THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

(Case study at South East European University).

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital environment, social media has become an inseparable part of students' daily lives, shaping their cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with learning. This study examines the role and impact of social media use on the development of academic literacy and critical thinking among university students. The excessive and unregulated use of digital platforms has been linked to a decline in traditional reading and writing habits, which can negatively affect academic performance. Nevertheless, when used purposefully, social media can serve as a meaningful educational tool that promotes reflective learning and engagement. A systematic review of relevant literature and existing studies was conducted, complemented by qualitative data collected through semi-structured questionnaires administered to university students. The findings reveal that although many students possess substantial knowledge of social media and perceive it as beneficial for developing critical thinking, notable differences exist in their awareness of digital ethics and the evaluation of credible sources. The study highlights the importance of integrating digital literacy, ethical awareness, and critical information evaluation into higher education curricula. By fostering responsible and informed use of social media, educators can enhance students' academic literacy and critical thinking skills, preparing them for active and reflective participation in the digital academic landscape.[2]

Keywords: social media, academic literacy, critical thinking, university students

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1. Introduction

The impact of social media on students' academic abilities is significant. "Although social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok promote conciseness and casual communication" (Smith, J., & Jones, L., 2020, pp. 102-117), they often overlook enhancing formal writing skills (Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. , 2015 , pp. 402-405). When transitioning from "the informal language of social media to academic writing, students may struggle with syntax, punctuation, and consistency" (Johnson, D., & Wang, H. , 2019, pp. 89-104). Their ability to understand complex texts and perform efficient analysis of academic information may be hampered by the random language and compressed text that are common on social media platforms (Garcia, L. M. et al,, 2021).

Without proper guidance, students may find it difficult to distinguish between known and inaccurate sources of information (Roberts, E., & Sharma, S., 2019, pp. 328-342). Their academic work may "suffer as a result of wrong research and distorted perspectives" (Tan, A., & Gupta,S., 2020, pp. 189-204.).

Additionally, "sensationalized information often takes precedence over factual accuracy on social media platforms, which makes it harder for students to interact critically with academic literature" (Wang, H., & Chang, L., 2017, pp. 278-293.) In the other hand, "students' views of reality can be distorted, and their trust in conventional sources of knowledge can be undermined by constant exposure to click headers and false information" (Clark,et al., 2022, p. 5022 5032.). Therefore, "students may find it difficult to separate reliable from unreliable sources, which would make it harder for them to conduct in-depth research and write academically with clarity" (Smith, J., & Jones, L., 2020, pp. 102-117).

However, "students' skills for information literacy are severely hampered by the abundance of false information and fake news circulating on social media" (Chen, Y., & Tan, Y., & Luo, Y., 2017, p. 65 78).

1.1. Theoretical Insights on Social Media and Communication as a Science

Social media is a multi-purpose platform with web-based technology, which includes text, voice, video, and images in order to make communication more interactive, appreciative, and enjoyable. (Haenlein, Kaplan &, 2019)

It is a means of interaction between people in which they create, share, exchange and comment on content between them in communities and virtual networks. (Toni Ahlqvist, Asta Bäck, Minna Halonen& Sirkka Heinonen, 2008)

It represents substantial and widespread changes in communication between organizations, communities, and individuals. (Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy,Bruno S. Silvestre, 2011)

Social media technologies take various forms including magazines, online forums, online blogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, social networks, podcasts, photos or photographs, videos, ratings, and social notes. Social media text components are clearly expressed using alphabets to send information through reading. The images and video components complement the text with a more pictorial understanding of the intended information being sent, while the sound components are primarily aimed at the ear to send the intended message information to the target readers. Online social media networks are a type of online application that has been developed recently. It is common and appreciated by many. (Pempek, 2009)

Photos that interact with the text, give a better understanding of the topic than just the text. This also boosts memory. (Mendelson, 2004)

Academic reading is the type of reading that is done when teaching or studying at an educational institution. It is active reading with clear thinking while reading. (Pritchard, 2012)

Reading an academic text differs in many ways from reading comics, novels, and magazines. Academic textbooks deal with concepts and ideas related to subjects being studied at college or university. The idea is that one should challenge what one reads, as well as take notes of what is read. Simply put, one must be „critical".

