

Exploring Differences in Social Media Literacy Between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants: A Comparative Analysis of Critical Skills and Digital Adaptability

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Date of Submission

10/11/24

Introduction

The dictionary defines media literacy as the ‘ability to critically analyse stories presented in the mass media and to determine their accuracy or credibility’. In today’s digital age, social media has become a primary source of information, communication, and socialisation, shaping individuals’ perspectives and influencing their daily decisions. However, the ability to critically engage with content on social media varies widely across populations, a disparity influenced by factors like age, experience, and exposure to digital environments. Scholars have increasingly examined the concept of social media literacy in recent years—the skills necessary to navigate, evaluate, and use social media responsibly. These skills are essential not only for identifying credible information and recognizing misinformation but also for understanding platform algorithms, protecting personal data, and fostering well-being in an increasingly interconnected world.

A fundamental demographic distinction within this field lies between digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital natives, those who have grown up immersed in technology and social media, are often assumed to possess higher levels of digital adaptability and familiarity with online platforms. In contrast, digital immigrants, who adopted social media later in life, may bring a different set of skills and perspectives, potentially derived from pre-digital experiences and more traditional media literacy practices. This study seeks to explore the nuanced differences in social media literacy between digital natives and digital immigrants through a comparative analysis of critical skills and digital adaptability. By examining the specific competencies and challenges each group faces, this research aims to deepen our understanding of how social media literacy differs between these demographics. Findings from this study can inform targeted educational interventions, helping both groups enhance their digital resilience and navigate the complexities of modern social media more effectively.

Research Question

What differences, if any, exist between the social media literacy of digital natives and digital immigrants?

Literature Review

Research has noted that people spend long periods on social media, ignoring the implications this carries in daily life— following this, the concept of social media literacy, an emerging concept barely developed in the literature, becomes relevant [1]. Social media is said to differ from other types of Internet platforms as content is consumed not only passively; but rather, consumers can engage in content creation without any prior knowledge or experience on the subject. A 2022 research article states that users are exposed to different phenomena on social media, such as publicity, images with a positivity bias, and aggressive and violent behaviours. Social media filters content provided to users based on their prior engagement with previous content and therefore individual bias— filtering content with technology using confirmation bias [1][2]. This only makes media literacy all the more important. Research emphasises that media literacy is a concept and practice necessary to help citizens be informed and empowered in a world increasingly populated with diverse media and messages[3]. Scholars have begun working on conceptualising social media literacy as well– one such model being SMILE [4]-- where two interfacing domains of development and empowerment are used. SMILE shows that the development of social media literacy is influenced by family, peers, and educators [3][4]. With such a growing significance of social media in today's age, a scholar says “the use (of) technological tools, such as cell phones, multimedia, educational software, videos or television is the new kind of literacy that marks the generation gap between digital immigrants and digital natives”[6] This marked generation gap has been confirmed to impact, for example, how traditional school lectures are perceived, and the difference in learning preferences from digital natives in comparison to digital immigrants [6]. The ultimate concern lies in the consumption of media between these two demographics, however. Social media has the potential to dictate one's daily life and perceptions. Exploratory research has highlighted the relationships between the conscious use of social media by adolescents and their psychological well-being, and it has been concluded that the conscious use of social media is linked to moral disengagement and analytical thinking [5]. In summary, existing literature highlights that social media literacy varies significantly between digital natives and digital immigrants, shaped by differences in exposure, cognitive strategies, and adaptability to digital environments. Understanding the differences in social media literacy between these demographics will allow the fostering of a more critically engaged and digitally literate society by bridging the gap and raising awareness through varied methods based on the findings of this study.

Proposed Methodology

This study will employ mixed-method approaches. A comparative survey will be held. Participants (n=500) will be recruited using stratified sampling to ensure even representation of demographics by gender. Each participant will complete a survey consisting of questions on their social media literacy, which they would be asked to rate on a 1-7 Likert scale. These surveys will be for both digital natives (n=250), and digital immigrants (n=250) and will test their knowledge of key social media literacy skills, such as detecting misinformation and understanding algorithms. The digital natives and digital immigrants will be differentiated through age groups. Along with that, a standardised test that includes fact-checking exercises, platform-specific literacy questions, and hypothetical scenarios will be administered. This will be followed by rigorous data analysis to conclude findings from the study conducted. The results are to be compared to see if there are differences in critical thinking skills and adaptability between the two groups. Digital natives will have the age range of 18–30 years old, with digital immigrants taken to be 50+ years of age. It will be ensured participants are representative across gender, education levels, and geographic locations and demographics using stratified sampling.

Project Practicalities

Data collection will occur over a period of three months, followed by rigorous data analysis. The study will adhere strictly to ethical guidelines regarding participant privacy and data security.

Roadblocks and potential limitations

This study may face challenges in achieving representative samples, mitigating response biases. Participants may overestimate or underestimate their social media literacy due to a lack of self-awareness or desire to appear more knowledgeable. Evaluation tasks will be given to mitigate the effect of this skewing the main data. Digital immigrants might also face more challenges navigating online tools used in the study, which could affect their performance and engagement. This could result in artificially lower literacy scores for digital immigrants if they struggle with the study's digital components. However, this can be prevented by providing technical support and clear instructions, or by offering alternative methods (such as in-person surveys) to reduce the impact of digital accessibility issues.

Conclusion

This research aims to deepen the understanding of social media literacy differences between digital natives and digital immigrants by examining their critical skills, adaptability, and approaches to navigating online content. As social media continues to influence public opinion, individual well-being, and access to information, addressing literacy disparities across generations is essential. This study will provide insights into each group's unique strengths and challenges, contributing valuable data for designing targeted educational programs. The findings of this study can be disseminated through academic publications

upon conclusions reached. These statistics and insights will help improve the quality of information users absorb from engaging in social media— also allowing students a better quality of education when these generational differences are taken into consideration and bridged.

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