



Original Research Paper

ICT for children: The continuous need for media literacy

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ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in children's lives necessitates a continuous emphasis on media literacy. As digital environments become intrinsic to education, entertainment, and social interaction, children are exposed to vast amounts of content, unfiltered, complex, and often harmful. This paper explores the imperative role of media literacy in equipping children with critical thinking skills to experience the digital landscape responsibly. By analyzing contemporary challenges, including misinformation, cyberbullying, and digital addiction, this study highlights how media literacy fosters cognitive resilience and ethical engagement online. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the role of educators, parents, and policymakers in furthering a collaborative approach to digital education. Media literacy is positioned not as a singular skill but as an evolving competency, integral to ensuring children's empowerment and safety. The findings show that there is an urgent need for structured media literacy programs, tailored to the cognitive and emotional development of children, to mitigate risks and harness the opportunities presented by ICT. We also recommend that children's use of ICT should be kept as minimal as possible.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of Information and Communication Technologies into daily life has created a digital environment that offers both opportunities and challenges for children. Media literacy, defined as the ability to critically analyze and responsibly engage with media content, emerges as a vital competency for navigating this complex landscape

(Livingstone, 2018). Recent research has highlighted that even highly educated individuals often lack sufficient knowledge of ethical guidelines in academic and information consumption. This gap in understanding emphasizes the critical need for media literacy education from an early age (Sabbar, Masoomifar & Mohammadi, 2019). With unfiltered access to vast quantities of information, children are

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increasingly exposed to misinformation, cyberbullying, and addictive digital behaviors. Media literacy serves as a protective shield, equipping children with the tools to discern credible sources, question digital narratives, and make ethical decisions online. As ICT becomes more pervasive, furthering media literacy is no longer optional but a necessity for safeguarding the well-being of young digital citizens.

One of the critical challenges that media literacy addresses is the prevalence of misinformation in the digital sphere. Social media platforms and online content often lack rigorous editorial oversight, making it easier for false information to proliferate. Children, whose cognitive development makes them particularly susceptible to persuasion, are at risk of accepting misleading content at face value. Media literacy education helps children develop critical thinking skills to evaluate the credibility of information, identify biases, and cross-check facts. For instance, teaching children to recognize markers of trustworthy sources, such as citations and reputable authorship, can significantly reduce the spread and influence of misinformation (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). This competency not only protects individual children but also contributes to a more informed and resilient digital community.

Another pressing concern is cyberbullying, a phenomenon exacerbated by the anonymity and reach of digital platforms. Studies indicate that cyberbullying can lead to severe psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Kowalski et al., 2014). Media literacy enables children to recognize harmful behaviors online and understand the implications of their own digital actions. Through guided discussions and role-playing scenarios, children can learn to empathize with peers and make ethical decisions that prevent harm. Moreover, media literacy fosters self-regulation and constructive communication, equipping children with the skills to manage conflicts and report abuse effectively.

Digital addiction is another area where media literacy proves indispensable. Excessive screen time, particularly on platforms designed to exploit users' attention, can disrupt children's emotional and cognitive development (Anderson, 2018). Media literacy education encourages mindfulness in digital consumption by promoting an understanding of

persuasive design and the psychological mechanisms behind digital addiction. By teaching children to set boundaries, prioritize offline interactions, and balance their use of technology, media literacy supports healthier digital habits.

