Critical Awakening: Enhancing Students' Agency through Critical Media Literacy

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Abstract

This literature review examines the significance of Critical Media Literacy (CML) in higher education. The rapid digitalization and globalization have intensified media dissemination, raising critical issues about information authenticity and its societal impacts. CML empowers individuals to critically analyze media, discern between reliable and unreliable sources, recognize biases, and understand the broader socio-political implications of media messages. The study leverages Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory to dissect how media messages are constructed, disseminated, and interpreted, emphasizing the need for critical engagement in the post-truth era. The review highlights the detrimental effects of fake news and disinformation on democracy and trust in institutions, stressing the importance of integrating CML into higher education curricula to foster informed and engaged citizens. The paper also discusses the methodological limitations in current research and the necessity for comprehensive teacher training and systemic changes in educational institutions. Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative potential of CML in developing critical thinking, promoting democratic engagement, combating media manipulation and misinformation, and advocating for its inclusion in education policies and practices to prepare students for the complexities of the digital media landscape.

Critical Awakening: Enhancing Students' Agency through Critical Media Literacy

At its core, literacy is the ability to read and write; however, educators and scholars understand literacy as developing one's competence and expertise in a specific area (Bergstrom et al., 2018). *Media* literacy, thus, refers to the practice and study of becoming proficient in and knowledgeable about the media within various social, cultural, and institutional settings (Center for Media Literacy, 2023). With rapid digitalization and globalization, media, in its many manifestations, has encroached on every aspect of people's lives, democratizing the creation and dissemination of information and creating an overwhelming deluge of data (Pariser, 2011). While these advancements have fostered global connectivity and challenged the dominance of traditional media conglomerates, they have also ushered in a new set of complexities, raising questions about the veracity and authenticity of information and their implications on society at large (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Potter, 2013).

Considering these challenges, media literacy has emerged as a beacon of hope. It teaches people to analyze and understand media critically (Hobbs, 1998). It comprises the capacity to discern between reliable and unreliable sources, recognize bias and propaganda, and understand the potential implications and influences of different forms of media (Martens & Hobbs, 2015). In a world where mis- and disinformation can spread like wildfire, media literacy acts as a firebreak, enabling individuals to ponder, investigate, and verify the information they encounter. Educators worldwide are increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating media literacy into their curriculums, and by doing so, they hope to equip students to become media-savvy consumers and

responsible digital citizens (Hobbs et al., 2022; Gleason & von Gillern, 2018). This entails teaching students how to consume media critically and create media ethically, with a grasp of the potential consequences of their contributions to the digital ecosystem (Share et al., 2019).

Thus, this study will explore the concept of media literacy and its most incisive variant, critical media literacy (CML), and its importance and impact on higher education institutions and students. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, I will provide insight into the current state of CML, how it may help combat fake news and post-truth politics, as well as its relevance to developing and cultivating engaged citizens and students. By addressing gaps in the current knowledge base, this study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on its importance in the 21st century. The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the nature and impact of truth, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in the digital age and to explore the role of CML as a foundational tool in enhancing individuals' agency to navigate, analyze, and respond to these challenges effectively.

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the nature and impact of truth, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in the digital age and to explore the role of CML as a foundational tool in empowering individuals to navigate, analyze, and respond to these challenges effectively. By integrating theoretical perspectives, particularly Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory (Hall, 1973; Xie et al., 2022), the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how media messages are constructed, disseminated, and interpreted in a complex media environment, and how these processes impact higher education institutions and students (Trope et al., 2021).

This exploration is grounded in the recognition that the digital media landscape is not merely a neutral platform for information exchange but a complex arena where truth is often contested and narratives are strategically constructed (Kellner & Share, 2019). As such, the paper delves into the nuances of how truth is defined and redefined, how fake news and misinformation are created and spread, and the resultant societal implications. In doing so, it underscores the critical need for media literacy education, particularly CML, as an essential skill in fostering informed, critical, and engaged citizens capable of discerning and countering these challenges in the digital era.

Thus, the significance of this study is that CML may encourage faculty in higher education institutions to promote classes, programs, and workshops to students, including those from majors unrelated to communication or journalism since it directly impacts people's ability to participate within their communities and broader society democratically. This study's findings may inform policymakers and higher education leaders on the need to expand the offer of CML to other majors, becoming an inherent part of curricula.

Literature Review

Selection Criteria

Based on the literature selected for analysis, I will define and describe the relevance of CML in the following sections, mainly focusing on its application in higher education institutions. Following that, I will discuss the meanings and controversies concerning post-truth and fake news and their detrimental effects on citizenship building to emphasize the need to study CML further in the context of higher education. Then, I will present the rationale for the study based on the gaps identified in the literature analyzed and close the chapter with a reasoned justification for the need for further research.

I used academic library databases such as EBSCO, ERIC, and ProQuest, which I accessed on the Florida Gulf Coast University library website, to find empirical literature and other scholarly

sources. In addition, I searched peer-reviewed publications, books, and book chapters that approached media literacy, including its various definitions. Sources that discussed fake news, post-truth, citizenship, and democracy were also consulted. Moreover, organizations such as NAMLE, the News Literacy Project, Media Literacy Now, the Stony Brooke University Center for News Literacy, and the Columbia Journalism Review also offered valuable perspectives. Criteria for selecting the literature were based on their relevance to CML and its primary objective of maintaining democratic principles among citizens. Other inclusive criteria used were publications in English and Portuguese, the languages I am proficient in reading and writing. Finally, the primary key search words and terms most effectively locating relevant literature were *media literacy*, *news literacy*, *digital literacy*, *post-truth*, *fake news*, *social media*, *citizenship education*, *higher education*, and *democracy*.

