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NEXUS BETWEEN CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN DETECTING MEDIA NEGATIVITY AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTH

By

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Abstract

Researchers have observed that Nigerian youth are exposed to a considerable volume of information on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, which may lead to adverse effects. The prevalence of media negativity—including fake news, misinformation, disinformation, violence, and harmful content—poses significant challenges to young people especially. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the rapid spread of media negativity within the media landscape and to understand why Nigerian youth are particularly affected by social media content consumption. It examined the relationship between critical thinking skills and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) competencies to identify media negativity among Nigerian youth. Employing a social survey design, 600 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to a sample of youths in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria through research assistants and electronic means. The data collected were analysed using frequency tables and percentages. The findings indicated a positive correlation between critical thinking abilities and MIL competencies, highlighting that many Nigerian youth struggle to detect or recognise media negativity. Consequently, the study recommended integrating critical thinking and MIL into Nigeria's educational curricula and youth development programmes. It concluded that enhancing MIL will foster critical thinking skills among the youth and enable them to differentiate between negative and positive media messages.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, Detecting Media Negativity, Media and Information Literacy, Nigerian Youth, Social Media.*

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Introduction

The advent of new media brought many changes in peoples' communication patterns and behaviours. In today's world of omnipresent media, the relationship between people, technology, and how information is created and shared with the outside world has changed. Most people today increasingly rely on the new media technologies as the taken-for-granted infrastructure of everyday life. Despite the potential of new media technology to aid the creation and distribution of information near and wide, there is a significant lack of the ability to distinguish truthful and objective messages from fake and emotional messages. Although phoney news or emotionally appealing news/content is a global issue, it is not new in Nigeria, either. Historically, according to Hassan (2022), the peddlers of disinformation or misinformation were popularly referred to as "radio without battery" and were a weapon in Nigeria's civil war between 1967 and 1970. Unfortunately, with the recent experience with social media, the bandwidth of the 'radio without battery' has expanded through its easy accessibility, more extensive reach, lightning speed, and low costs.

In contemporary Nigeria, the proliferation of digital media has significantly altered the landscape through which information is consumed and disseminated, particularly among youth. With the emergence of social media platforms, online news outlets, and digital communication channels, Nigerian youth are exposed to an unprecedented volume and diversity of media content, most of which are fake, misleading, and harmful. For instance, Umejei, Ajaero, Samuels, Oloruntola, and Odebiyi (2024) claim that as of January 2022, Nigeria had approximately 32.9 million social media users, representing 15.4% of the total population. According to them, many Nigerian people, including youth, are exposed to misinformation. Studies have also indicated that 93% of highly educated Nigerians believe they have encountered misinformation on social media. One can affirm that the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (Bindu, 2023) and WhatsApp has made spreading misinformation easier. In other words, the advancement of the Internet and social media platforms have given young people everywhere, including those in Nigeria, unparalleled access to knowledge and the ability to consume materials indiscriminately (Aduloju, 2021). However, alongside the benefits of media exposure, there is a growing concern about the potential negative impacts, including the dissemination of biased narratives, misinformation, and harmful content (Livingstone, 2004). In Nigeria, a

nation characterised by a vibrant and diverse media landscape, the challenge of media negativity significantly affects young individuals who are continually navigating a complex digital environment, often lacking essential critical thinking and media literacy skills.

Critical thinking skills are essential for empowering individuals to evaluate and interpret media content with discernment (Koltay, 2011). This process involves analysing information, assessing its credibility, and forming reasoned judgments (Paul & Elder, 2006). Within the context of media literacy, critical thinking empowers individuals to question media messages, identify biases, and differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources (Aufderheide, 1993). Equally, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) further enhances individuals' ability to engage critically with media content (UNESCO, 2013). MIL encompasses a range of competencies, including accessing, analysing, evaluating, and creating media content (Martinez, 2009). In an increasingly digitalised society, MIL is essential for equipping individuals with the necessary skills to navigate the vast array of media sources and information channels effectively.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of critical thinking and MIL, limited research explicitly examines their impact on detecting media negativity among Nigerian youth. Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, with rapid technological advancements and socio-political complexities, presents a unique context for studying the intersection of these variables. Of course, the existing studies have highlighted the prevalence of media negativity in Nigerian media, including biased reporting, sensationalism, and spreading misinformation (Oloruntola-Yusuf, 2015; Uchendu, 2017). Nonetheless, more research is needed to explore how Nigerian youth perceive and respond to media negativity, particularly concerning their critical thinking skills and MIL competencies. It is believed that understanding the nexus between critical thinking, MIL skills, and the detection of media negativity among Nigerian youth is highly essential for developing effective strategies to promote media and information literacy and empower youth to engage critically with media content. This study aims to develop evidence-based interventions and educational initiatives to foster media literacy among Nigerian youth by expounding the factors influencing youths' media consumption practices and perceptions of media negativity. Hence, this study investigates the nexus between critical thinking skills and media and

