

Media Literacy in China: The Impact of Education on Individual's Media Behavior

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Abstract: In the past two decades, China's digital media era has developed rapidly, it resulted in the challenge of dealing with information overload. In this context, media literacy has become a crucial skill, with critical thinking serving as a core component of it. Moreover, media literacy education also become a significant factor affecting people's performance on social media, especially in the Web 2.0 era, where an abundance of UGC (user-generated content) is being created. Millennials and Gen Z grew up in the Opening Up Policy and Web 2.0 period. As these two groups have extensive exposure in the media era and they are the backbone of China's technology development, media literacy education seems more crucial for them. Some scholars have found that first-tier cities pay more attention to media literacy education, and the courses include editing classes and journalist workshops; however, media literacy education in China is still at a surface level due to people ignoring the cultivation of critical thinking. The article aims to investigate how education influences Millennial and Gen Z's media behaviour and what obstacles resulted in unsuccessful media literacy education spread. The findings indicated that the Chinese government has supported media literacy education in recent years. However, the unequal distribution of educational resources, differences in parents' expectations, and low teaching ability of teachers have blocked its widespread adoption. The main purpose of this article is to raise individuals' awareness of media literacy education and make individuals understand the status of China's media literacy education.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Education, Information Overload, Critical Thinking, Millennials and Gen Z.

1. Introduction

Gen Z and Millennials are two main groups that have benefited from the rapid development of the internet. Millennials typically refer to people who were born between 1985 and 2000, roughly aged between 25 and 39. China published the Reform and Opening Up Policy, also known as the "open door" policy, in 1978. Xiaoping Deng guided the policy, and it was mainly about engaging in trade with foreign countries[1]. As the Reform and opening policy came out, it drove the rapid development of China's digital era, and this generation had grown up within this context. Millennials are more frequently exposed to various forms of media, such as television, social media, and online news, compared to the previous generation. Furthermore, millennials are gradually taking a leading role in the development of today's society, with their participation and influence in the political, economic,

and cultural spheres. Therefore, investigating the media literacy ability of millennials can help us understand the relationship between technological change and social cognition. Around a decade later the web 2.0 emerged. Around a decade later, Web 2.0 emerged. User-generated content, rising social media, interactivity, and abundant user experiences are main characteristics of Web 2.0, and Gen Z has grown up during the more user-friendly Web 2.0 era. In an era of overwhelming information, the ability to recognize its authenticity has become increasingly important. This paper discusses the impact of education on the media engagement of Gen Z and Millennials in China, importance and obstacles towards media literacy education. The aim for this paper is to assist readers in understanding the relationship between technological and social cognition, particularly manifested in the behavior of Generation Z and Millennials on social media platforms. It also attempts to raise people's awareness on media literacy education, thereby to minimize the spread of fake news and promote the popularization of media literacy education.

2. Concept of Media Literacy

2.1. Overview of Media Literacy

Since the rise of the digital age, an overwhelming amount of information has emerged such as advertisements, news, and social media content. People have to filter out valuable information, thereby avoiding the information overload issue. Media literacy is a key element that individuals should possess during the information age. In general, media literacy means a person's ability to read and analyze the media message. However, Livingstone found that media literacy can be elaborated as an individual's ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create content when facing vast information [2]. Specifically, media literacy is a well-developed process for getting valuable information. In the beginning, people were required to obtain information through various media platforms such as TV and social media, and the extent of this information could be influenced by an individual's social mobility, potentially leading to a cascading effect. Due to the disparity in people's social mobility, their capabilities and the resources for acquiring information are also unbalanced. It also becomes one of the challenges in media literacy. Once people receive overwhelming information, they start the second step, which is filtering valuable information. At this moment, an individual's analysis and evaluation ability assist them in identifying and extracting valuable information efficiently. Therefore, the three core components (access, analysis and evaluation) are not only the key solution to information exposure but also a necessary skill in the information age.

2.2. The Importance of Media Literacy

The European Commission adopted that the individual has to understand how the media operates, how the media influences culture and economics, and the importance of media literacy does not depend on the extent of people's media exposure, it emphasized the essential role of media in the development of democracy, culture engagement and the formation of active citizenship[3]. In other words, media literacy enhances individuals' critical thinking abilities. People are able to recognize fake news and make rational decisions once they receive digital information. In the second place, media literacy is one of the key components that facilitate multicultural communication diversely, as people who have media literacy ability are more capable of better understanding and accepting opinions from different perspectives, thereby promoting a more inclusive public discourse. Additionally, media literacy plays a significant role in preventing the spread and occurrence of fake news. The extent of an individual's media literacy leads them to identify the authenticity of news and enables people to have the authority to play a monitor role in media. Due to the extensive coverage and widespread influence of media information, it had a profound effect on people's behavior, values and social perceptions. In the context of media's influence on culture, students are required to think

critically about the media information that they read, hear and see[4]. Thus, it is crucial to integrate media literacy into education.