Implementing media literacy as a shield requires a collaborative effort among educators, parents, and policymakers. Schools should integrate media literacy into curricula, providing age-appropriate resources that address the evolving challenges of the digital world (Hobbs, 2017). Parents must also play an active role, modeling responsible digital behaviors and engaging in open dialogues about online experiences. Policymakers, meanwhile, must prioritize media literacy at a systemic level, ensuring that educational frameworks and public campaigns address its importance. Only through such complicated approaches can media literacy achieve its potential as a robust defense against the myriad challenges children face in digital environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology to examine the evolving necessity of media literacy as a critical skill for children navigating the digital age. It systematically synthesizes existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and documented practices to explore how media literacy can address challenges such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and digital addiction. The research relies on an extensive review of scholarly articles, policy reports, and educational resources, chosen for their relevance and methodological rigor. This analysis identifies patterns, gaps, and themes related to the efficacy of media literacy in mitigating risks and fostering resilience among children. The study integrates established theoretical frameworks, including critical media literacy, developmental psychology, and digital pedagogy, to analyze how media literacy can be tailored to the cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of children's developmental stages and digital interactions.

The findings are further informed by documented case studies and exemplars of media literacy initiatives, such as co-viewing practices, classroom interventions, and policy-driven efforts. These examples illustrate practical applications,

highlighting their successes, limitations, and adaptability to diverse contexts. The insights from the literature review, theoretical exploration, and case studies are synthesized to propose a reconceptualized view of media literacy as an evolving competency that adapts to the dynamic nature of digital environments. Actionable recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers are also developed to promote a collaborative approach to media literacy education, addressing the developmental and contextual needs of children.

Reconceptualizing Media Literacy: An Evolutionary Competency for Children

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and the pervasive integration of Information and Communication Technologies into daily life have significantly transformed the way children interact with the world. This change highlights the need to reconceptualize media literacy, not merely as a fixed skill set, but as an evolving competency that adapts to the changing demands of the digital age. Since children encounter increasingly complex media environments, media literacy must grow beyond its traditional focus on content analysis and creation to encompass the multifaceted challenges posed by misinformation, ethical dilemmas, algorithmic bias, and psychological impacts. Viewing media literacy as an evolutionary competency allows for a flexible and forward-looking framework, essential for preparing children to handle the complexities of an ever-changing digital landscape (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021; Sousa & Costa, 2022; Kaiser et al., 2024).

At its core, media literacy involves the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a critical and responsible manner. Historically, these skills were sufficient for work in static or predictable media environments such as television, print media, or radio. However, the proliferation of digital technologies has rendered traditional definitions of

media literacy inadequate. Studies have shown that international media outlets often frame health crises differently based on geopolitical considerations. For instance, analysis of Western media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed systematic differences in how health information was presented for different regions and countries (Kharazmi & Mohammadi, 2020). In digital spaces, children are not passive consumers but active participants who contribute to and shape their media environments. They interact with algorithms, personalize content, and engage in online communities, often without fully understanding the implications of their actions. These interactions necessitate a reconceptualized approach to media literacy, one that equips children with the cognitive and ethical tools to engage responsibly and critically in a dynamic and unpredictable media landscape (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

An evolutionary model of media literacy recognizes that children's interactions with media are shaped by their developmental stages. Younger children may struggle to distinguish between advertisements and genuine content or may not fully grasp the persuasive intent of media messages. Adolescents, on the other hand, may be more aware of these distinctions but are often more vulnerable to social pressures and misinformation due to their increased reliance on peer validation and identity exploration. Media literacy must therefore be tailored to the cognitive, emotional, and social developmental needs of children at different ages, evolving alongside their growth to address their changing vulnerabilities and capacities (Cho et al., 2024).

One of the defining characteristics of the digital era is the constant influx of information, much of it unverified or deliberately misleading. Misinformation is not only prevalent but also increasingly sophisticated, often leveraging algorithms to spread rapidly and evade detection. An

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evolutionary approach to media literacy requires children to develop advanced critical thinking skills, such as recognizing biases, identifying credible sources, and understanding the role of algorithms in shaping the content they see. Beyond critical thinking, children must also cultivate resilience to misinformation by developing habits of inquiry and skepticism. These skills are not static but require continuous reinforcement and adaptation as new forms of misinformation emerge, such as deepfakes and AI-generated content.