information literacy (MIL) competencies in detecting media negativity among Nigerian youth.

Statement of the Problem

In the digital age, young people are immersed in a media landscape characterised by abundant information from various sources, including social media, which shape their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours. Nigerian youth are flooded with media content which may be biased, misleading, sensationalised, and harmful (Ajakaiye, 2021). Despite the proliferation of digital media consumption among Nigerian youth, a gap exists in understanding how critical thinking and media and information literacy (MIL) skills crisscross in detecting media negativity. Thus, understanding how critical thinking and media and information literacy (MIL) intersect in detecting media negativity among Nigerian youth is crucial for addressing misinformation and promoting informed citizenship.

Considering the pervasive influence of media on youth and the potential negative implications of undiscerning media consumption, particularly in the context of biased narratives, fake news, misinformation, and X-rated content, investigating how critical thinking and MIL influence youths' ability to discern media negativity is crucial (Abrams, 2024). Consequently, there is a need to explore the interplay between critical thinking and MIL in the context of Nigerian youth's negative media consumption habits to develop targeted interventions to enhance their ability to discern and critically evaluate media content in the digital age. Thus, this study investigates the relationship between critical thinking, MIL, and the ability of Nigerian youth to discern and navigate harmful media content.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of critical thinking skills among Nigerian youth, and how do these skills influence their ability to analyse and evaluate media content for negativity?
2. How frequently do Nigerian youth encounter media negativity?
3. What is the frequency of engagement with MIL skills in detecting media negativity among the Nigerian youth?
4. In what ways do Nigerian youth perceive and respond to media negativity, including biased narratives, misinformation, and harmful content?

Literature Review

Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

Critical thinking involves knowing one's biases and assumptions when encountering information. It requires applying consistent standards when evaluating sources. In essence, it is the ability to think logically and objectively. Thus, critical thinking can be defined as the ability to analyse and evaluate information objectively and rationally; it is a fundamental skill for navigating the information-saturated digital age (Paul & Elder, 2008). In other words, critical thinking is a valuable skill that effectively analyses information and forms informed judgments (Aduloju, 2020). Critical thinking is universal and applicable in various aspects of life, including communication and media studies. It is essential to analyse media content because of the following features:

- i. Crucial for the economy: It helps individuals make informed decisions, contributing to economic growth.
- ii. Essential for improving language and presentation skills: Clear thinking leads to effective communication.
- iii. Promotes creativity: Critical thinkers see the bigger picture by connecting logical ideas.
- iv. Facilitates self-reflection: It encourages introspection and personal growth.
- v. Forms the basis of science and democracy: Rigorous analysis drives progress and informed decision-making (Coursera, 2023).

These qualities help critical thinkers analyse information, question biases, and form informed judgments. Hence, Nigerian youth can benefit from enhancing their critical thinking skills to discern between reliable information and harmful media content. In short, critical thinking involves being objective, considering multiple perspectives, and making informed choices.

Media and information literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in various forms (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993). Media and information literacy are sometimes conceptualised to address the negative dimensions of media, including media manipulation, misinformation, gender (Aquilina and Susana de 2017), racial

stereotypes and violence, the sexualisation of children, and concern about loss of privacy, cyberbullying, and Internet predators (Frau-Meigs, 2008). In today's *Infomedia* (Aduloju, 2020), MIL goes beyond traditional literacy skills (reading and writing) and emphasises a critical approach to media content. It recognises that learning happens inside and outside the classroom through information, media, and technology (Aduloju, 2022). MIL enables people to question critically what they encounter—whether it is news articles, social media posts, or online content.