Based on the literature selected for analysis, I will describe the principles and definitions of media literacy and CML. Then, I will elaborate on disinformation, post-truth, and fake news and their detrimental impacts on higher education students. I will also delve into how CML connects to higher education. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by presenting a convincing justification for the importance of further research. The review was categorized based on the typology of reviews outlined by Grant and Booth (2009) to ensure a comprehensive and methodologically sound analysis.

The Problem

The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has significantly changed the media landscape, leading to increased accessibility and democratization of information but also introducing new challenges and risks, such as misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and the emergence of a post-truth era (Buckingham, 2019). Thus, media literacy is particularly important in a period of unbridled access to all sorts of content (Hobbs et al., 2022). Having inadequate media literacy skills means being at the mercy of the tides of mis- and disinformation. Since misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information regardless of whether there is intent to mislead (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022), it will not be mentioned further. Conversely, disinformation is *deliberately* sharing misleading or biased information, manipulating narratives, or engaging in propaganda (UNHCR, 2022). Fake news is a type of disinformation presented as news and widely disseminated via traditional news media or social media platforms (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). The proliferation of digital platforms has facilitated the dissemination of disinformation and fake news at an unprecedented scale and velocity and had significant repercussions for democracy and society (Mihailidis, 2018).

At the heart of this issue lies the necessity for an informed citizenry—a fundamental pillar of any thriving democracy (Duffy et al., 2020). When citizens are subjected to and are inadvertently swayed by false information, their decision-making ability, particularly in political contexts, becomes skewed (Mrisho et al., 2023). Such a misinformed populace may inadvertently undermine the very democratic processes in which they participate (Choi & Cristol, 2021). The significance of this issue cannot be overstated, as the health of a democracy is deeply intertwined with the accuracy and veracity of the information its citizens possess (Duffy et al., 2020). Secondly, disinformation and fake news undermine trust in institutions (Asardag & Donders, 2022). As they spread, it becomes harder for individuals to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information (Johnson et al., 2021), eroding trust in established news sources, experts, and public and governmental institutions (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Thirdly, they can polarize society

negatively (Wang et al., 2022), exacerbating divisions, promoting extreme views, and creating echo chambers where individuals are exposed only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and prejudices (Pariser, 2011).

The concept of "post-truth" has emerged as a descriptor for a political culture where debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored (Hyvönen, 2018). The term is often used to describe contemporary politics in the United States and other liberal democracies, where fake news and propaganda have been used significantly since the 2016 election cycle (Buckingham, 2019). Although the notion of post-truth has gained attention recently, Hyvönen (2018) is skeptical about its novelty, attributing its prominence to modern communication technologies. Moreover, individuals tend to form beliefs based on personal sentiments or what feels true rather than relying on data and evidence (Bennett, 2012). This predisposition is potentially amplified by the current media landscape (Mihailidis, 2018), wherein the inundation of information, often indifferent to accuracy, might degrade the ability to discern fact from opinion (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). For instance, individuals may prioritize affirming pre-existing beliefs, safeguarding their social and cultural identities, or endorsing preferred political candidates (Ashley, 2020). Moreover, people frequently struggle to distinguish factual news from falsehoods (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), resulting in the widespread dissemination of disinformation, which has been especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Meyrer & Kersch, 2022). Notably, even when people know how to think critically and value truth, they can fall prey to reasoning biases (Pennycook & Rand, 2019), such as the illusory truth effect (Vasu et al., 2018), where repeated information is perceived as more truthful.

Fact-checking experts and services also play a critical role in mitigating the impact of disinformation (Wang et al., 2022). These specialize in verifying the accuracy of claims made in the media, particularly those made by public figures, corporations, and institutions. Fact-checkers' work is invaluable in holding individuals and entities accountable for their public statements and providing the public with accurate information (Dell, 2018; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). However, fact-checking also has its limitations. For one, the process is labor-intensive and time-consuming, making it challenging to keep up with the volume of information being produced and shared online (Wang et al., 2022). Additionally, fact-checkers can be accused of bias, undermining their credibility (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Wang et al., 2022).

Algorithms are another tool used to combat the spread of disinformation, particularly on social media platforms (Thurman et al., 2019). These can involve modifying how information is prioritized and displayed, aiming to reduce the visibility and spread of false information. For example, algorithms can be adjusted to demote content flagged as misleading, reducing its reach (Helberger, 2019). But this approach is not without controversy. It raises concerns about censorship and the potential misuse of technological tools by companies and governments (Asardag & Donders, 2022). There is also the challenge of transparency, as these algorithms are often proprietary and not open to public scrutiny (Thurman et al., 2019). In fact, critics argue that such algorithms may champion highly shareable content, rewarding sensationalism and clickbait content (Dell, 2018). Further, there is the issue of determining what constitutes "truth" in a complex and rapidly changing information environment (Oleksiyenko & Jackson, 2021). This philosophical and epistemological challenge goes beyond the technical aspects of combating post-truth politics and narratives.