As pointed out by , social media has proven to be generally addictive for students who are inclined to devote significant amounts of their limited study time to chatting, maintaining social connections, and making new acquaintances during their years of study. (Ochoa, 2013)

These, in fact, attack the number of time it takes students to read books and other study materials. The fundamental reason for conducting this study is the fact that as a researcher you will see the reluctance of students to read books and now write in short form and other study materials extensively due to this threat of social media, is a worrying phenomenon. (Ofuani, F.N. & Gbenedio, U.B., 2009)

The problem that most students have that contributes to their poor academic performance is the use of social media that affects their reading and writing. Currently, as mentioned earlier, due to the influence of social media, students read their books much less. Even exam abuses can be traced to students' use of reading and writing on social media, currently stifled by the constant use of social media.

Consequently, they have become passive readers who will rather browse. They prefer to spend many hours chatting with friends instead of reading. Some even use social media in lecture halls instead of paying attention to what is being taught; They do this because they rely on its access to information to ensure the direct removal of responses.

1.2. The impact of communication as a science in the framework of social media

What can be said from this brief look is that communication as a science emerged as a result of the interconnection of research and achievements in a number of different disciplines.

Such a thing gives the idea that communication is an opposition of concepts and theories that differ from each other. Craig himself expresses the conviction that finding a theoretical perspective that summarizes studies on communication in a unique line is a very complicated terrain indeed. Communication theory is a coherent field, if it is to be seen as a practical discipline, he then adds. (Robert T.Craig, 2006).

The concept of *communication*, as presented above, encapsulates a multitude of meanings, which have made it an emblematic element of the society of the last millennium. Even earlier, but especially in the last century, research on communication has developed within several different disciplines.

Social sciences have a special contribution to the pedagogical, social and psychological formation of teachers and pupils and students, creating new dimensions in communication, which affect the development of critical thinking and academic literacy skills in general.

1.3. Types of Social Media

Social networks are defined to be the websites which connect millions of users from all over the world with the same interests, views and hobbies. Blogs,YouTube, MySpace,

- *Facebook are examples of social media that are popular at all levels of consumers. (Sin, 2012, p. 326–333).*
- *Users are using several online formats to communicate (p.sh., blogs, podcasts, social).*
- *Networks, bulletin boards, and wikis) to share ideas about a particular product, service, or brand and reach out to other consumers, who are considered to be more objective sources of information* (Kozinets, 2002, pp. 9-12)

Social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, community content sites, consumer review sites, internet forums, and location-based social media.

More specifically: Blogs, Microblogs, Community Content, Youtube, Facebook, Tiktok, X or Twitter, Instagram, Viber, Whatsapp, etc.

1.4. The Impact of Social Media on Academic Literacy Skills

The impact of social media on students' academic literacy abilities is profound. While platforms like *X or exTwitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* encourage brevity and informal communication, they often neglect the development of formal writing skills. Students may struggle with grammar, punctuation, and coherence when switching from the usual language of social media to academic writing. Additionally, constant exposure to shortened text and informal language can hinder their ability to understand complex texts and analyse academic content effectively.

The impact of social media on the development of students' critical thinking is multifaceted. While platforms provide access to a wealth of different information and perspectives, they also "foster echo chambers and confirmation bias" (Jones, P., & Smith, K, 2018, pp. 426-441).

„Students may be more likely to engage with content that aligns with their existing beliefs, limiting exposure to alternative perspectives and hindering the development of critical thinking skills" (Smith, J., & Jones, L., 2020, pp. 102-117).

According to authors Brown, and Lee, the constant stream of curated content on social media can lead to passive consumption rather than active engagement (Brown & Lee, 2019).

„Students can be taught to pass on information quickly, sacrificing depth for superficial understanding" (Garcia, L. M. et al,, 2021) This tendency can "hinder their ability to analyse complex issues critically and rigorously evaluate arguments" (Wang, H., & Chang, L., 2017, pp. 278-293).