The critical competencies within MIL include:

- i. Search and evaluation: This competency includes Finding reliable information and assessing its credibility.
- ii. Digital literacy: This enables individuals to understand how to navigate digital platforms.
- iii. Ethical awareness involves grasping the ethical implications of accessing and using information.
- iv. Promoting equality and free expression: With this competency, the individual can engage with media and ICTs to foster dialogue and understanding (UNESCO, 2023).

Equally, the European Audio-visual Observatory (2016) points out that media and information literacy programmes emphasise these components:

1. *Critical thinking*: This involves identifying various media content types and assessing content for truthfulness, reliability, and value; identifying and managing online security and safety risks; understanding how the media industry operates and how media messages are constructed; and questioning the motivations of content producers to make informed choices about content selection and use;
2. *Creativity*: developing competencies through building and generating, producing and creating media content, often through cooperation;
3. *Intercultural dialogue*: practices of human communication, empathy, and social interaction techniques, such as those that oppose hate speech, violent extremism, and radicalisation;
4. *Media skills*: the capability to search, find, navigate, and use media content and services effectively;

5. *Participation and civic engagement*: active engagement with the media in ways that promote fundamental human rights and democratic involvement in the social, cultural, artistic, and economic spheres of society.

MIL gives people the means to enhance their receptive media skills, enabling them to evaluate messages critically. It also allows them to expand their media experiences and fosters their generative media skills, boosting their creative ability to create original media messages (Heidi, 2017). The author, goal, and point of view may be identified, genres and construction methods can be examined, media representation patterns can be examined, and bias, censorship, and propaganda in news and public affairs programmes can be found by applying critical thinking and media literacy skills.

From the preceding, critical thinking and media literacy skills are essential for navigating the complexities of the media landscape, particularly in identifying biased or misleading information. Together, these competencies enable individuals to engage with media content critically, discerning biases, misinformation, violence, X-rated content, and propaganda. When applied to media literacy, critical thinking helps individuals evaluate news sources, recognise misinformation, and navigate the digital landscape appropriately and wisely. This means that the intersection of critical thinking and media and information literacy plays a crucial role in detecting fake news and combating media negativity, especially among Nigerian youth. More so, the research conducted by Adegaju and Idowu (2019) highlights the importance of integrating critical thinking, media, and information literacy into the Nigerian curriculum. They argue that such educational initiatives should equip youth with the skills to critically evaluate and resist manipulations and other harmful media content. By fostering critical thinking and MIL skills among young people in Nigeria, they can: a) Verify information, Scrutinise news sources, and fact-check claims. b) Combat misinformation: Recognise emotional language and biased narratives. c) Promote media literacy: Encourage peers to think critically about the content they consume before sharing it with family and friends.

Media Negativity and its Impact on Youth

Media negativity encompasses various forms of biased, fake news, misinformation, sensationalised or misleading content, violence, and X-rated content, which are prevalent on traditional and digital media platforms (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Exposure to harmful media content can influence Nigerian youth's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Akinseye & Olanipekun, 2020). Furthermore, studies have suggested that repeated exposure to negative media can contribute to desensitisation and emotional distress among youth (Ijaduola & Ogunyemi, 2021). Aduloju (2021) also points out that exposure to mis- and disinformation and other harmful media content often happens every day in Nigeria, specifically using social media platforms and mobile apps. Thus, social media platforms have become potential drivers that provide direct access to unprecedented content and increase misinformation, fake news, rumours, and questionable information. Avowing this, Silverman (2016) argues that some fake news stories were more widely circulated on social media than the most popular real news stories (cited in Jones-Jang, Mortensen & Liu, 2019). The impact in this context, according to Aduloju (2021), is potentially more precarious and riskier as it can engineer crisis, fear, and panic, which may degenerate into conflict, insecurity in the nation, mental illness, and even death.