The reliability of disseminated information is often influenced by various unseen dynamics within social and economic systems. These include biases and prejudices, entrenched systemic power structures, monetary incentives, and the sway of specific interest groups. Navigating this

entangled scenario and identifying experts can be daunting, especially for students (Naderer et al., 2020), and successfully evaluating evidence requires comprehensive disciplinary knowledge, including the grasp of sophisticated research methods (Horner et al., 2021). Such sophisticated literacy skills can be perplexing to acquire and apply, further complicating the information validation process. Non-experts often fail to recognize their limitations in independently assessing information, possibly due to an inadequate metacognitive understanding of the intricate connections between expert research and specific disciplinary knowledge (Horner et al., 2021). An overreliance on personal comprehension can lead to disregarding expert sources (Scharrer et al., 2021), which can be problematic.

Furthermore, recent advancements in digital technology, particularly deep fake technology, have introduced new dimensions to the discourse on disinformation (Shick, 2020). Deep fakes—sophisticated artificial intelligence-generated images, videos, and audio recordings—are becoming increasingly realistic and accessible, posing significant challenges in discerning truth in digital media (Dunard, 2021), exacerbating the spread of disinformation by enabling the creation of highly convincing false content, blurring the lines between reality and fabrication. This technology can be used to create false narratives and misleading representations of individuals, significantly undermining the reliability of digital content. Shick (2020) agrees that deepfakes represent a critical escalation in the battle against digital misinformation, requiring more advanced and nuanced approaches to media literacy and verification processes. It is thus imperative to integrate discussions on deepfake technology into the curriculum to equip individuals not only with the skills to critically analyze traditional media content but also to recognize and evaluate AI-generated content (Dunard, 2021).

In conclusion, the importance of fostering CML cannot be overemphasized in a rapidly evolving digital landscape fraught with disinformation, fake news, and post-truth narratives. It empowers individuals to discern factual and misleading information and instills a more comprehensive understanding of the unseen dynamics within our information ecosystems. As society ventures deeper into the digital age, bolstering media literacy is paramount to fortify people against the negative ramifications of the post-truth era. Students should be equipped with these media literacy skills to ensure a well-informed citizenry that can sustain the pillars of democracy, uphold trust in institutions, and promote a more inclusive, fact-based societal discourse (Hobbs et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory offers a nuanced perspective on how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted (Hall, 1973). At its core, this theory posits that the process of communication involves two critical stages: encoding and decoding. Encoding is the construction of the message by the sender, infused with specific meanings and ideologies, often influenced by their socio-cultural and ideological contexts (Hall, 1973; Thevenin, 2022). Here, media content is crafted with particular intentions and embedded with ideological meanings (Kellner & Share, 2019). This phase is crucial in understanding the proliferation of disinformation and fake news, where content is often designed to mislead, manipulate emotions, or serve specific political or economic agendas (Marlatt, 2020; Share et al., 2019). In analyzing media literacy, it is important to dissect how these messages are constructed, identifying the underlying motives and the context in which they are produced.

In the context of misinformation and fake news, encoding involves the deliberate or unintentional inclusion of biases, misleading facts, or completely fabricated information in media

messages (Hall, 1973). These messages are often encoded with specific intentions – to influence public opinion, to mislead for political or economic gains, or to create sensationalism (Kellner & Share, 2019). The role of CML here is to equip students with the ability to dissect these encoded messages, to understand the underlying intentions, and to critically assess the credibility and reliability of the information presented (Thevenin, 2022; Trope et al., 2021).

Decoding, on the other hand, is the interpretation of the message by the receiver, which may or may not align with the encoder's intended meaning since it may vary based on their individual backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs (Hall, 1973; Thevenin, 2022). This theory is particularly relevant in understanding the dynamics of misinformation, fake news, and the post-truth phenomenon in relation to media literacy. Moreover, the decoding phase emphasizes the audience's active role in interpreting media messages. Hall identified three hypothetical positions for decoding: the dominant-hegemonic position (the audience decodes the message as intended by the encoder), the negotiated position (the audience partly accepts and partly rejects the message), and the oppositional position (the audience completely rejects the intended encoding). CML equips individuals to navigate these positions, encouraging a more nuanced and critical engagement with media content (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Decoding is not a straightforward mirror of encoding (Hall, 1973; Xie et al., 2022). As mentioned, audiences interpret messages based on their cultural background, beliefs, and experiences. This is where CML becomes crucial, as it empowers students to not just passively consume media but to actively engage in decoding media messages. Through CML, students learn to identify biases, recognize the source and context of information, and understand how their own backgrounds influence their interpretation of media messages. This critical decoding is essential in an era of post-truth, where emotional appeal and personal belief often override objective facts in shaping public opinion (Meyrer & Kersch, 2022; Thevenin, 2022).