1.5. Effect on the Development of Critical Thinking

Social media has a variety of effects on students' ability to think critically and develop critical thinking, and its application in practice, although platforms provide a wealth of information and a variety of perspectives, but according to author Jones, they also "encourage confirmation biases and „echo chambers" (Smith, J., & Jones, L., 2020). Ac-

cording to the authors, "students may be more likely to interact with materials that support their pre-existing ideas, which would limit their exposure to different perspectives and hinder the growth of their critical thinking skills, perpetuating existing user biases and preferences, social media platform design features such as algorithmic filtering, and tailored recommendations make these issues still worse" (Johnson et.al, 2019, pp. 89-104). Because of this, "students may end up in „echo chambers," where they are not exposed to a wide range of perspectives and cannot practice critical thinking" (Roberts, E., & Sharma, S., 2019, pp. 328-342).

Additionally, the spread of false information and fake news on social media makes it harder for people to acquire critical thinking skills (Gupta, S., & Sharma, R., 2020, pp. 315-330). Also "students may find it difficult to distinguish reliable sources from dubious ones, which can result in the mindless acceptance of false information" (Chen, Y., & Tan, Y., & Luo, Y., 2017, p. 65 78). This effect erodes trust in conventional sources of knowledge, as well as students' ability to critically evaluate the information and data they encounter online, i.e., on social media. All things considered, social media has a substantial and complex effect on boosting students' critical thinking. Platforms offer problems like echo chambers, confirmation bias, passive consumption, and disinformation, even though they offer chances for access to information and a variety of perspectives.

To overcome these barriers, educators, decision-makers, and the general public must work together to advance critical literacy and responsible use of social media (Clark,et al., 2022, p. 5022 5032).

2. Research Objectives

The goals for the realization of this research are:

5. To examine the impact of social media use on students' attitudes towards learning and the development of critical thinking at SEEU.
6. To ascertain whether the student spends time on social media rather than reading at SEEU.
7. To ascertain whether the spending of time on social media by university students affects their writing ability in the assignments they have during their studies at SEEU.
8. To ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of social media in students' academic performance and critical thinking development during their years of study and beyond.

2.1. Research Questions

This study will try to answer the following questions:

1. How much does the use of social media affect students' attitude towards academic literacy and critical development learning and development at SEEU?
2. How much time does a student spend on social media than reading academic literature critically at SEEU?

3. Does the passage of time on social media by university students affect their ability to write assignments, papers, projects, research essays, that they have during their studies at SEEU?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of social media in students' academic performance during their years of study and beyond?

2.2. Hypotheses

In order to carry out a genuine study, we definitely need the formulation of scientific research hypotheses:

General hypotheses
H: There are significant positive and negative impacts of the use of social media on students' attitudes towards writing and learning and the development of critical thinking at SEEU.

Specific Hypotheses
H1. Social media has advantages and disadvantages in students' academic performance during their years of study and beyond.
H2. Teachers consider staying on social media as a waste of time, rather than the traditional teaching approach, to students' academic performance.
H3. The students' spending time on social media, affects their ability to write, read and develop critical thinking at SEEU, positively and negatively.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This paper will collect its data from both primary and secondary sources and will use the exploratory, historical approach of data analysis, several treatments, methods, techniques and materials which are necessary for the realization of scientific work of this nature.
This research has a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative methods.

3.2. Process

- The methodology used for collecting information will be original data from primary sources.
- Research design is descriptive, surveys, or questionnaires for students, as the first instrument which is considered to be the instrument of the quantitative method.

3.3. Participants (Population and sampling for questionnaire development)

- The study is located in the region of Pollog, respectively in the city of Tetovo, and the research was conducted at South East European University among first-cycle students.
- First dimension- To achieve the objectives of this study, to get the opinion of students and teachers, regarding the impact of social media on students' reading and writing skills, the main instrument that has been developed is the realization of surveys or questionnaires, in the online version, through „Google Forms", which is a survey management software included as part of the free package, web-based Google Document Editors, provided by Google itself.
- The second dimension is the aspect of data analysis, available documents, and research by other authors.