Despite the potential adverse effects, research indicates that Nigerian youth often lack the critical skills to effectively discern and resist media negativity (Ogunyemi & Ogunyemi, 2020). An empirical study conducted by Ijaduola and Ogunyemi (2021) examined the impact of negative media portrayal on Nigerian adolescents' social behaviour. It revealed a significant association between exposure to harmful media content and adverse social outcomes among youth.

Thus, as Nigeria rises to curtail the negative impact of media negativity on her citizens, particularly in an era of media proliferation, Pate (2018) proposes that media literacy should increase the education and media and information literacy competencies among Nigerian young people. This will make them overly critical of the information they receive from conventional and social media platforms. In the same vein, the Global UNESCO-led MIL Alliance (GAPMIL) states that to stop the spread of misinformation, control the information fog, and better focus on developing healthy media and information environments for all, media and information literacy is vital for all citizens (UNESCO, 2013). The ability to critically manage and engage

with information, particularly in the current age, will aid young people in detecting harmful media content. In addition, MIL can help people progress toward positive values such as solidarity, generosity, and togetherness. In other words, for individuals to be better able to curtail and detect media negativity in Nigeria, MIL becomes necessary (Aduloju, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory

The cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in the 1960s, holds that people's views of social reality are shaped by repeated exposure to media material (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). The proponents state that at its core, cultivation theory posits that prolonged exposure to media content, particularly television, gradually shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality, leading them to adopt the beliefs, values, and attitudes portrayed in media messages (Gerbner et al., 1980). According to Potter (2014), the theory offers a framework for comprehending how people's media consumption habits impact their perception and understanding of the outside world in the context of the avalanche of media messages they are opened to in the current digital era. Thus, this theory highlights the value of critical thinking, scepticism, and well-informed decision-making in an era of unparalleled media saturation. It discusses its implications for the Nigerian educational curriculum's media and information literacy instruction.

Fundamental to the cultivation theory is the idea of "cultivation differential," or the difference between the perspectives of heavy and light media users. According to Gerbner and Gross, people who watch much television, especially those that are of genres containing violence and sensationalism, violent and sensationalistic, are more prone to believe that the world is a dangerous and unfriendly place. Known as "mean world syndrome," this phenomenon highlights how media exposure shapes people's perceptions of risk, danger, fear, and social norms (Gerbner et al., 1980).

However, empirical research on cultivation theory has provided mixed findings, with some studies supporting its hypotheses and others challenging its assumptions (Buckingham, 2003). While early studies found a positive correlation between television viewing and perceptions of a

violent world, subsequent research has expanded the scope of cultivation theory to include other media platforms such as social media, video games, and online news (Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone & Third, 2017). Moreover, studies have highlighted the role of individual differences, contextual factors, and media and information literacy interventions in mitigating the effects of cultivation (Livingstone & Third, 2017). Thus, this theory is relevant to this study since critical thinking and media and information literacy skills can empower Nigerian youth to critically analyse and evaluate media messages, enabling them to detect harmful media content. This will enhance their ability to navigate the mediated landscape effectively. Cultivation theory offers valuable insights into the relationship between media exposure and individuals' perceptions of reality, underlining the importance of critical thinking and media and information literacy in an increasingly mediated world.

