

Assessing Social Media Literacy among University Students: Platform Awareness, Critical Evaluation and Ethical Responsibility

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital age, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok have become integral to everyday communication, learning, and social interaction. For university students, social media can connect formal and informal learning and support participatory forms of communication (Greenhow and Lewin, 2016). As social media environments are increasingly shaped by algorithmic filtering and user-data practices, they also present challenges related to misinformation, privacy, and the selective presentation of content (Eslami et al., 2015; Madden et al., 2013; Kahne and Bowyer, 2017).

Social media literacy extends beyond the technical ability to operate digital platforms. It includes awareness of how content is curated, the ability to critically assess the credibility and intent of information, and the ethical responsibility to participate respectfully online. Effective engagement therefore draws on digital literacy, media literacy, and critical thinking skills (Buckingham, 2007; Choi, 2016). Concerns about the wider effects of intensive smartphone and social media use also reinforce the need for more reflective forms of digital participation (Cain, 2018). Although today's university students are often regarded as digital natives, active use does not necessarily imply a strong understanding of platform structures, privacy practices, or critical evaluation processes (McDougall et al., 2018; Madden et al., 2013).

Objective

The main objective of this study is to assess social media literacy among Bachelor of Arts undergraduates in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Kelaniya, with particular attention to platform awareness, critical evaluation of digital content, and ethical responsibility in online environments.

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Research Problem

University students in Sri Lanka are frequent users of social media, but active platform use does not necessarily demonstrate social media literacy. A specific concern is whether undergraduates understand platform curation and data practices, critically evaluate digital content, and apply ethical judgment when communicating or sharing information online. Limited capability in these areas may increase vulnerability to misinformation and impulsive or harmful responses. Accordingly, this study examines social media literacy among Bachelor of Arts undergraduates in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Kelaniya across three dimensions: platform awareness, critical content evaluation, and ethical responsibility. Both self-reported behaviors and scenario-based responses are used.

Methodology

A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Journal articles, research papers, and other scholarly sources were used as secondary sources to establish the theoretical and empirical context of the study.

The study population comprised students pursuing Bachelor of Arts degrees in the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Kelaniya. To promote representation across departments and academic years, 150 students were selected through simple random sampling and invited to complete the questionnaire. Data collected through Google Forms were exported to SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cumulative percentages, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and survey responses.

Data Analysis

Data were collected by administering the questionnaire through Google Forms to students in the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences. Of the 150 randomly selected students from various departments who were invited to participate, 129 submitted responses, yielding a response rate of 86%.

$R = \text{number of responses received} = 129$

$T = \text{total questionnaires administered} = 150$

The response rate (P) was calculated as follows:

$$P = \left(\frac{R}{T}\right) \times 100 = \left(\frac{129}{150}\right) \times 100 = 86\%$$

The largest age group comprised 23-year-old respondents, representing 50.4% of the sample. Approximately 80% of respondents were between 23 and 25 years of age, indicating that most were in their early twenties. The overall age range was 23 to 28 years, and only four respondents (3.1%) were 28 years old (Table 1).

Table 1: Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	23	65	50.4	50.4
	24	25	19.4	69.8
	25	13	10.1	79.8
	26	15	11.6	91.5
	27	7	5.4	96.9
	28	4	3.1	100.0
	Total	129	100.0	

Most respondents were female, accounting for 82.2% of the sample (106 of 129), while 17.8% were male (Table 2). This distribution indicates a substantial gender imbalance in the sample and reflects greater female representation among the respondents.

Table 2: Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	106	82.2	82.2
	Male	23	17.8	100.0
	Total	129	100.0	

Most respondents were from the Faculty of Humanities (57.4%), while 42.6% were from the Faculty of Social Sciences (Table 3). Final-year students accounted for 60.5% of respondents, followed by third-year students (29.5%) and second-year students (10.1%). This distribution indicates that the perspectives of senior students are strongly represented in the sample.