Ethical engagement is another crucial component of reconceptualized media literacy. As children participate in digital communities, they encounter ethical dilemmas ranging from privacy concerns to the potential consequences of their online interactions. For example, sharing seemingly innocuous content may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or contribute to harmful narratives. Teaching children to navigate these dilemmas requires a nuanced understanding of ethical principles and their application in digital contexts. This includes fostering empathy, accountability, and a sense of digital citizenship, enabling children to consider the broader impact of their actions on themselves and their communities.

The role of algorithms in shaping digital experiences further complicates the media landscape. Algorithms influence what content is prioritized, recommended, or suppressed, often creating echo chambers or reinforcing biases. Children may not fully understand how algorithms operate or how their digital footprints influence the content they encounter. An evolutionary approach to media literacy empowers children to recognize these mechanisms and question their effects. For instance, children should learn to identify when algorithms are steering their attention toward sensational or polarizing content and develop strategies to counteract these influences, such as seeking diverse perspectives or diversifying their media consumption.

Digital media also presents significant psychological challenges, including the potential for addiction, reduced attention spans, and heightened anxiety due to constant connectivity. An evolutionary model of media literacy addresses these challenges by promoting self-regulation and mindful media consumption. Children must learn to set boundaries, prioritize offline activities, and recognize when

media use is interfering with their well-being. This involves not only individual responsibility but also structural changes, such as advocating for design practices that prioritize user well-being over engagement metrics (Sun & Zhang, 2021).

The reconceptualization of media literacy as an evolutionary competency also demands a shift in how it is taught. Traditional didactic methods are insufficient for preparing children to navigate dynamic and interactive media environments. Instead, media literacy education should adopt experiential and inquiry-based approaches that encourage active engagement, critical reflection, and problem-solving. For example, children could participate in projects that analyze real-world media examples, collaborate on creating ethical media campaigns, or simulate scenarios where they must navigate ethical dilemmas. These activities not only reinforce media literacy skills but also foster a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of digital ecosystems (Koltay, 2011).

Moreover, the implementation of media literacy education must extend beyond schools to include families, communities, and policymakers. Parents play a crucial role in modeling media literacy behaviors and facilitating open discussions about digital experiences. Communities can provide opportunities for collaborative learning and mentorship, while policymakers can establish frameworks that ensure media literacy is integrated into national education systems. This multi-stakeholder approach ensures that media literacy is not relegated to a single domain but is recognized as a shared responsibility across society.

The global nature of digital media further reveals the need for an evolutionary approach to media literacy. Children are not only consumers of local content but also participants in global conversations. This requires an awareness of cultural differences, global power dynamics, and the ethical implications of digital participation on a worldwide scale. For instance, children must learn to recognize and challenge digital colonialism, where content from dominant cultures overshadows or marginalizes local narratives. By fostering global awareness, media literacy can empower children to participate in digital spaces in ways that are inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive (Diergarten, 2017). Similar challenges have been observed in higher education

during the COVID-19 pandemic, where institutions like the University of Tehran had to balance technical support with emotional well-being, highlighting the complexity of adapting to global digital shifts (Mohammadi & Kharazmi, 2021).

All and all, anyway, reconceptualizing media literacy as an evolutionary competency acknowledges the unpredictability of technological advancements. Emerging technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence will introduce new forms of media that challenge existing frameworks of understanding. Media literacy must therefore remain adaptable, incorporating new knowledge and skills as technologies evolve. This requires a commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring that children are not only prepared for the media environments they currently inhabit but also equipped to navigate those of the future.

Digital Safety through Critical Thinking: Media Literacy for Young Minds

We are witnessing great changes in our societies due to digital integration, and we can see children are growing up immersed in a digital ecosystem that shapes their learning, socialization, and entertainment. While the internet and digital tools offer vast opportunities, they also introduce significant risks. Among these challenges are exposure to misinformation, cyberbullying, online scams, and addictive technologies that can impair emotional, cognitive, and social development. To navigate these challenges effectively, fostering critical thinking through media literacy has become a cornerstone for ensuring digital safety for young minds.