Methodology

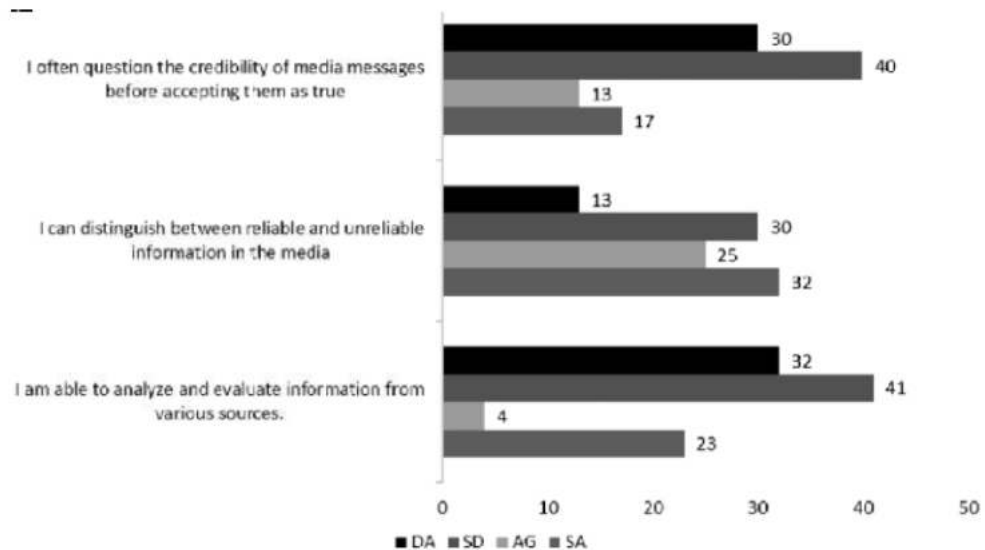
This study used a quantitative survey approach and gathered information using a structured questionnaire as the instrument to evaluate participants' critical thinking abilities, MIL competencies, and media negativity detection skills. The participants consisted of 600 Nigerian youth aged between 15 and 25 years. It employed a stratified sampling technique to ensure adequate representation of the demographic group from the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. For equal representation, 100 respondents were selected from each of the geopolitical zones, which include North Central (NC), North East (NE), North West (NW), South West (SW), South East (SE), and South (SS). The copies of the questionnaire were administered, physically through research assistants, electronically using online platforms and mobile applications, to ensure efficient data collection from the participants. Six hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered, of which 535, forming 89.5% response rate, were correctly retrieved and used for the study. The data collected from the respondents was presented and analysed to examine the relationships between critical thinking skills, MIL competencies, and the detection of media negativity among Nigerian youth.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data gathered for this study is presented and analysed based on the research questions.

RQ 1: What is the level of critical thinking skills among Nigerian youth, and how do these skills influence their ability to analyse and evaluate media content for negativity?

Fig. 1: Level of critical thinking of the Nigerian youth

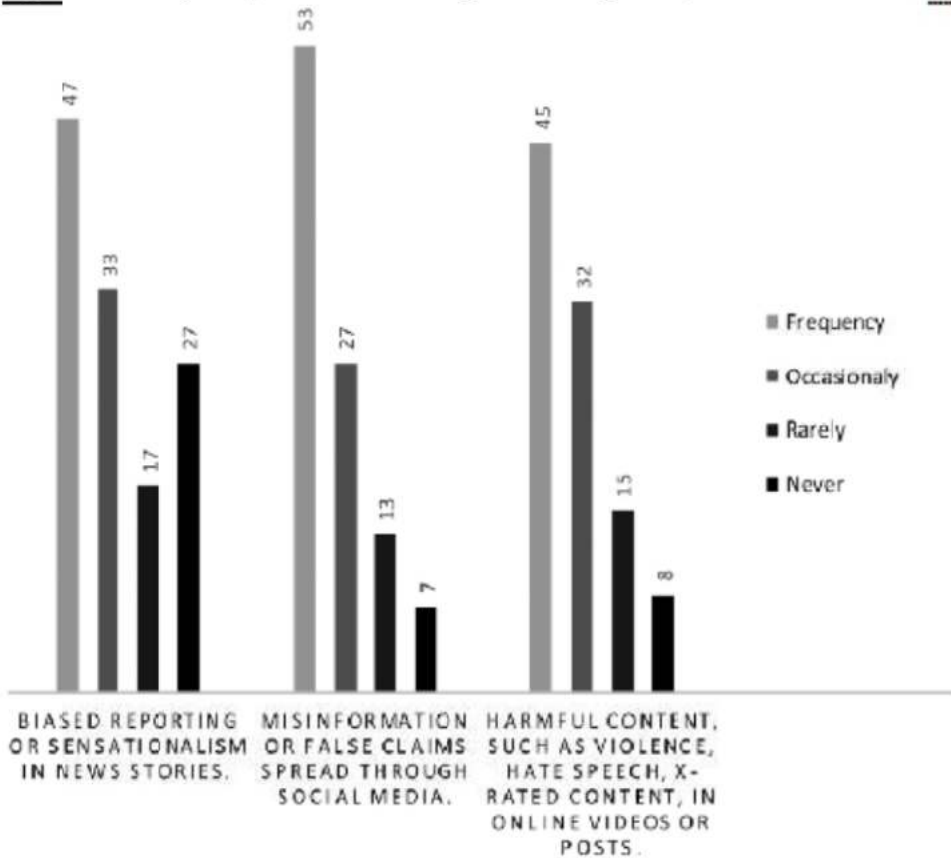


Source: Field Survey (2024)