Table 3: Respondents by Faculty

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Faculty of Humanities	74	57.4	57.4
	Faculty of Social Sciences	55	42.6	100.0
	Total	129	100.0	

Of the 129 respondents, 73 reported that they were aware of digital literacy, whereas 56 reported that they were not (Table 4). Overall, the findings indicate a moderate level of awareness of digital literacy.

Table 4: Digital Literacy Awareness

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	56	43.4	43.4	43.4
	Yes	73	56.6	56.6	100.0
	Total	129	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the primary social media platforms used by respondents, 59.7% (n = 77) reported using Facebook, 30.2% (n = 39) reported using WhatsApp, and 10.1% (n = 13) reported using YouTube (Table 5). These results indicate that Facebook and WhatsApp are the dominant platforms for digital communication among the respondents.

Table 5: Primary Social Media Platform Used

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Facebook	77	59.7	59.7	59.7
	WhatsApp	39	30.2	30.2	89.9
	YouTube	13	10.1	10.1	100.0
	Total	129	100.0	100.0	

Awareness of Platform Knowledge, Algorithms, and Privacy

Students were asked whether they understood how the algorithms used by social media platforms affect the content they see. Of the respondents, 40.3% (n = 52) agreed and 19.4% strongly agreed, while an equal number to those who agreed (n = 52) selected a neutral response. Students were also asked whether they had read or reviewed the privacy policies of the social media platforms they used. In response, 9.3% (n = 12) strongly agreed, 50.4% (n = 65) agreed, and 52 respondents selected a neutral response. Regarding the settings available to control posts and content on social media, 39.5% (n = 51) strongly agreed that they understood these settings, 10.1% (n = 13) agreed, and 40.3% (n = 52) were neutral; 13 students disagreed or indicated that they did not know. When asked whether they could identify commercial, sponsored, and promotional content on social media, 40.3% (n = 52) reported that they understood such content. However, the majority (n = 77) did not express a clear understanding. Finally, students were asked about their awareness that social media platforms collect user data. Of the 129 respondents, 60.5% (n = 78) selected a neutral response, 20.2% (n = 26) agreed, and 19.4% (n = 25) strongly agreed. These findings

suggest substantial uncertainty regarding data collection practices.

Critical Thinking and Content Evaluation

According to the study data, 40.3% of respondents reported checking the source of social media content to assess its credibility before sharing, and 20.2% reported doing so regularly. However, 39.5% selected a neutral response, indicating uncertainty or inconsistency regarding source reliability. Regarding the accuracy or truthfulness of social media content, 20.2% reported that they did not verify it, 50.4% checked facts only in some cases, 19.4% checked facts to ensure accuracy, and 10.1% indicated a high level of concern about accuracy. Participants were also asked how often they critically evaluated social media content. When asked whether they considered the bias or intent behind posts, 30.2% agreed, another 30.2% strongly agreed, and 39.5% were neutral. A large majority reported that comments were useful for assessing credibility or considering other perspectives (70.5% agreed, whereas 29.5% did not). In relation to avoiding premature conclusions, 40.7% agreed and 9.9% strongly agreed, while 40.0% were neutral and 10.1% acknowledged forming opinions without reading full articles. Overall, these results suggest that although many students engage in some critical reflection when using social media, a substantial proportion adopt a relatively passive or inconsistent approach to evaluating content.

Ethics and Responsible Use

Of the respondents, 40.3% (n = 52) strongly agreed that they avoid sharing content that could be harmful or offensive to others on social media, while 51.2% (n = 66) agreed and 8.5% (n = 11) were neutral. To assess students' judgment in emotionally charged situations, participants were asked whether they considered the truthfulness of information before reacting emotionally on social media. Fifty-two students (40.3%) agreed with the statement.