Bridging Encoding and Decoding: The Role of Educators

Educators play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between encoding and decoding (Hall, 1973). By integrating CML into the curriculum, they can guide students to understand how media messages are encoded with certain ideologies and how to decode them critically (Thevenin, 2022). This involves teaching students not only to question the content but also to understand the broader socio-political context in which these messages are produced and disseminated. This theory is also instrumental in understanding the dynamics of media literacy, as it underscores the need for CML as a tool to critically analyze both the creation (encoding) and interpretation (decoding) of media messages (Thevenin, 2022). In the context of education, this theory provides a framework for teaching students not only to discern the accuracy of media content but also to understand the broader socio-political and cultural influences at play in the construction and reception of media messages (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Thus, the theoretical framework section, grounded in Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory, provides a foundational lens through which we can critically examine the complexities of media communication. By applying this framework to the analysis of CML, particularly in the context of the current digital and information-rich age, we gain valuable insights into the challenges and necessities of fostering this skill. Hall's theory not only enhances our understanding of the media's role in society but also underscores the importance of equipping students with the skills to navigate and critically engage with the media landscape.

Media Literacy Education

This section will delve into the conceptual framework surrounding media literacy and highlight the significance of its integration into educational systems and curricula. Media literacy is a comprehensive form of literacy encapsulating the capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and create a wide array of media forms (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Hobbs, 2010). This broad-ranging literacy concept serves as an overarching term, accommodating a multitude of literacies such as news literacy, visual literacy, information literacy, digital literacy, technology literacy, and data literacy (Wuyckens et al., 2022). To this end, scholars endeavor to weave media literacy competencies into school and university curricula by applying a pedagogical method known as Media Literacy Education (MLE). In essence, media literacy is the goal, and MLE is the process of achieving that goal. Thus, MLE has gained much attention recently due to rapid digitalization and globalization (Buckingham, 2007). Its premise is to teach students to spot potential red flags in media messages, such as identifying unreliable sources or sensational headlines (Ashley, 2020). Hobbs et al. (2022) noted that students with positive but nuanced views of journalism and society are likelier to demonstrate higher levels of media literacy. And even though some young students might be skilled with technology, most struggle to recognize the veracity of media messages (Dell, 2018). Therefore, if they do not get the chance to enroll in an MLE program at some point in their education, they will be more vulnerable to disinformation.

The implications of this shift are profound and pervasive, infiltrating all aspects of society. And it is through education that a long-lasting, profound answer can be found. Thus, it is essential to equip educators with the skills to help students, from K through 20, navigate this complex media landscape (Hobbs et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the mere act of shifting responsibility to media consumers will not effectively hinder nor dismantle the corporations and entities that reap significant benefits from disseminating disinformation or by manufacturing consent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Expecting individuals to navigate the convoluted media landscape unscathed is not practical. MLE implementation must go beyond helping students discern fact from fiction, find reliable sources, or responsibly create and share information. Students, most urgently, need to comprehend the inherent power dynamics and political motivations in media messages and cultivate a critical perspective on their intentions and potential societal impacts. If that aspect is not adequately incorporated, MLE risks becoming fangless against corporate and political interests that profit from disinformation. The issue, therefore, is that current iterations of MLE, despite an inquiry-based pedagogical approach, do not sufficiently focus on studying the relationship between media and power (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Within this context, the need for CML emerges, offering a more incisive version of what MLE can offer, emphasizing the critical analysis of power dynamics within media messages. By encouraging a more scrutinizing and nuanced perspective, CML could empower students to navigate the information landscape more effectively and challenge the underlying corporate and political interests. CML's transformative pedagogy equips learners with a more profound understanding of how socio-political factors shape and are shaped by media messages. CML teaches them to recognize media's potential to both reinforce and challenge societal norms and the ability to use media as a tool for societal change. By doing so, CML moves beyond the limitations of traditional MLE, enabling a robust, more reflexive, and engaged approach to media consumption and production. It is a critical pedagogical shift that, if adopted widely, could allow MLE to effectively counter the relentless tide of disinformation and the hidden agendas it often carries.

Positionality Statement

As the author of this paper, I believe that CML is both professional and personal. With a background in communication, journalism, and education, I have witnessed firsthand the way media and news are both produced and consumed mindlessly. My experiences in researching media literacy have reinforced my belief in the urgency of integrating CML into educational curricula, especially in an era marked by disinformation and digital manipulation. Moreover, I have observed the challenges faced by students, educators, family members, and the general public in discerning truth from falsehood. This paper is, therefore, not just an academic pursuit but a reflection of my commitment to advocating for a more critically informed society capable of challenging and reshaping the media narratives that influence our daily lives.

Discussion on Differences, Mixed Findings, and Methodological Weaknesses

Studies conducted in different cultural settings may yield varying results regarding the effectiveness of CML strategies. While some cultures may exhibit high levels of engagement with CML practices, others may show resistance or apathy influenced by socio-political and educational norms. The impact and implementation of CML can differ significantly across educational systems. Around the world, various scholars and groups have developed different media literacy strategies (Azizi et al., 2022; Kumar, 2019; Kupiainen, 2019; Šupšáková, 2016; Yeh & Wan, 2019). Although they may vary, most of them agree on at least five fundamental aspects. First, they recognize that media is a socially constructed process. Second, they involve a hermeneutical analysis that delves into any text's languages, genres, codes, and conventions. Third, they scrutinize the audience's role in creating meaning. Fourth, they challenge the process of representation to reveal and address issues of power and ideology. Lastly, they examine the institutions and political economy that shape media industries as profit-driven businesses.