The data in Figure 1 shows that most respondents (73%) disagree or strongly disagree that they can analyse and evaluate information from various sources, indicating low confidence in their critical thinking skills. However, a significant proportion of respondents (57%) agree or strongly agree that they can distinguish between reliable and unreliable information in the media, which suggests a moderate level of confidence in their ability to discern the credibility of information. Nevertheless, most respondents (70%) disagree or strongly disagree that they often question the credibility of media messages before accepting them as genuine. The results reveal that Nigerian youth's low critical thinking skills contribute to their inability to analyse and evaluate media content from different sources.

RQ 2: How frequently do Nigerian youth encounter media negativity?

Figure 2: Frequency of encountering media negativity

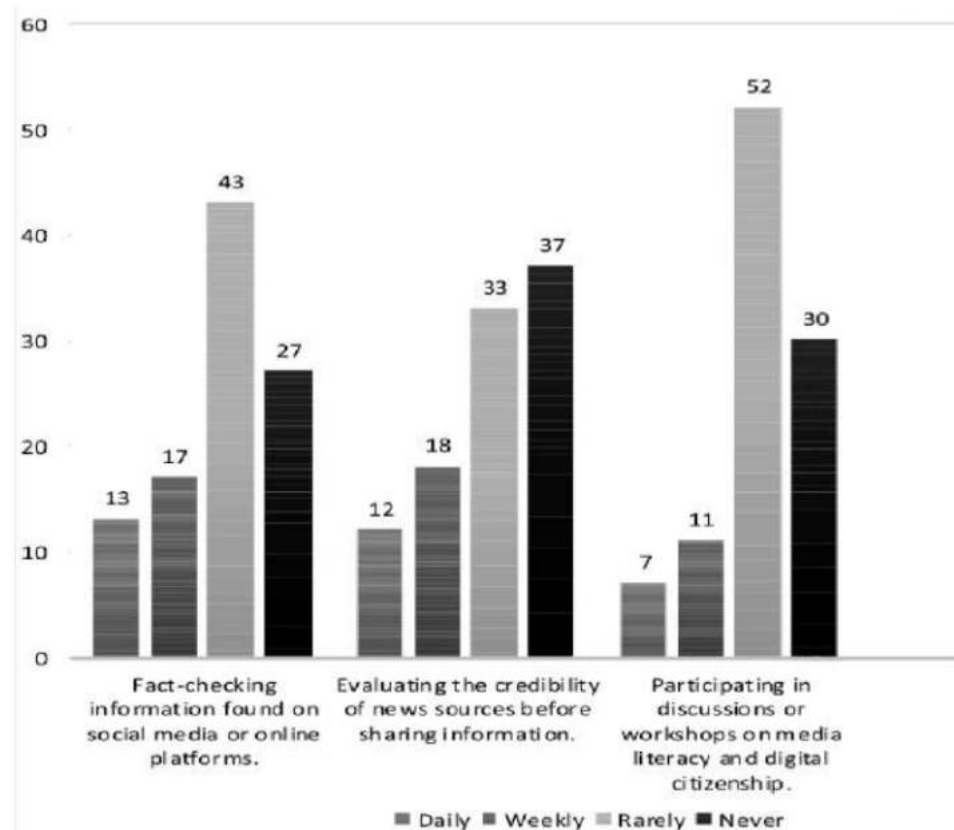


Source: Field Survey (2024)

The data reveals that Nigerian youth frequently encounter various forms of media negativity, with misinformation and biased reporting content being the most prevalent. Most respondents, 53% and 47%, frequently encounter these. Nonetheless, 45% of the respondents frequently encounter harmful content.