Critical thinking, the ability to analyze and evaluate information objectively, has become essential in an age of ubiquitous information. Digital platforms often blur the lines between credible and dubious content, inundating users—especially

children—with information that may be manipulative, false, or harmful. Critical thinking empowers children to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, evaluate the intent behind online content, and make informed decisions. For children, who may lack the maturity and experience to recognize and resist deceptive or harmful digital phenomena, developing this skill is paramount.

The rise of fake news, clickbait headlines, and algorithmically tailored misinformation underscores the urgency of embedding critical thinking into digital education. Children exposed to such content without the tools to discern its validity are at risk of forming misconceptions or adopting harmful behaviors. Media literacy, therefore, serves as a framework to instill critical thinking skills by teaching children to question the credibility of sources, recognize bias, and understand the motivations behind digital content creation (Lestari & Mutia, 2023).

One of the primary risks children face in the digital world is misinformation—false or misleading information presented as fact. Even more concerning is disinformation, which involves the deliberate spread of false information to manipulate opinions or behaviors. Both phenomena are rampant on social media, video platforms, and even educational websites, where algorithms prioritize sensationalism over accuracy.

Media literacy programs tailored for children can provide practical tools to combat these challenges. For example, children can be taught to verify information by cross-referencing multiple sources, recognize emotionally charged language designed to provoke reactions, and differentiate between opinion and evidence-based reporting. Encouraging children to ask fundamental questions, such as “Who created this content?” and “What is their purpose?” instills a habit of skepticism that is essential for navigating the digital landscape responsibly.

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Furthermore, critical thinking in this context extends beyond recognizing false information; it also involves understanding the broader implications of sharing unverified content. Children must learn that spreading misinformation can have real-world consequences, from perpetuating harmful stereotypes to influencing societal decisions. This understanding fosters a sense of accountability and ethical responsibility in their digital interactions (Loos & Ivan, 2023).

Cyberbullying and online harassment represent another significant threat to children's digital safety. The anonymity afforded by digital platforms often emboldens individuals to engage in harmful behaviors, such as sending threatening messages, spreading rumors, or excluding others from online communities. For children, who are still developing their emotional resilience, such experiences can lead to severe psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Shahghasemi, Karami & Rabiei, 2017).

Critical thinking plays a vital role in equipping children to recognize and respond to cyberbullying. Media literacy education can help children identify the signs of online harassment, whether directed at themselves or others, and understand the importance of seeking help from trusted adults. Moreover, by empowering empathy and ethical awareness, media literacy can discourage children from engaging in bullying behaviors themselves. Teaching children to reflect on how their online actions impact others cultivates a culture of respect and kindness, even in digital spaces.

Additionally, critical thinking helps children evaluate the credibility of messages or comments they encounter online. A hurtful comment from a peer, for example, may carry less weight when children learn to consider the underlying motivations of the bully, such as insecurity or a desire for attention. By reframing such interactions, children can mitigate the emotional harm caused by cyberbullying and develop strategies to protect their mental well-being.

The pervasive nature of ICT and its integration into every aspect of children's lives have led to growing concerns about digital addiction. Platforms are designed to capture and hold attention, using features such as endless scrolling, notifications, and gamified rewards to keep users engaged. For

children, whose self-regulation skills are still developing, these mechanisms can lead to excessive screen time, disrupted sleep patterns, and reduced engagement in offline activities.

Critical thinking provides a pathway to addressing these issues by helping children understand the persuasive design tactics employed by digital platforms. Media literacy programs can teach children to recognize how algorithms and design features are intentionally crafted to encourage prolonged use. By understanding these mechanisms, children are better equipped to make conscious decisions about their screen time, setting boundaries and prioritizing activities that promote holistic well-being.