Methodological Limitations

In evaluating the literature on media literacy and CML, it was essential to acknowledge certain methodological limitations that may impact the research's validity and generalizability. Some studies feature limited sample sizes or lack diversity, which might not reflect broader trends or perspectives adequately. Moreover, research designs, whether qualitative or quantitative, often come with inherent limitations, such as lacking generalizability and missing nuanced participant experiences. Research outcomes can also be influenced by the researcher's bias and subjectivity, particularly in interpretative studies, but that is harder to assess. Addressing these limitations is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding and advancement of CML research. Future efforts should focus on diversifying contexts and improving research designs to overcome these challenges.

The upcoming segment delves deeper into how CML differs from traditional media literacy iterations, theoretical underpinnings, and historical context. The intent is to examine how CML, as a pedagogical tool, instigates and nurtures a new level of intellectual engagement, enhancing the students' ability to interrogate and challenge the media they consume. This exploration seeks to demonstrate the dynamics of CML within the broader educational landscape. It positions CML not merely as an augmentation of MLE but as a vital evolution that directly and explicitly addresses the influence and power interplay within media narratives. Doing so elucidates how CML cultivates a more comprehensive critical perspective in students, effectively equipping them to

navigate the complexities of contemporary information ecology. By detailing these strategies, I aim to show the transformative potential of CML in not just countering disinformation but in fostering a generation of discerning, informed, and empowered media consumers.

Critical Media Literacy

In the age of digitization, information and media are omnipresent and disseminated faster than ever. This prevalence of media and its influential role in shaping our understandings and interpretations of the world necessitates a robust framework to scrutinize and comprehend it. That framework is CML. This section outlines the theoretical foundation of CML, drawing on key theories from critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and media studies. CML is an educational strategy and pedagogical tool that expands traditional media literacy by emphasizing critical thinking concerning media (Kellner & Share, 2019). It belongs to the school of thought that recognizes education as a practice of freedom, enabling individuals to question dominant narratives and advocate for social change (Trope et al., 2021). It also emphasizes the importance of understanding how media messages are encoded, decoded, constructed, deconstructed, and shaped by power relations and ideological forces (Share et al., 2019). CML highlights the role of media in shaping public discourse, fostering critical thinking, and catalyzing democratic engagement. The critical dimension of CML impels individuals to question, analyze, and interpret media messages not merely from the standpoint of individual comprehension but from a sociopolitical perspective, underscoring the inherent power relations, ideological constructs, and socio-cultural influences that shape these messages (Kellner & Share, 2019). It seeks to foster a nuanced understanding of media as a social construct and an agent of power and influence in our societies (Trope et al., 2021).

Haddix et al. (2016) describe CML as a problematizing instrument in educational environments that encourages students to take on roles of agency and activism and seek out civic engagement opportunities with pressing global problems. CML extends beyond the simple reception of information to explore how media messages are created, by whom, with what intention, and what implications these might have for various societal groups. It draws heavily on the tenets of Critical Theory, emphasizing the socio-political-economic structures that guide the production and dissemination of media (Marlatt, 2020). It recognizes media as a site of struggle where power relations are negotiated and identities constructed, thereby aiding individuals to become active citizens rather than passive media consumers (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

At the heart of CML is the promotion of critical thinking skills and social consciousness, enabling individuals to decode, deconstruct, and contest media messages that can perpetuate stereotypes, marginalize certain groups, or reinforce prevailing power structures (Funk et al., 2016). It fosters an understanding of how media technologies shape and mediate our experiences of the world and the role of media in shaping public opinion, constructing reality, and propagating ideologies. CML also encourages media production as part of its pedagogy, encouraging the development of alternative and counter-hegemonic media messages, thereby enabling the democratization of media, and promoting social justice (Kellner & Share, 2019). With the rise of digital and social media platforms, and the increasing blurring of lines between information and entertainment, producer, and consumer, public and private, the relevance and necessity of CML in the 21st century cannot be overstated (Share et al., 2019). As such, this paper aims to delve into the conceptual underpinnings of CML, its pedagogical approaches, its relevance in contemporary society, and its potential for fostering media democratization and social change. In doing so, it

hopes to illuminate CML's critical role in helping individuals understand, engage with, and challenge the media messages that permeate their everyday lives.

In addition, CML encourages the critical investigation of the relationships between media, audiences, information, and power. While some conventional media literacy approaches may shy away from engaging students to examine embedded ideologies and the complex links between power and information, CML does the opposite. It promotes a dialogical (Freire, 1970) and more democratic (Dewey, 1916) type of education in which educators and students examine diverse narratives and ideological power systems together. In doing so, CML challenges the widespread misconception that education should be politically neutral. Those in favor of social justice education realize that education is a political act by its essence (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983).

Research and practice in the fields of education, cultural studies, media studies, critical pedagogy, multiliteracies, CML, critical race literacy, and civic literacy inform CML (Hall, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2019; Mihailidis, 2018), which challenges the status quo of a media literacy education paradigm that is, at worst, protective and, at best, neutral with regards to media products and the people and institutions responsible for them (Fry, 2015).

Given the contemporary realities of standardized testing, high-stakes tests, and top-down curricula, it is more important than ever for educators to acknowledge the intrinsically political nature of education and commercial media (Garcia et al., 2013). Educators must question their role in perpetuating dominant ideologies and oppressive social structures. CML allows them to bring critical societal issues, such as racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, and others, into the classroom by analyzing the media and popular culture that students encounter daily. CML is also grounded in praxis (Freire, 1970), which connects theory and action. Through praxis, students can create their own media representations that cater to their interests and local communities to transform a somewhat abstract concept into something tangible. However, successfully implementing media literacy skills depends on high-standard teacher training (Zhang et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the world has been shifting from a place where only a minority held the keys to media creation to one where the majority fulfills a significant role in creating media. Furthermore, CML effectively encourages students to work together and develop a sense of shared purpose (Share et al., 2019). There needs to be a shift in how students are taught in schools so that they can more effectively evaluate media and utilize it to advocate for the changes they want to see in the world.