RQ 3: What is the frequency of engagement with MIL skills in detecting media negativity among the Nigerian youth?

Figure 3: Frequency of engagement with MIL skills activities

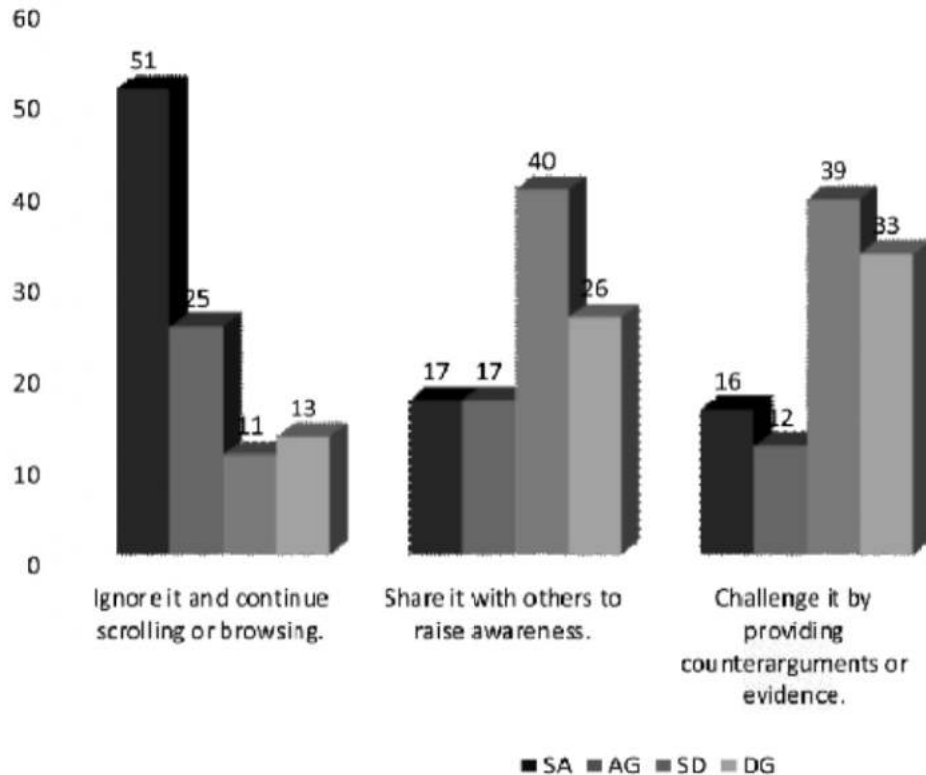


Source: Field Survey (2024)

The data above indicates that the majority of the respondents, 70% and 82%, rarely or never engage in MIL activities such as fact-checking information, evaluating news sources, and participating in discussions, while only 30% and 18% engage in reporting daily or weekly participation.

RQ 4: In what ways do Nigerian youth respond to media negativity, including biased narratives, misinformation, and harmful content?

Figure 4: Response when encountering media negativity



Source: Field Survey (2024)

The most common response to media negativity among Nigerian youth is to ignore it and continue scrolling or browsing, with 76% of the respondents agreeing strongly or agreeing. 66% of the respondents disagree and strongly disagree that they share it with others to raise awareness, and 72% disagree and strongly disagree that they respond to media negativity by challenging it by providing counterarguments or evidence.

The results presented and analysed above highlighted the significance of critical thinking and MIL skills in empowering the Nigerian youth to detect

and respond appropriately and critically whenever they encounter media negativity.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study provide valuable insights into critical thinking skills, media and information literacy (MIL) competencies, and the detection of media negativity among Nigerian youth in the digital age. These insights shed light on youth engagement with media content and their ability to critically evaluate information in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The data indicate a generally low outlook regarding critical thinking skills and MIL competencies among Nigerian youth. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, most respondents (73%) express low confidence in their ability to analyse and evaluate information from various sources. Additionally, 70% of the respondents said they only question the credibility of media messages after acceptance. This result establishes that most Nigerian youth still need to gain critical thinking and media and information literacy skills to engage critically with media content. Meanwhile, 57% of the respondents who agree and strongly agree that they could distinguish reliable content from unreliable content suggests that although youth possess a foundational skill set, they do not necessarily possess critical thinking skills for discerning the credibility of media messages and making informed judgments. These findings agree with the position of Aduloju (2020) that critical thinking is a valuable skill that allows one to analyse information and make informed judgments effectively.