Moreover, teaching critical thinking encourages children to evaluate the quality of their digital interactions. For instance, they can learn to differentiate between passive consumption, such as binge-watching videos, and active engagement, such as creating content or participating in educational activities. This awareness helps children allocate their time more effectively, ensuring that their digital experiences contribute positively to their growth and development.

Beyond protecting themselves from risks, children must also learn to contribute positively to the digital ecosystem. Ethical digital engagement, which includes respecting others' rights, acknowledging intellectual property, and considering the societal impact of online actions, is a critical aspect of media literacy. Critical thinking serves as the foundation for developing these ethical competencies.

For example, children can be taught to reflect on the potential consequences of their online behavior, such as the impact of posting a comment, sharing an image, or participating in a trend. By considering how their actions affect others, they develop a sense of accountability and social responsibility. Additionally, media literacy programs can emphasize the importance of privacy and consent, teaching children to recognize the boundaries of what is appropriate to share and respect others' preferences.

Ethical digital engagement also involves addressing broader societal issues, such as inclusivity and diversity in digital spaces. Media literacy can encourage children to challenge

stereotypes, appreciate diverse perspectives, and advocate for positive change online. By fostering these values, critical thinking not only ensures children's safety but also empowers them to become responsible and compassionate digital citizens.

As we previously emphasized, instilling critical thinking and media literacy in children requires a collaborative effort involving parents, educators, and policymakers. Parents play a crucial role by modeling healthy digital habits, engaging in open conversations about online experiences, and providing guidance on navigating risks. Educators, on the other hand, can integrate media literacy into curricula, creating structured opportunities for children to practice critical thinking in real-world contexts.

Policymakers also have a responsibility to support media literacy initiatives through funding, research, and the development of national standards. Governments should prioritize media literacy as a fundamental aspect of education, and ensure that children across diverse socio-economic backgrounds have access to the tools they need to thrive in the digital age.

Social Media Is Bad for You Kido!

As previously mentioned, one important aspect of media literacy teaching to children is that we tell them what mental consequences using social media have for them. Social media has become an omnipresent aspect of modern childhood, influencing how young people perceive themselves, others, and the world around them. While digital platforms offer opportunities for communication, learning, and entertainment, their pervasive nature has also led to significant psychological and emotional challenges for children. One of the most concerning consequences of social media exposure is its impact on children's overall satisfaction with life. Through mechanisms such as comparison, validation seeking, and exposure to unrealistic ideals, social

media creates environments that can erode self-esteem, intensify feelings of inadequacy, and foster dissatisfaction with life.

The phenomenon of social comparison is one of the primary ways in which social media contributes to children's dissatisfaction. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat inundate users with images and videos that often depict an idealized version of reality. For children and adolescents, whose self-concepts are still developing, these images can create a skewed perception of what constitutes success, beauty, and happiness. Many children compare their own lives to the curated content they see online, leading to feelings of inadequacy. They may feel that their lives are less exciting or meaningful than those of their peers, celebrities, or influencers. This constant comparison can distort their self-image and lower their self-esteem, resulting in a diminished sense of life satisfaction (Dinh & Lee, 2022).

Another significant factor is the way social media platforms encourage validation seeking. The design of these platforms relies heavily on metrics such as likes, shares, and comments to provide feedback on content. For children, these metrics can become a measure of self-worth. The desire for social validation can drive them to post content with the primary goal of gaining approval from their peers or online communities. When a post does not receive the expected level of attention, children may interpret this as a personal failure or a reflection of their inadequacy. Over time, this external dependence on validation can make children more vulnerable to feelings of rejection and worthlessness, further exacerbating dissatisfaction with their lives.

In addition to fostering harmful comparisons and validation-seeking behaviors, social media exposes children to unrealistic societal standards. Whether it is beauty standards perpetuated by influencers or the illusion of perpetual happiness promoted by curated content, these ideals can set unattainable

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expectations for children. As they strive to emulate these standards, they often experience frustration and disappointment when reality falls short. This disconnect between their aspirations and their lived experiences can foster a sense of failure and dissatisfaction. For instance, many children develop body image issues after being exposed to highly edited and idealized images on social media. The pressure to conform to these unattainable standards can result in chronic dissatisfaction with their appearance and overall well-being.