Sixty-five students (50.4%) responded neutrally, while 12 students (9.3%) disagreed. When asked whether they gave appropriate credit or respect to content owners, 30.2% of students strongly agreed and a similar proportion agreed; 29.5% expressed moderate agreement, while 10.1% did not agree. Students were also asked whether they avoided insulting others during controversial or emotionally charged discussions on social media. Approximately 79.9% agreed, while the remaining respondents did not agree. Finally, students were asked whether social media should serve as a tool for positive and respectful communication. Fifty-two students (40.3%) agreed, 26 (20.2%) strongly agreed, 25 (19.4%) were neutral, and 26 (20.2%) disagreed.

Situational Judgment (Case-Based Scenarios)

Participants were presented with a scenario involving a hateful post that claimed a religious leader had made a controversial statement but provided no source or link. Sixty-five students (50.4%) stated that they would search for reports from trusted news sources to verify the claim, while 38 (29.5%) said they would ignore the post. Thirteen students (10.1%) stated that they would comment with their opinion even if the claim were unverified, and another 13 (10.1%) said they would share the post immediately. Students were also asked how they would respond if a personal photograph of them were posted on social media without permission. Fifty-three students (41.1%) said they would report the post directly, 52 (40.3%) said they would politely request its removal and report it if necessary, and 24 (18.6%) said they would ignore the situation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the respondents possessed a basic to moderate level of social media awareness but showed important gaps in the consistent verification of online information and in understanding platform processes. High proportions of neutral responses were recorded for algorithmic influence, privacy settings, and data collection, suggesting uncertainty rather than strong literacy in these areas. Although 56.6% reported awareness of digital literacy, this single awareness item should not be interpreted as evidence of advanced competence. Students sometimes considered bias and used comments to explore credibility or alternative perspectives; however, source and fact verification were inconsistent. The ethical findings were comparatively positive: most respondents reported avoiding harmful content and insulting behavior. Nevertheless, scenario-based responses revealed a gap between stated values and intended actions, because a minority were willing to comment on or share an unverified claim. The study therefore suggests that the sampled undergraduates are active social media users but are not yet consistently prepared to engage with social media in a critically informed and ethically responsible manner. Because the analysis is descriptive and the sample is drawn from two faculties at one university, the findings should not be generalized to all Sri Lankan university students or used to claim subgroup differences without further statistical testing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that although students demonstrate moderate levels of awareness and ethical engagement on social media, several areas require further development. To address these gaps and strengthen social media literacy among university students, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, higher education institutions should integrate formal education on digital literacy and digital ethics into the core curriculum. Such instruction should address key topics including algorithmic awareness, privacy management, content evaluation, and responsible digital citizenship. Active learning methods, such as role-play, presentations, scenario analysis, and case-study discussions, can be used to promote deeper learning and critical reflection.

Second, universities should foster a culture of fact-checking. Students should be trained to assess the reliability of information before sharing it and introduced to credible fact-checking sources and verification methods. Verification activities can be integrated into academic assignments and classroom exercises so that the critical evaluation of digital content becomes a routine practice.

Third, greater awareness of data privacy and the influence of algorithms is essential. Workshops and awareness campaigns can educate students about managing their online profiles, adjusting platform settings, and understanding how personal information is used to target content and advertisements. This knowledge can help students make more informed decisions about their online behavior. Fourth, ethical participation on social media should be continuously promoted. Student organizations and clubs can encourage respectful discourse, inclusivity, and empathy online. Universities should also provide guidance on intellectual property, copyright, and proper attribution so that students can observe appropriate digital etiquette.

Finally, cross-disciplinary approaches to digital literacy should be encouraged. Faculties across different fields of study should integrate relevant aspects of digital citizenship into their curricula. Collaborative projects and interdisciplinary workshops addressing misinformation, digital activism, and media responsibility can broaden students' perspectives and prepare them to participate responsibly in the digital world. Together, these measures can provide universities with a framework for developing sustainable and comprehensive interventions that equip learners with the skills and attitudes required to navigate social media critically, ethically, and responsibly.

Keywords - social media literacy, digital citizenship, awareness, ethics, critical thinking

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