Moreover, media literacy has different meanings when facing different groups[5]. From scholars' perspectives, each individual is required to understand the literature meaning that the information is disclosed, then make a deep analysis of this information and disseminate personal thoughts, thereby enhancing people's information analysis capabilities and promoting mutual communications. Additionally, media literacy should be understood within the framework of critical pedagogy, and it also has a close connection with social and cultural practices[6]. Scholars and Citizen Action Groups share a common understanding of media literacy, which is the exploration of critical thinking skills. However, in terms of understanding the concept of media literacy, the Citizen Action groups aim to build a balanced relationship between individuals and media. In other words, individuals acquire the right to free speech, and they are also encouraged to think critically about the content released by the media, but based on the condition that they should not accuse the media indiscriminately.

3. The Role of Education in Shaping Media Behavior

3.1. Media Literacy Education in China

According to research, there were approximately 1.1 billion internet users as of June 2024, an increase of around 7.4 million people compared to 2023. The majority of these users are elderly individuals and teenagers[7]. As the number of internet users in China continues to grow, the importance of media literacy has become increasingly evident. Both the Chinese government and educational agencies have taken a supportive stance on media literacy education.

Based on scholar's research, media literacy education in China began to develop gradually in the 1990s[8]. Scholars in China are now attempting to establish media literacy as a distinct academic discipline. The rapid development of Web 2.0, also known as the participative web, has created an increased demand for media literacy. As more user-generated content emerges, the internet has become one of the primary tools for people to socialize[1]. Research shows that some schools in first-tier cities have already started implementing media literacy education. For instance, several primary schools in Hangzhou and Guangdong have attempted to integrate media literacy, psychology, and ethics curricula to improve students' media literacy skills[9].

Moreover, government-funded organizations in China are also making efforts to implement media literacy programs for teenagers and primary school students. One notable example is the Guangzhou Children's Palace Media Literacy Project. The Children's Palace, an organization that offers extracurricular activities such as sports and art classes, provides a curriculum that includes a young reporters' workshop and an editing class[10].

From the above, it is clear that the Chinese government is making efforts to improve the public's media literacy. However, these efforts remain at a surface level. A key element of media literacy is empowering individuals to think critically when consuming information on digital platforms. Therefore, schools should also focus on improving students' critical thinking skills. Some scholars argue that media literacy should not be taught as an independent course but should instead be integrated into existing subjects as a cross-disciplinary skill to be developed[11]. The core components of media literacy include skills such as information analysis, sourcing, and critical thinking, which can be applied to a variety of subjects, including history, sociology, and science, rather than being confined to a separate subject.

3.2. Relationship of Critical Thinking and media literacy

As Sholle and Denski mentioned, media literacy education is rooted in the critical thinking framework, with an emphasis on individuals' ability to evaluate or analyze information. Critical thinking is one

of the significant indicators of enhancing an individual's media literacy ability. Critical thinking means making rational personal judgments about something based on facts, observation, and evidence, rather than just accepting surface explanations of events. The core of critical thinking is conducting in-depth analysis of information and raising reasonable questions, thereby understanding the logical structure of events and assessing their reliability based on a variety of factors[12]. In the context of China, educational agencies are striving to improve students' critical thinking skills, but meaningful results have not yet been achieved.

Although critical thinking education has been promoted in Chinese universities, its development is still progressing slowly. Chinese traditional culture is one of the essential aspects hindering the development of critical thinking. The Chinese culture encourages students to respect authority and social order. Li and Liu argue that individual respect for authority is attributed to China's long-term feudal rule, where people ranked themselves according to age and official position[13]. Under these circumstances, teachers had a higher social status than students. Thus, the only rule that students were required to obey in the classroom was to respect the teacher and listen to them[14].

Educational institutions should transition from the teacher-centered model to a student-centered approach to enhance students' critical thinking abilities. In the meantime, they should encourage students to express their individual thoughts and analyze the learning content.

3.3. Millennials and Gen Z 's Performance on Social Media

As statistics indicate that Gen Z and millennials are two major social media-using groups; with the development of social media, there are approximately 1 billion people using social media on a daily basis, and 70% of millennials consider social media as a main source of information[15][16]. Around 15-20 % of users are under 18 years old, and people aged 25-34 occupy 35% of the total number of social media users. WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (TikTok), and Xiao Hong Shu are the most widely used social media platforms in people 's daily lives[17]. These software have a common feature, which is they all provide a large opportunity to support User Generate Content, especially Douyin (Tik Tok) and Xiao Hong Shu. From the performance of millennials and Gen Z on social media, it can be seen that media literacy is closely related to media behaviour, and these two demographics presented a positive image in their behaviour of using social media. They not only express their personal viewpoint more actively but also demonstrate a sense of social responsibility. For example, a Douyin influencer, "Yang Mao Yue," joked about the difficulties faced by Generation Z in the job market, which led to an intense discussion. In his video, he sarcastically questioned the employment struggles of young people; he said, "Aren't the Gen Z supposed to reform the workplace? Why can't they even get into the workplace?". He also expressed his concern that if young people shift careers to become influencers, it might intensify the career competition. Yang's statement resulted in widespread dissatisfaction among Gen Z, mainly from two aspects: 1. People are dissatisfied with the tone of the statement. 2. His statement lacks empathy and is too subjective. In response to Yang's statement, Gen Z presented a remarkable result of media literacy education. Specifically, individuals shared their perspectives on Yang's assertion that Gen Z has a poor reputation in the job market. For instance, the Douyin user "Yi Ke Na Tie Nao Dai" pointed out Yang's statement neglected the consideration of realistic problems faced by the young generation today, such as intensive employment competition in the job market. During the responding process, the user maintains a rational attitude and critically analyzes the causes of Gen Z's difficulty in finding jobs. Her sensible and critical response is crucial evidence to show people's media literacy. However, some of the users showed a negative image of the response to Yang's incident. Users expressed their anger and extremist responses under Yang's video comment area, and some comments even escalated to the level of cyberbullying. The situation not only reflected people's lack of media literacy but also increased the extremization of public opinion. In addition, people's behaviour on social media platforms can be a double-edged sword.