The frequency of MIL activities among Nigerian youth could be more encouraging, with the majority not reporting regular engagement in fact-checking, evaluating the credibility of news sources, and participating in discussions or workshops on media literacy and digital citizenship. This indicates a non-proactive effort among youth to engage with the media messages. For instance, most respondents, 70% and 82%, seldomly or never, respectively, engage in MIL activities such as fact-checking information, evaluating news sources, and participating in discussions. In comparison, only 30% and 18% of the respondents engage in daily reporting or weekly participation in discussions. This result shows a need to enhance young people's ability to actively navigate the digital media landscape responsibly. The data also underscore the importance of integrating MIL education into curricula to further develop these competencies among youth.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that Nigerian youth frequently encounter various forms of media negativity, including biased reporting, misinformation, and harmful content. As shown in Figure 2, 53% and 47% frequently encounter misinformation and biased reporting content, and 45% frequently encounter harmful content. The findings also show that despite the frequent exposure to media negativity, the most common response among most respondents (76%) is to ignore it and continue scrolling or browsing. This passive response signals the importance of fostering proactive engagement with media content and empowering youth to challenge misinformation, harmful narratives, and other negative information. Again, this study's findings attest to Heidi (2017), who states that MIL gives people the means to enhance their receptive media skills, enabling them to evaluate messages critically. It also allows them to expand their media experiences and fosters their generative media skills, boosting their creative ability to create original media messages.

No doubt, the findings of this study have several consequences for education generally, for the development of media and information literacy initiatives, and youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria. In other words, there is a clear need to prioritise integrating critical thinking and MIL skills into educational curricula at all levels to equip young people with the tools necessary to navigate the digital media landscape effectively. Additionally, media literacy initiatives should promote proactive engagement with media content, foster critical inquiry, and empower youth to detect negative narratives from the media. Furthermore, the collaboration between government, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and media stakeholders is essential to develop comprehensive strategies that address the challenges of media negativity and promote responsible media consumption among Nigerian youth in the digital age.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the position of critical thinking and media and information literacy in empowering Nigerian youth to navigate the digital media landscape and detect media negativity effectively. The nexus between these constructs is pivotal in empowering youth to navigate the complex media landscape, detect negativity, and critically engage with media content. Of course, this study revealed that while some Nigerian youth possess a baseline level of critical thinking and

MIL skills, there is still ample room for improvement, particularly among the majority who still lack the skills. Moreover, the positive correlation between critical thinking and MIL skills emphasises the need for integrated education and intervention approaches that simultaneously address both domains. By fostering critical inquiry, promoting MIL competencies, and encouraging proactive engagement with media content, stakeholders can empower youth to become active, critical, informed, responsible, and engaged citizens in the digital age.

Recommendations

1. **Integration of Critical Thinking and MIL in Schools:** Educational institutions should prioritise integrating critical thinking and MIL skills into formal curricula at all levels of education. This integration can be achieved by developing specialised courses, workshops, and educational materials that promote critical inquiry and media literacy among students.
2. **Professional Development for Educators:** Teachers play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking and MIL skills among youth. Therefore, professional development programmes should enhance educators' capacity to integrate critical thinking and media literacy education into their teaching practices.
3. **Community Engagement and Outreach:** Community-based initiatives and outreach programmes should be established to promote media and information literacy and critical thinking skills among Nigerian youth. These initiatives can include workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns that raise awareness about media negativity and provide practical strategies for navigating the digital media landscape.
4. **Research and Evaluation:** Continued research and evaluation are essential for assessing the efficacy of interventions to enhance critical thinking and MIL skills among Nigerian youth.
5. **Policy Development:** Policymakers should prioritise developing and implementing policies that support the development of MIL and critical thinking skills in schools and communities. These policies should be informed by evidence-based research and designed to promote a culture of critical inquiry and informed media consumption.



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