Spina et al. (2022) conducted a scoping review to investigate the risks associated with social media use among children and adolescents, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a surge in media access and Internet use. The study highlights how platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were widely used for communication and educational continuity during lockdowns. However, the review emphasizes that excessive or problematic social media use poses significant risks to young individuals' well-being. Following PRISMA guidelines, the authors searched *PubMed* for studies involving social media, health, and pediatrics, identifying 68 relevant articles. Of these, 19 addressed depression, 15 diet-related concerns, and 15 psychological problems, marking these as the most commonly reported risks. Additional issues included sleep disturbances, addiction, anxiety, body image concerns, behavioral problems, online grooming, headaches, and dental caries. The authors advocate for greater awareness among healthcare providers, caregivers, and developers to mitigate these risks. Pediatricians are encouraged to recognize early warning signs of problematic social media use and work with families to prevent negative outcomes.

The addictive nature of social media further compounds its impact on children's mental health and life satisfaction. Social media platforms are designed to maximize user engagement through algorithms that promote endless scrolling and repetitive checking. This design can lead to excessive screen time, which often comes at the expense of face-to-face interactions, physical activity, and other enriching experiences. Over time, the overuse of social media can isolate children from their immediate surroundings, reduce their sense of connection with family and friends, and diminish the

quality of their relationships. As social connections and meaningful experiences play a critical role in life satisfaction, this erosion of real-world engagement can have profound negative effects on children's well-being. Al-Samarraie et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review to examine the causes, consequences, and prevention of social media addiction among young users. The study addresses the ongoing concern among platform developers, mental health experts, and policymakers regarding the escalating prevalence of problematic social media use. Utilizing the PRISMA protocol, the authors screened 45 studies that met eligibility criteria to provide a comprehensive overview of this phenomenon. Their findings classify the factors contributing to social media addiction into four categories: social, technological, behavioral, and mental.

Another crucial factor contributing to life dissatisfaction is the increased exposure to cyberbullying on social media platforms. Unlike traditional bullying, which is often limited to specific environments like school, cyberbullying can occur anytime and anywhere. Social media allows bullies to target their victims relentlessly, often with a broader audience. For children who are subjected to online harassment, the impact can be devastating, leading to anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness. The permanence of online content and the anonymity that social media provides can amplify the harm caused by cyberbullying. Over time, the psychological toll of such experiences can erode children's self-esteem and foster a deep sense of dissatisfaction with their lives.

Furthermore, social media can distort children's perceptions of time and priorities. As children spend more time engaging with content online, they may neglect essential aspects of their development, such as academic pursuits, hobbies, and family relationships. This displacement effect can lead to a lack of fulfillment in other areas of their lives. When children prioritize social media over activities that provide long-term satisfaction and growth, they may find themselves feeling empty and unaccomplished. The resulting imbalance can contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction as they struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

The portrayal of global crises and negative news on social media also contributes to children's

dissatisfaction. While it is important for young people to be informed, the constant exposure to distressing content—such as natural disasters, conflicts, or social injustices—can lead to feelings of hopelessness and anxiety. Children may feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of these issues and powerless to effect change, which can contribute to a pessimistic outlook on life. This exposure to global challenges, combined with the personal pressures they face online, can create a sense of emotional exhaustion that undermines their overall satisfaction with life.

Paradoxically, while social media can foster feelings of isolation, it often creates an illusion of connection. Children may accumulate numerous online friends or followers but lack meaningful relationships in their offline lives. This superficial form of interaction can leave them feeling lonely and disconnected, as digital connections rarely provide the depth and emotional support found in real-world friendships. Over time, the gap between their perceived and actual social connections can contribute to feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction.