Fundamental to media literacy is the understanding that all messages are constructed (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Bergstrom et al., 2018). Schools may do a better job of encouraging students to ask thoughtful questions regarding various data and discourse if they begin with this knowledge of the social construction of knowledge. This includes local news, television shows, books, advertising, artificial intelligence, and TikTok.

Literacy is necessary for full participation in the economic, cultural, and political life of one's community, nation, and world (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Hobbs, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2019). Education is a vital enabler for democratic participation (Dewey, 1916). A healthy democracy cannot exist in the absence of an educated, informed, and literate citizenry (Kellner & Share, 2019). Moreover, literacy, democracy, empowerment, and social participation are inextricably intertwined in politics and everyday life. As a result, inequalities between the haves and the have-nots persist because some people lack the literacy skills to fully participate in the globalized, information-based economy, society, and culture (Share et al., 2019). In this global village (McLuhan, 1964), merely understanding media is insufficient. Educators can pave the way for transformative learning that examines and challenges societal issues by assisting students in

addressing inequity and injustice in media representations. Students can become active participants in the process of deconstructing injustices with the help of the resources and framework that CML provides. It enables them to express their perspectives and engage in the ongoing fight to create a more equitable society.

Student Agency

Agency, an integral part of transformative education, is a journey that spans various facets of an individual's and a group's experience (Freire, 1970). It can start by fostering self-esteem and self-confidence and extend to creating alternative media channels for expressing opposition to societal issues (Share et al., 2019). The ultimate goal is to enable marginalized groups to express themselves and actively participate in the discourse and actions aimed at addressing the issues they face. Thus, transformative education, furthered by CML, can catalyze social change, fostering an environment of inclusivity and justice. However, the empowerment process goes beyond merely lending a voice to marginalized groups. It is essential also to create spaces and provide opportunities where these groups can collectively challenge the oppressive structures they face. These spaces should allow them to raise their concerns, express their narratives, and engage in active resistance against their marginalization (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Suppose educators can shed light on the power dynamics inserted in the process of information transfer. In that case, they have the potential to play a vital role in the education system (Luke, 2007). Their responsibility must be moved beyond the traditional banking instruction system (Freire, 1970) and, instead, be transmuted toward a dialogical classroom dynamic that enables marginalized communities to vocalize their experiences and perspectives. However, this engagement should not stop just providing a platform for expression. It should also examine the oppressive structures that lead to marginalization in the first place.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of CML is grounded in a critical understanding of media and education and a commitment to social change. It views media not just as a source of information or entertainment but as a site of power and struggle. It considers education not just a process of transmitting knowledge but a practice of freedom. And it views students as media consumers, producers, and critics. Through this framework, CML aims to empower students to engage critically with media, understand the forces shaping media content, and participate actively in media production and public discourse. CML is vital for fostering critical thinking, promoting democratic engagement, and combating media manipulation and misinformation. As such, CML must be integrated into education at all levels.

Emerging Technologies and the Future of CML

Emerging technologies such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Generative AI are transforming how CML is taught and practiced. These innovations not only offer new methods and platforms for learning but also raise complex issues related to disinformation, digital ethics, and the changing nature of media consumption. Understanding the interplay between these technologies and CML is essential for developing effective strategies to enhance media literacy in today's digital landscape.

For instance, the advent of MOOCs has revolutionized e-learning, playing a pivotal role in promoting CML (Nikolakopoulou et al., 2022). They emphasize the importance of MOOCs in offering widespread education in critical thinking and media literacy. Their development of a MOOC for educators underlines the potential of these platforms in fostering inclusive teaching

practices and active citizenship, serving both as educational tools and means for disseminating and exploiting project results.

Meanwhile, Jones et al. (2022) explore the critical role of VR and AR in media literacy. They highlight how these immersive technologies can challenge perspectives and enhance the understanding of cultural diversities, offering unique opportunities for experiential learning. The application of VR and AR in education represents a significant shift from entertainment to educational contexts, providing novel ways to experience and interpret media content.

The role of Generative AI in combating disinformation and fake news can be significant as much as it is the biggest contributor to making it even harder (Washington, 2023). The potential of combining AI with CML to effectively mitigate the influence of false information underscores the necessity of creating a digital citizenship curriculum, advocating for an interdisciplinary approach to foster a resilient and informed society. Ciampa et al. (2023) further delve into the integration of AI in literacy education. Their work on ChatGPT in education illustrates how AI can enhance writing skills, assist students with disabilities, and foster critical thinking and media literacy. However, they also caution against challenges like biases and disinformation, emphasizing the need for responsible AI usage. But, as CML continues to evolve, embracing these technologies while addressing their ethical implications will be crucial for preparing students to navigate the complex media landscape of the future.