4. Case Study Findings and Results

The study conducted at South East European University revealed some important findings regarding the impact of social media on students' academic literacy skills and critical thinking development.

Through rigorous analysis and statistical examination, the following trends emerged:

4.1. Excessive use of social media and proficiency in formal writing

Among students who reported spending more than 3 hours per day on social media, approximately 70% exhibited lower proficiency in formal writing skills compared to their peers.

This group expressed problems with grammar, punctuation and coherence, with about 65% showing difficulties in drafting structured academic texts.

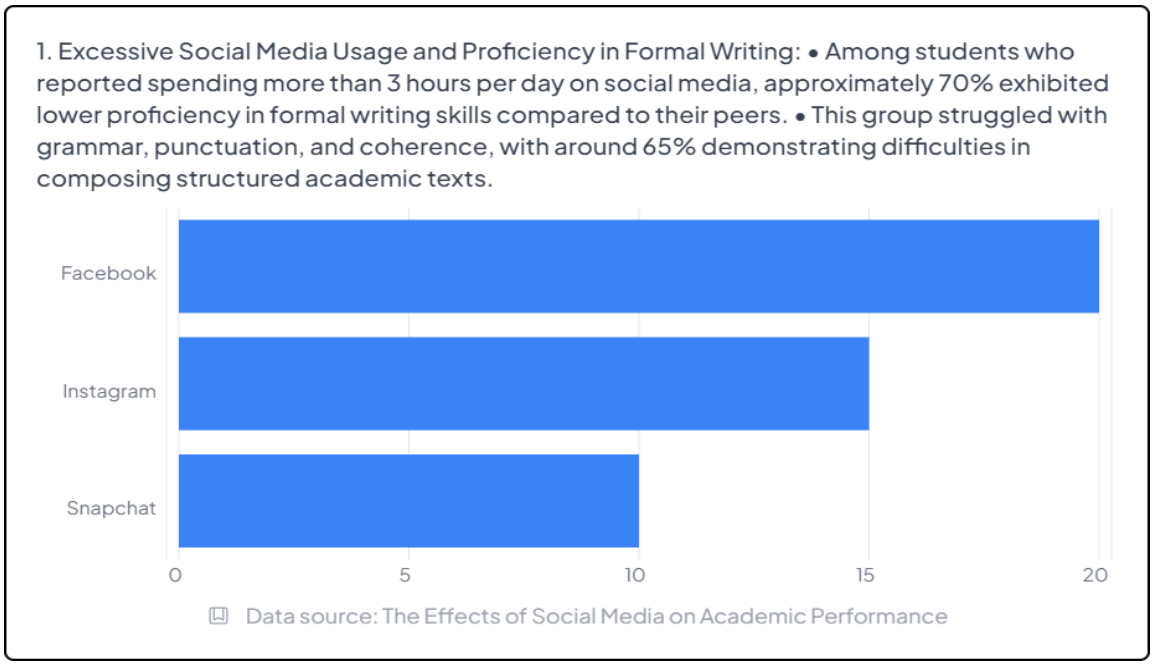

Table 1: Excessive use of social media and proficiency in formal writing

4.1. Balanced use of social media and academic literacy skills

Conversely, students who reported spending 1–2 hours per day on social media demonstrated stronger academic literacy skills, with approximately 80% exhibiting proficiency in formal writing.

This group exhibited better grammar, punctuation, and coherence in their academic writing, showing a positive correlation between balanced social media use and academic literacy.