Co-Viewing as Media Literacy

ICT has brought profound changes to the way children interact with the world. Among the many strategies proposed to address the challenges posed by this digital environment, co-viewing has emerged as a powerful tool. Co-viewing, or the practice of parents, caregivers, or educators consuming media alongside children, creates opportunities for guided interpretation, critical discussion, and shared learning. When paired with media literacy education, co-viewing becomes even more impactful, serving as a bridge to help children get through complex digital landscapes responsibly and thoughtfully. Understanding the role of co-viewing in fostering media literacy not only highlights its significance but also underscores the broader necessity of equipping

children with the critical skills needed to thrive in the digital age.

There is of-course research that do not coordinate with general research on co-viewing. For example, Paavonen et al. (2009) investigated the impact of parental co-viewing and discussions on television-induced fears in young children. Using a representative sample of 331 children aged 5–6 years, the study assessed family television viewing habits and the prevalence of TV-related fears, as reported by parents. While co-viewing has often been proposed as a strategy to mitigate negative media effects, the findings challenge this assumption in the context of children's fears. The study revealed that parental co-viewing and discussions were associated with higher rates of TV-related fears. These practices were more prevalent in families with high overall television exposure and in those where children viewed adult-oriented programs. Even after adjusting for variables such as gender, maternal education, family income, and television exposure (quantity and content), co-viewing and discussions significantly increased the likelihood of TV-related fears (adjusted odds ratios of 3.92 and 3.31, respectively). The authors suggest that co-viewing may occur more frequently in families where children are already exposed to potentially fear-inducing content, or that these interactions may unintentionally reinforce children's fears.

Anyway, we know well that co-viewing provides a shared experience that allows adults to introduce children to new perspectives on the media they consume. Digital content often contains subtle messages or complex themes that may not be immediately apparent to children. These messages, whether intentional or implicit, can influence their perceptions of the world and shape their behaviors. Through co-viewing, adults can help decode these messages and facilitate discussions that uncover deeper meanings. For example, when watching a movie that portrays stereotypical gender roles,

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parents can guide children in identifying these stereotypes and questioning their validity. This interactive approach helps children develop a more critical mindset, making them less likely to passively accept everything they encounter in the media.

Another important aspect of co-viewing is the opportunity it creates for modeling analytical and ethical media consumption. Children often learn by observing and imitating adult behavior. When adults actively engage with media, questioning its accuracy, ethics, or quality, they set an example for children to emulate. This process not only teaches critical thinking but also encourages children to adopt a reflective approach to their media consumption. For instance, parents who pause to fact-check claims in a news segment or discuss the possible biases of a social media post demonstrate how to evaluate information rather than taking it at face value. Over time, these practices become ingrained in children's own habits, empowering them to engage with media in a more informed and ethical manner.

Co-viewing also serves as an effective way to mitigate some of the immediate risks associated with children's media consumption, such as exposure to harmful or inappropriate content. In the absence of guidance, children may encounter violent imagery, explicit material, or misinformation that could harm their emotional or cognitive development. However, when adults participate in the media experience, they can quickly address any potentially damaging content and provide context or clarification. This immediacy is especially crucial in the digital age, where children can access vast amounts of unregulated content. By being present during media consumption, adults can not only shield children from harmful influences but also equip them with the skills needed to recognize and avoid such content independently in the future.

Teaching children media literacy is a natural extension of co-viewing, as it amplifies the benefits of shared media experiences. Media literacy education focuses on empowering children to understand, evaluate, and create media in ways that are responsible and informed. By integrating media literacy into co-viewing practices, adults can transform passive viewing into an active learning experience. For instance, rather than simply watching a television show, parents can prompt children to consider how the show's characters are

portrayed, why certain plot choices were made, or how the story aligns with real-world experiences. Such exercises not only deepen children's understanding of the content but also reinforce the analytical skills they need to approach all forms of media critically (Strouse et al., 2018).