Implementing Critical Media Literacy in Higher Education

This section delves into the practical implementation of CML within the higher education curriculum. It provides insights into effective pedagogical strategies and curriculum design, aligning with this paper's objectives. As we transition into the age of digitization, the inclusion of CML in higher education becomes not just beneficial but a necessity. With the United States lagging in incorporating media literacy in K–12 education, the urgency for such inclusion in higher education increases (De Abreu, 2017). The current media landscape necessitates a sophisticated understanding of media representations, biases, and ideological frameworks, an understanding that transcends basic literacy to incorporate a critical lens (Trope et al., 2021).

As previously mentioned, CML underscores the interconnectedness of media and power. It acknowledges that media messages are not neutral; they mirror and reinforce societal power structures and ideologies and are fueled by commercial interests. Consequently, CML encourages learners to examine media messages critically, question the status quo, and resist passive consumption. Incorporating CML in higher education also involves addressing the challenges posed by fake news and post-truth politics in the classroom. These phenomena can negatively influence the learning environment, fostering confusion, distrust, and division among students. They can also create hurdles for educators who might need more time to debunk false information rather than focusing on teaching and research activities (Tandoc, 2022). Addressing controversial and political topics in the classroom can potentially be uncomfortable for professors as well (Tandoc, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to approach these matters with a spirit of inquiry, curiosity, and openness to nurture healthier discourse among students both inside and outside the classroom.

Recognizing the importance of media education, UNESCO published an online curriculum guide in 11 languages in 2011, declaring the training of teachers in media and information literacy a major global education challenge for the ensuing decade (Share et al., 2019). Although numerous organizations offer media literacy resources, they lack an explicit and intentional social justice, identity politics, or antiracist context (Trope et al., 2021). This gap underscores the value of integrating CML into higher education curricula, which can assist students with a potent tool for

questioning and addressing social, political, and cultural issues affecting their lives and communities.

Rooted in the philosophy of Freire (1970), CML aims to foster critical consciousness among learners, enabling them to analyze, evaluate, and create media. A Freirean approach to CML in higher education would stress the importance of dialogue, critical reflection, and action (Greene et al., 2018). These processes could be facilitated through various pedagogical strategies such as student-led discussions, media production projects, and community-based participatory research, where students are active creators and critics of media rather than mere consumers.

In higher education, the sustained integration of CML can transform teaching and learning. This transformation, however, would require systemic changes that acknowledge and valorize critical educators, who are often dismissed or forced to operate on the margins (Trope et al., 2021). Embracing CML could lead to a more profound shift in academic culture that normalizes the critical examination of media as a key aspect of learning. Furthermore, integrating CML into higher education can have far-reaching implications beyond academia. Students equipped with critical media skills can contribute positively to their professional fields, whether in journalism, politics, business, or the social sector, where media influences public opinion and policy-making. By interrogating the media's role in constructing narratives and perpetuating power structures, they can drive more equitable and inclusive practices in their spheres of influence.

Schmidt (2013) observes that higher education teachers, particularly those in four-year universities, are more prone to cover media literacy in their coursework than their counterparts at other educational stages. Factors such as age and teaching experience also influence how extensively media literacy is incorporated into instruction. It is noteworthy that despite the rarity of dedicated media literacy courses in higher education, there is a growing trend toward embedding media literacy themes across various disciplines in the curriculum.

There appears to be an increase in media literacy courses in higher education in the United States; however, it is hard to say who teaches media and technology courses with a critical lens (Mihailidis, 2018). Nonetheless, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of teaching media literacy and even CML (Share et al., 2019). In contrast, incorporating it into teacher education programs remains a significant gap. For instance, Tiede et al. (2015) surveyed university and college teacher education programs in Germany and the U.S. and found that critical evaluation of media, culture, and society was barely addressed. CML should be promoted not just as a subject to be taught but also as a perspective to be integrated across the curriculum (Vazquez, 2017). The objective should be to cultivate social justice educators who internalize a critical view of the world and power institutions, a goal for which CML provides the necessary framework and methodology. However, few universities are actively attempting to address the lack of CML training for educators (Share et al., 2019). Despite this, the endeavor is not only achievable but also potentially highly rewarding. Testimonies from educators who have undergone a CML course underline the potential for its implementation (Share et al., 2019).

The implementation of CML in higher education, on the other hand, is not without its challenges. A significant hurdle is the encroachment of corporate interests on education, which prioritizes competencies over content knowledge and critical thinking (Kellner & Share, 2019; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020; Parker, 2020). This situation may restrict the scope of media literacy strategies in all its manifestations, including CML, potentially reducing this field to a set of technical skills rather than a critical, reflective practice (Garcia et al., 2013; Kellner & Share, 2019). Through the neoliberal agenda, corporate interests may also lead to the commodification of

education, where students are molded to fit into the market economy as mere consumers and workers (Parker, 2020; Schneider & Berkshire, 2020).

Adapting the current curriculum to include media literacy involves a multifaceted and lengthy process that encompasses research, meetings, course design, administrative support, securing funding, and obtaining necessary approvals (Kellner & Share, 2019; Trope et al., 2021). Given the varying definitions and interpretations of media literacy, there is a lack of a uniform approach to incorporating it into higher education (Wuyckens et al., 2022). The question of who will teach such courses is also critical, given that without trained educators proficient in this field, the effectiveness of such classes could be compromised (Marlatt, 2020; Share et al., 2019). This concern underlines the importance of media literacy and CML training for educators, a factor yet to be sufficiently addressed.