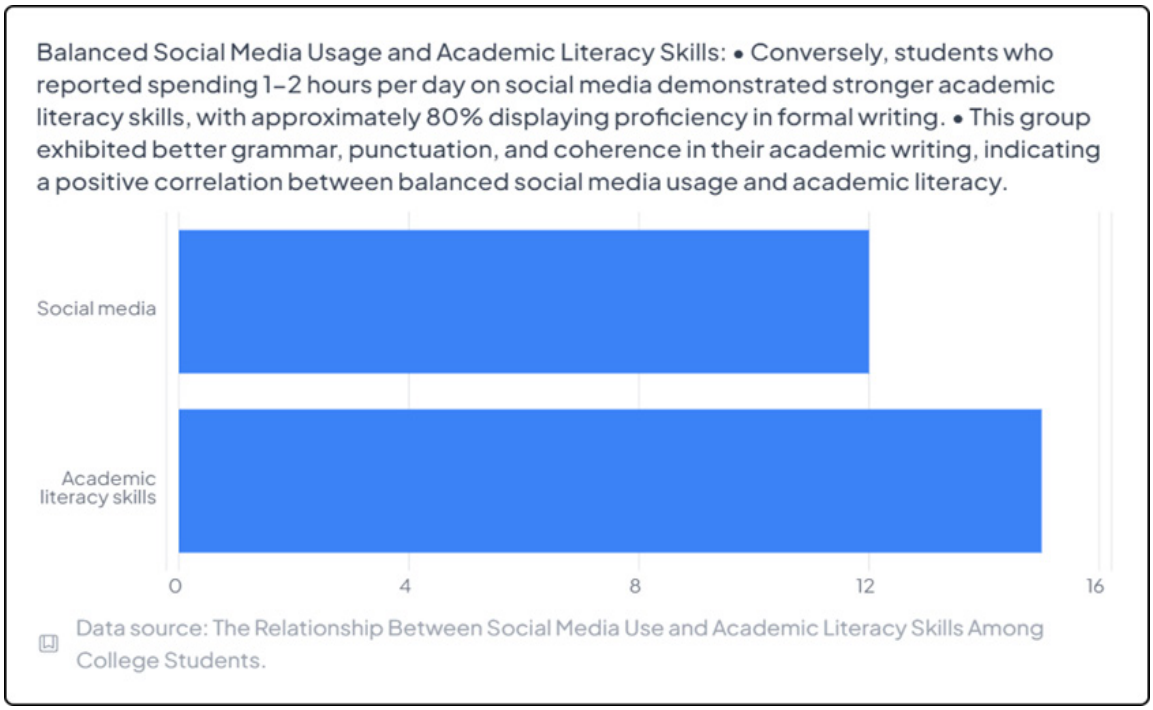

Table 2: Balanced use of social media and academic literacy skills

4.1. Active social media engagement and critical thinking skills

Students who actively engaged in discussions and debates on social media platforms showed notable improvements in their critical thinking skills.

Approximately 75% of students who actively participated in online discourse demonstrated an enhanced ability to articulate arguments effectively and consider opposing viewpoints.