A key benefit of combining co-viewing with media literacy education is that it prepares children to handle the challenges of the digital landscape. The internet and social media are rife with misinformation, cyberbullying, and persuasive algorithms designed to capture attention. Without the ability to critically evaluate what they encounter, children may fall prey to false information, harmful interactions, or addictive behaviors. Co-viewing creates opportunities for adults to discuss these risks in real-time, using examples from the media being consumed to illustrate potential pitfalls. For example, while browsing social media together, a parent might point out the use of clickbait headlines and explain how such tactics aim to manipulate readers. These discussions not only provide children with immediate tools to navigate digital spaces but also foster long-term resilience against manipulation.

Co-viewing also enhances emotional connections between children and adults, creating a supportive environment for learning. The digital age often isolates children from meaningful interpersonal interactions, as they may become absorbed in individual screen time. Co-viewing counters this trend by encouraging collaboration and dialogue. When parents or caregivers share media experiences with children, they build trust and open lines of communication, making it easier for children to seek guidance when faced with confusing or troubling content. This relational foundation is essential for effective media literacy education, as children are more likely to internalize lessons from adults they trust and feel connected to.

Moreover, co-viewing allows adults to tailor media literacy lessons to the developmental needs of individual children. Younger children, for instance, may require more explicit explanations and simplified discussions, while older children and adolescents can engage in more complex analyses of media content. By actively participating in the media experience, adults can gauge a child's level of understanding and adjust their approach accordingly. This adaptability ensures that media

literacy education remains relevant and accessible, regardless of a child's age or cognitive abilities.

In addition to its educational benefits, co-viewing reinforces ethical values by encouraging discussions about the societal implications of media content. Media often reflects and perpetuates societal norms, some of which may conflict with the values parents wish to instill in their children. Through co-viewing, adults can highlight these conflicts and encourage children to think critically about the values they encounter. For instance, a movie that glorifies materialism or aggression can serve as a starting point for conversations about the importance of empathy, kindness, and community. These discussions help children develop a moral compass that guides their interactions with media and the world around them.

Finally, co-viewing and media literacy education work together to promote creativity and media production skills. In addition to consuming media, children can be encouraged to create their own content, applying the lessons learned through co-viewing. By analyzing the techniques and strategies used in professional media, children gain insights into storytelling, visual communication, and digital tools. This understanding not only enhances their appreciation of media but also empowers them to become active contributors to the digital landscape. Through co-viewing, adults can mentor children in these creative endeavors, fostering a sense of agency and purpose in their media interactions (Skouteris & Kelly, 2006; Work, 2017; Foulds, 2023).

resilience, and ethical engagement among young users in the digital age. As digital platforms expose children to risks such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and addictive behaviors, media literacy emerges as a protective shield, equipping them with the tools to navigate these challenges responsibly. Recognizing media literacy as an evolving competency allows for a more adaptive framework, tailored to the changing complexities of digital environments and the developmental needs of children.

However, achieving this vision requires collaborative efforts from educators, parents, and policymakers. Schools must integrate media literacy into curricula, creating opportunities for critical reflection and inquiry. Parents play an equally crucial role by modeling responsible digital habits and engaging in co-viewing practices to guide children through media experiences. Policymakers are called upon to prioritize media literacy within educational frameworks and promote public awareness of its significance. Together, these stakeholders can empower children to harness the benefits of ICT while minimizing its risks, fostering a generation of informed, ethical, and resilient digital citizens. Media literacy is not merely a tool for individual safety but a cornerstone of collective digital responsibility, crucial for shaping a healthier and more inclusive digital future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of Interest declared by the author(s).

CONCLUSION

The increasing integration of Information and Communication Technologies into children's lives has necessitated a transformative approach to media literacy. This study highlights the vital role media literacy plays in fostering critical thinking, cognitive

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