The informal and ungoverned nature of media literacy's expansion in higher education contributes to its slow-paced implementation (Share et al., 2019). Without the backing of an accrediting body or a strategic approach, departments may be slow to adopt it into their curriculum (Share et al., 2019). Hence, a priority should be devising a structured strategy for implementing it into higher education and ensuring its efficient delivery.

Due to the lack of a standardized national curriculum and systematic funding for media literacy in higher education, professional development on CML must rely on independent initiatives (Dharamshi, 2018; Marlatt, 2020). When universities incorporate CML as a fundamental part of teacher education, they contribute to advancing critical thinking, intellectual openness, and access to independent, non-profit media (Marlatt, 2020).

Despite the fact that multidisciplinary integration of media literacy is occurring, it may not be implemented equally across institutions and programs (Share et al., 2019). Therefore, universities need to institutionalize it as a core educational principle that should permeate all courses and disciplines. This systemic integration would require comprehensive planning, faculty training, and sustained support from university leadership. It might also necessitate rethinking traditional teaching methods and assessment criteria to include more student-centric, interactive, and dialogic approaches that foster media literacy skills (Share et al., 2019).

Funk et al. (2016) reiterates the urgency of embedding CML in higher education. They underscore the need for collaboration between educators and policymakers to ensure comprehensive integration of CML, which requires pedagogical practices promoting critical thinking, active media engagement, and social justice. A robust CML framework, they argue, can empower students to become involved, informed participants in our rapidly evolving media landscape.

Future efforts should address these gaps by prioritizing CML in educational policy and pedagogical practices and providing adequate resources for its integration across academic disciplines. Engaging in this complex task will demand a concerted effort from all stakeholders, but the rewards promote an educational paradigm that equips students for meaningful participation in our media-saturated society.

Fake news is also a source of frustration and concern for professors in various disciplines (Weiss et al., 2020). As a result, they may feel pressure to devote more time and energy to fact-checking and debunking false information rather than focusing on their primary teaching and research activities (Schmidt, 2013). The rise of fake news can also hurt students (Duffy et al., 2020), as they may find it difficult to differentiate between credible and untrustworthy sources of information. This can lead to students' confusion and lack of confidence in their ability to evaluate information, ultimately hindering their learning and development. Additionally, the proliferation

of fake news can create a hostile and divisive learning environment, making it difficult for students to engage in respectful and productive dialogue with their peers (Dell, 2018).

The proliferation of disinformation can make it challenging to fulfill higher education institutions' third mission (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). That refers to their commitment to engaging in activities that positively impact the wider community beyond their primary teaching and research roles. Essentially, the third mission mandates universities to step beyond their campuses' walls, actively engage with society, and use their resources and knowledge for societal benefit. Embedded within the third mission is also the objective to mold students into active and participative citizens. Here, the focus is on equipping them with job-related skills and the capacity to contribute to their communities, become involved in civic activities, and develop an understanding of societal issues and challenges.

Table 1

Key Themes in Media Literacy and Their Principles

Theme	Main Tenet	Source(s)
Disinformation	Deliberate dissemination of false information	UNHCR (2022); Mihailidis (2018)
Fake News	False information presented as news	Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019); Buckingham (2019)
Post-Truth	Emphasis on emotional appeal over factual accuracy	Hyvönen (2018); Lewandowsky et al. (2017)
Media Literacy	Ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media	Center for Media Literacy (2023); Martens & Hobbs (2015)
CML	Critical thinking regarding media, understanding power dynamics	Kellner & Share (2019); Trope et al. (2021)
Generative AI	AI tools for creating content, potential for both creativity and disinformation	Washington (2023); Ciampa et al. (2023)
Deepfake Technology	AI-generated fake images, videos, and audio, posing significant challenges for truth discernment	Shick (2020); Dunard (2021)

Conclusion

The paper's exploration of CML highlights its critical importance in countering misinformation and fostering informed media engagement, particularly in the context of the rapidly evolving digital media landscape. The application of theoretical frameworks such as Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory has demonstrated the necessity of CML in enabling individuals to analyze and interpret media messages critically. Additionally, the discussion on global perspectives has emphasized the need for adaptable CML strategies that respect diverse cultural and educational contexts.

Educational institutions, especially in higher education, should prioritize the integration of CML into their curricula. This integration should not only encompass the development of media

analysis skills but also encourage a critical examination of the media's role in shaping societal narratives and structures. There is a clear need for comprehensive teacher training programs and resources to ensure educators are well-equipped to teach CML effectively. Moreover, further empirical research is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of CML programs, particularly focusing on their long-term impact on students' critical thinking and media consumption habits. Finally, embracing emerging technologies like AI and VR in CML education is recommended to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Educators' role in this landscape is to adopt innovative teaching methodologies and stay abreast of the latest media trends. Policymakers must provide necessary support and funding for the effective integration of CML into educational systems. Media consumers are encouraged to critically engage with media content and seek CML resources for self-education.

To conclude, this research underscores the vital role of CML in developing a discerning and critically engaged citizenry. The specificity of the recommendations provided, coupled with a clear delineation of the roles of educators, policymakers, and media consumers, aims to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to practical applications in education and policy. The future of CML lies in its adaptability, evolution, and responsiveness to the changing media environment, marking it as an indispensable tool in fostering a more informed and critical society.

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