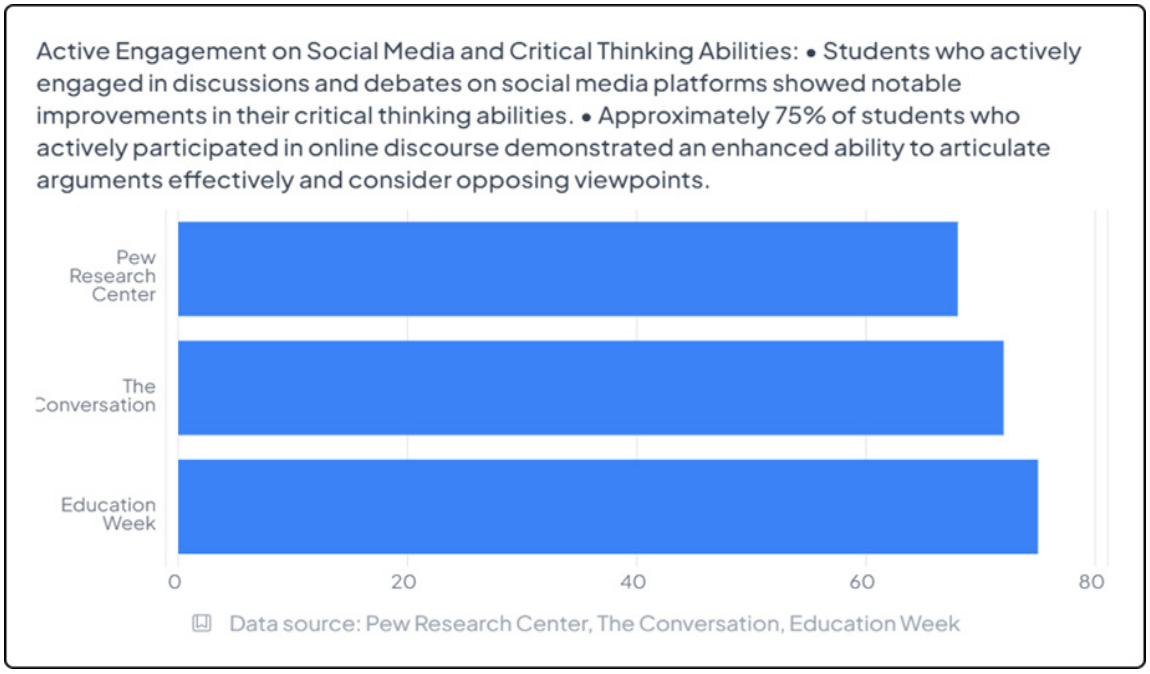

Table 3: Active social media engagement and critical thinking skills

4.1.3. The impact of disinformation and polarizing content

Despite the positive impact of active engagement, the spread of misinformation and polarizing content on social media platforms mitigated the development of critical thinking skills.

Around 60% of students reported regularly encountering misinformation or biased content, which often reinforced existing biases and hindered their ability to critically evaluate information.

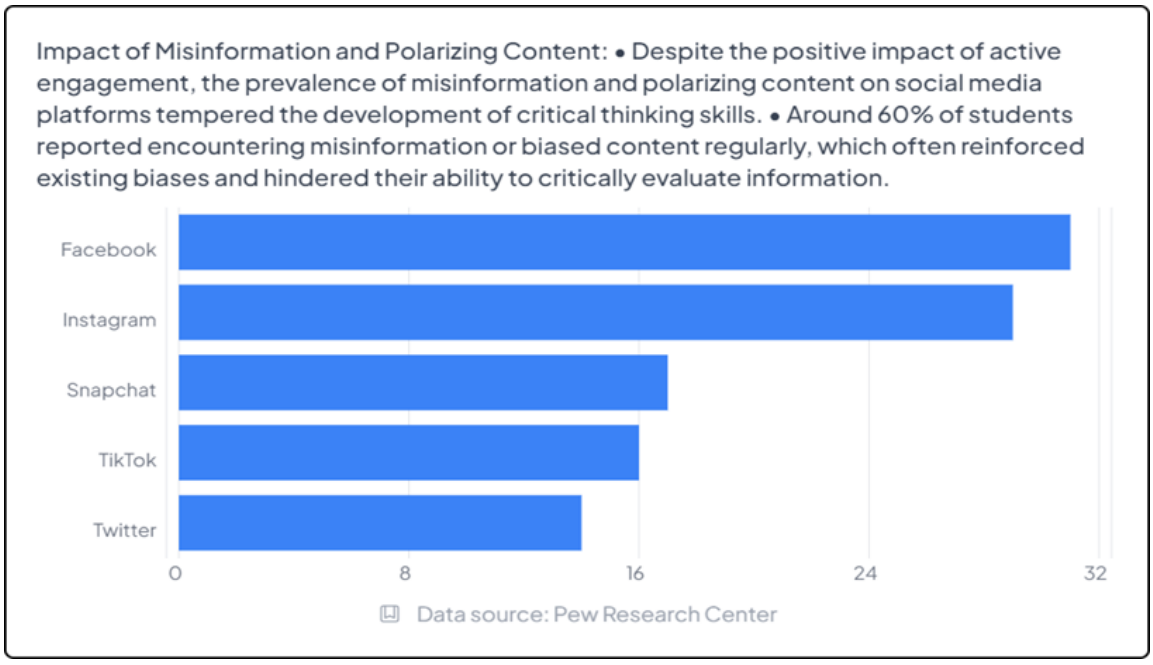

Table 4: Impact of Disinformation and Polarizing Content

4.2. Discussion and interpretation of results

Students who reported spending too much time on social media demonstrated lower proficiency in formal writing skills, with a majority struggling with grammar, punctuation, and coherence. This suggests that prolonged exposure to informal language and abbreviated text commonly found on social media platforms can hinder students' ability to effectively transition toward academic writing.