Specifically, user-generation content is a primary module in social media platforms, so it may offer diverse perspectives or critiques on a particular incident when they browse content created by others. The Alliance for a Media Literate America mentioned above that people have the right to freedom of speech, but it is based on a reasonable and calm attitude.

4. Obstacles in Media Literacy Education

The unequal allocation of education resources is the primary cause of disparity in the level of media literacy among individuals, and it is also one of the obstacles to enhancing people's media literacy. In recent years, the education resources gap between urban and rural areas in China has been still very apparent. Students who live in economically developed regions have greater accessibility to education facilities and online education resources[18]. Household income, family cognitive level and teacher ability are three factors that resulted in education disparities between urban and rural areas. Urban residents who engage in socialized production are more willing to spend money on education than rural area residents who engage in small-holder production[18]. The main reason for this phenomenon is the difference in parents' expectations for their children's education. To be specific, urban families generally have higher education level; thus, they place more emphasis on their children's overall development. On the other hand, rural family tend to focus on the traditional view of education, which prioritizes acquiring knowledge. There is a phrase in China called “出路 (chūlù)”, which means solution. In the context of education, it refers to the opportunities to change people's lives through acquiring academic knowledge. So, some rural area residents believe education is the only “chūlù” to change their children's life. The education expectation of parents from different regions also reveals their attitude toward media literacy education. Due to parent's education backgrounds and limited awareness towards education, it may have resulted in students being at a disadvantage in media literacy education. Under these circumstances, media literacy education might not play a significant role in school education agenda. Some schools in rural areas remain to concentrate on teaching traditional subjects and neglect the development of students' media literacy and critical thinking skills. However, the evidence showed that the students from rural areas still have a huge demand for media literacy education. However, the evidence showed that the student from rural area still have huge demand of media literacy education. Media literacy program assist children who are separated from the migrant worker parents to enhance their self-esteem and promote children's social participation[19]. According to Lee's survey result, she stated that rural area student showed a enthusiasm for the media literacy education. The student said media literacy course not only improved their communication skills but also helped them become a responsible citizen[9]. Furthermore, the teaching ability of teachers is also one of main challenges in media literacy education. From an educational perspective, the overall quality of teachers in rural areas is lower than that of teachers in urban areas. There are around 54% of rural area teacher who are substitute teacher and “Minban Teacher, and most of them haven't received any formal training[19]. “Min ban” and “Substitute teacher” are usually hired on a contract basis by schools, and the government does not regulate their salaries. The challenges associated with media literacy education are diversified. To overcome these issues, the following strategies are suggested. First of all, school administrators should organize training sessions for teachers to enhance their professional skill. The training can include the roundtable discussions or lectures delivered by expert with media literacy education experience. The purpose of this approach is to provide teachers with opportunities for collaborative learning on media literacy, thereby improving their teaching proficiency. Secondly, schools should also make effort to raise parent's awareness of media literacy education, as children's media literacy capability have a close connection with their parents' understanding of its significance. To address this, the school can hold parent-teacher meeting in each semester and use these opportunities to share knowledge about media literacy. Thus, to assist parents understand individual's media literacy can

influence their social cognition, and the crucial role that media literacy play during the information era. Finally, the local communities also can offer media-related project, such as journalist workshop and news editing courses. As these projects are not only able to stimulate student's interest but also helping student enhance their media literacy ability through practice.

5. Conclusion

During the age of information overload, everyone should have media literacy capability. The paper discusses the importance of media literacy, the challenges that media literacy education encounters, and how education influences people's behaviours regarding media usage. Millennials and Gen Z are two major reference groups in this paper, as they experienced Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 era. The paper emphasized that media literacy is the ability to filter effective information and make a deep analysis of the information, and during the analyzing process, critical thinking ability is a core component; it assists individuals in identifying the credibility of the information and promotes a more inclusive public discourse simultaneously. In recent years, the Chinese government has shown a supportive attitude toward media literacy education, and the education agencies in first-tier cities have also begun implementing media literacy education programs. However, media literacy education still hasn't been widely adopted due to the disparities in educational resource allocation, low teaching quality and limited awareness of the parent's education level. In order to improve the current situation, the government can provide financial support to schools in rural areas, regulate the school's teaching quality, and provide communication opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas. Therefore, it will be needed to increase awareness about the significance of media literacy education.

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