Perceptions of Disinformation as a Social Issue

Participants also spoke about their evolving perceptions of disinformation as a broader social issue, recognizing its potential to influence public opinion and behavior. A participant in their mid-20s highlighted the societal responsibility tied to combating misinformation:

"It's not just about me being smarter online; it's about society as a whole. If we can spread truth and stop fake news, maybe the community would be better informed, and we could make better decisions as a society."

This theme indicates that media literacy programs did not just influence individual participants; they also contributed to a broader awareness of the societal consequences of disinformation. Many participants expressed a sense of collective responsibility, where their individual actions could contribute to a more informed and responsible public discourse.

The results of this study illustrate that media literacy programs are crucial in helping young people develop the skills needed to identify and respond to disinformation on social media. The participants demonstrated increased confidence in critically engaging with media content, particularly regarding the ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources. However, the study also highlighted that the success of such programs is heavily influenced by the social environment of the participants, particularly within family and peer groups. Moreover, participants' growing awareness of the societal impact of disinformation suggests that media literacy has the potential to foster not only individual change but also collective responsibility for addressing the challenges posed by misinformation.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of young people who participated in media literacy programs, focusing on their ability to identify and navigate disinformation on social media. The findings revealed that participants experienced a significant shift in their ability to critically evaluate media content, increasing their awareness of disinformation and the strategies used to manipulate public opinion. Furthermore, the participants articulated a growing sense of responsibility to combat the spread of false information, underscoring the societal implications of media literacy.

Contribution to the Research Question

The results of this study provide valuable insights into how media literacy programs influence the subjective experiences of participants, particularly in terms of how they identify and respond to disinformation. By focusing on the lived experiences of young individuals, this research addresses the gap in existing literature that primarily relies on quantitative measures of knowledge or behavior change. The findings suggest that media literacy programs not only enhance participants' cognitive skills but also reshape their emotional and social perceptions regarding disinformation. Participants felt empowered to challenge misleading content, indicating that the program had a profound effect on their personal engagement with media. This research contributes a deeper, phenomenological understanding of how media literacy can influence both individual and collective perceptions of information in the digital age.

Relation to Literature and Previous Theories

The findings align with existing research that emphasizes the role of media literacy in enhancing critical thinking and reducing vulnerability to disinformation (Oliveira dkk., 2024). However, unlike prior studies that often focus on knowledge acquisition, this study adds a new layer by highlighting how participants internalize media literacy lessons within the context of their everyday lives. The concept of media literacy as a tool for empowerment, as noted by Pasitselska (2024), is further supported by this study, as participants expressed an increased sense of agency in their media consumption practices. Moreover, the study contributes to the growing body of work on the societal implications of disinformation, echoing findings from scholars who argue that media literacy can play a key role in fostering responsible digital citizenship. The subjective nature of the experiences shared by the participants underscores the need for more in-depth, phenomenological research to capture the complexities of how individuals perceive and interact with media content, particularly in an era where disinformation is rampant.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold both scientific and practical significance. On a scientific level, the results contribute to the field of media literacy by offering a deeper understanding of how individuals, particularly young people, experience and internalize media literacy lessons. The shift in participants' ability to critically evaluate media content and their growing sense of responsibility to combat disinformation suggest that media literacy programs have the potential to produce significant cognitive and social change (Lozano-Monterrubio dkk., 2024). Practically, these findings can inform the development of more effective media literacy curricula that not only focus on knowledge acquisition but also address the emotional and social dimensions of media consumption. By emphasizing critical engagement with media and the societal impact of disinformation, such programs can help individuals develop the skills necessary for responsible digital citizenship. The implications extend beyond the individual level to include broader societal benefits, such as fostering a more informed and discerning public capable of navigating the complexities of the digital age.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. One significant limitation is the focus on a specific age group—young people who have recently participated in media literacy programs. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations, such as older adults or individuals who have not engaged with formal media literacy education. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data from in-depth interviews introduces the potential for response biases, as

participants may present socially desirable answers or reflect on their experiences in a way that aligns with their personal beliefs or values. Furthermore, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and social context, and the findings may differ in other settings where media literacy programs or disinformation issues are approached differently. Future studies could explore a wider range of demographic groups and contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of media literacy's impact across diverse populations.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study lay the groundwork for further exploration into the effects of media literacy on individuals' engagement with disinformation. Future research could extend this study by examining how media literacy influences long-term behavioral change, particularly in terms of participants' media consumption patterns and their ability to identify and resist disinformation over time (Barbaro dkk., 2022). Moreover, studies could investigate the role of media literacy programs in different cultural contexts, considering how various societal norms and values shape the way individuals engage with and respond to disinformation. Another promising direction would be to explore the impact of media literacy on broader societal levels, such as its potential to reduce the overall spread of misinformation in public discourse. By expanding the scope and depth of these inquiries, future research can continue to build on these findings and further enrich our understanding of the role of media literacy in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of young individuals participating in media literacy programs, focusing on how these programs influence their ability to identify and respond to disinformation on social media. The findings revealed that participants experienced a significant improvement in their critical media consumption skills and developed a stronger sense of responsibility to combat the spread of false information. Unlike previous research, which often focused on knowledge acquisition, this study contributes a deeper understanding of the personal, social, and emotional dimensions of media literacy. The results demonstrate that media literacy programs can have profound effects on participants' perceptions of disinformation and their role in mitigating its spread. Future research could build on these findings by examining the long-term impact of media literacy education and expanding the scope to include diverse cultural and demographic contexts. By exploring these avenues, further studies can enhance our understanding of how media literacy can shape a more informed and responsible digital society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

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