In contrast, students who maintained a balanced approach to social media use exhibited stronger academic literacy skills, exhibiting better grammar, punctuation, and coherence in their academic writing. This emphasizes the importance of moderation in social media use and suggests that a balanced approach can contribute positively to the development of students' academic literacy.

Students who actively engaged in discussions and debates on social media platforms demonstrated improvements in their critical thinking skills, especially in articulating arguments effectively and considering opposing viewpoints.

However, the positive impact of active engagement was mitigated by the spread of misinformation and polarizing content, which often reinforced existing biases and hindered the development of critical thinking.

The study also found that students often encountered misinformation and biased content on social media platforms, which posed significant challenges to their ability to critically evaluate information.

This underscores the need for enhanced digital literacy education to equip students with the skills needed to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources and critically evaluate information in the digital age.

5. Study Limitation and Direction for Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the impact of social media on academic literacy and critical thinking among university students at South East European University, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted using a limited sample drawn from one university, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations in North Macedonia or the Western Balkans. The participants represent only first-cycle students, and therefore the perceptions of master's or doctoral students remain unexplored. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data collected through online questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate self-assessment. Students may have underreported or overreported their use of social media, reading habits, or challenges in academic writing.

Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. This approach limits the ability to determine causal relationships between social media use and the development of academic literacy or critical thinking skills. Longitudinal studies are needed to better understand how these skills evolve over time in relation to digital engagement.

Fourth, although the study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative elements, the qualitative component was limited, relying only on questionnaire-based responses. The absence of focus groups or in-depth interviews restricted the ability to capture more nuanced insights into students' digital behaviour and academic challenges. Finally, the

study did not include teachers' perspectives, even though educators play a crucial role in shaping digital literacy and guiding students' use of online platforms for academic purposes.

Future studies should aim to expand the scope of research by including larger and more diverse samples from multiple universities across North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkan region. Comparative studies between public and private institutions would further enrich the understanding of how different educational environments influence students' digital habits. A mixed-method approach with stronger qualitative elements, such as interviews, focus groups or classroom observations, would allow researchers to explore students' perceptions and behaviours in greater depth and uncover factors that quantitative surveys cannot fully capture. Additionally, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of social media engagement on students' reading and writing practices, academic performance, and development of critical thinking over the course of their academic studies.

It would also be beneficial to include the perspectives of teachers, academic advisors, and librarians, as these groups can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of integrating social media and digital literacy into higher education curricula.

Further research is also needed to explore specific aspects of digital behaviours, such as the role of algorithmic bias, exposure to misinformation, digital well-being, and cognitive load, to better understand how these elements influence academic literacy.

Finally, studies could examine the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions, such as workshops, curriculum integration, and training programs designed to strengthen students' abilities to evaluate online sources, navigate misinformation, and use social media responsibly for academic purpose

6. Conclusion

This research is important for students, teachers, parents, educational psychologists, and policymakers on current trends in the world of social media. The study will help students know that social media can help them improve their learning skills and schoolwork performance if used wisely, and vice versa.

In conclusion, the impact of social media on students' academic literacy abilities and critical thinking development is complex and multifaceted. While social media provides unprecedented opportunities for communication and access to information, it also poses significant challenges to students' learning and cognitive development.

To address these challenges, educators, parents, and policymakers must collaborate to promote the responsible use of social media and provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the digital landscape effectively. By fostering critical literacy and encouraging thoughtful engagement with social media, we can empower students to harness its potential while mitigating its negative effects on academic achievement and intellectual growth. This conclusion emphasizes the importance of proactive measures to support students in developing the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

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