

The Role of Media Literacy in Shaping Public Opinion and Political Participation in the Digital Era

Ibrahiem M. M. El Emary^{1,*}, Mohammed Ahmed Alhebbi²

^{1,2}*King Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

(Received January 20, 2025; Revised April 25, 2025; Accepted July 15, 2025; Available online September 10, 2025)

Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed how people access, interpret, and respond to political information. This study explores the role of media literacy in shaping public opinion and political participation in the digital era. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten respondents from diverse educational and social backgrounds. The findings reveal that individuals with higher media literacy demonstrate stronger critical thinking, higher awareness of information credibility, and greater involvement in political discourse and civic engagement. Conversely, those with lower media literacy are more susceptible to misinformation, hoaxes, and emotional manipulation, which can distort political perceptions and reduce participation. The study highlights that media literacy not only enhances citizens' ability to filter and evaluate political content but also strengthens democratic quality by encouraging informed and responsible participation. It recommends that media literacy education be integrated into both formal and informal learning environments to foster critical, active, and digitally responsible citizens.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Public Opinion, Political Participation, Digital Society, Misinformation

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of communication has fundamentally altered how individuals engage with political information, public discourse, and civic life. The proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube has created a participatory media ecosystem where every user can become both a consumer and producer of political messages [1]. This unprecedented accessibility of information has enhanced democratic participation by enabling individuals to express opinions freely and exchange diverse perspectives [2]. However, it has also led to a surge of misinformation, disinformation, and manipulative narratives that challenge citizens' ability to discern factual information from biased or false content [3].

The ease of information dissemination in the digital era has not necessarily been accompanied by an equal increase in citizens' critical capacity to evaluate that information. This imbalance has resulted in a phenomenon where the quantity of accessible information does not guarantee its quality or reliability [4]. Consequently, citizens who lack adequate media literacy may become vulnerable to political hoaxes, echo chambers, and confirmation bias, which distort public perception and weaken informed political decision-making [5]. These challenges highlight the growing importance of media literacy—a competency encompassing the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media content across platforms critically and ethically [6].

According to Livingstone [7], media literacy extends beyond technical media use; it involves understanding how media messages shape values, beliefs, and political orientations. Similarly, Potter [8] emphasizes that media literacy is an essential cognitive and affective skill that allows individuals to critically process information rather than passively absorb it. In political contexts, this ability plays a decisive role in shaping public opinion, as citizens rely heavily on mediated information to form judgments about political issues, candidates, and policies [9].

*Corresponding author: Ibrahiem M. M. El Emary (omary57@hotmail.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47738/ijis.v8i3.271>

This is an open access article under the CC-BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

© Authors retain all copyrights

Public opinion itself serves as the foundation of modern democracy. As McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory asserts, media not only reflects public priorities but actively constructs them by influencing which issues dominate the public agenda [10]. In digital environments, this agenda-setting function has become even more complex due to algorithmic personalization, where platforms curate content based on user preferences, inadvertently reinforcing ideological polarization [11]. Thus, the interplay between media literacy and the digital information ecosystem has become a defining factor in how citizens perceive political reality and participate in governance.

The connection between media literacy and political participation is both empirical and theoretical. Individuals with strong media literacy are more likely to verify information sources, engage in fact-based discussions, and participate in political activities such as voting, campaigning, or civic advocacy [8]. Conversely, individuals with low media literacy are more prone to misinformation-driven apathy or disengagement, undermining democratic quality. This suggests that media literacy functions not only as a protective tool against disinformation but also as an empowering force for meaningful democratic engagement [3], [9].

Recent studies show that in digital societies, citizens' ability to think critically about media content correlates with trust in democratic institutions and the perceived legitimacy of public discourse [4], [6]. Media literacy thus operates as a mediating variable between media exposure and political behavior, shaping not only how individuals interpret political information but also how they act upon it [1]. Strengthening this competency is essential in sustaining democratic resilience and countering digital manipulation strategies such as coordinated misinformation campaigns or algorithmic propaganda [2], [5].

Despite its recognized importance, disparities in media literacy remain evident across demographic, educational, and socioeconomic groups [7], [11]. Many individuals, especially in developing and transitional democracies, still rely on unverified online content as their primary political information source. This creates unequal levels of political awareness and participation. Therefore, examining the relationship between media literacy, public opinion formation, and political participation in the digital era is vital to understanding how democracies can adapt to a hyper-connected yet fragmented information landscape.

Given this context, this study seeks to analyze the role of media literacy in shaping public opinion and political participation in the digital era. It aims to understand how differences in media literacy levels influence citizens' interpretation of political information, the credibility they assign to media sources, and their patterns of political involvement. By employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this study provides a contextual understanding of how citizens perceive and interact with political information online, offering insights relevant to media education, policy development, and digital democracy research.

2. Literature Review

Media literacy has evolved as an essential competency in contemporary society, especially within the context of an increasingly complex digital information ecosystem. The convergence of media, technology, and politics has reshaped the way individuals receive, process, and act upon information. As communication becomes decentralized through digital platforms, traditional hierarchies of knowledge and authority have been disrupted, giving rise to a participatory media environment in which users are simultaneously content consumers and producers [12]. This transformation has amplified the need for individuals to possess critical literacy skills that allow them to navigate a vast and often misleading flow of information. The concept of media literacy has thus expanded from its original focus on understanding mass media texts to encompass a broader set of cognitive, social, and ethical competencies that facilitate informed participation in digital culture.

According to Buckingham, media literacy is not simply a technical skill but a social practice grounded in critical thinking and democratic participation [12]. It empowers individuals to question media representations, uncover hidden ideologies, and recognize the power relations embedded in media structures. Livingstone emphasizes that media literacy involves both access and awareness — the ability to interpret symbolic content and understand the institutional forces that shape it [13]. From this perspective, media literacy is both a form of intellectual empowerment and a civic necessity. Individuals who are media literate are not merely passive recipients of information; rather, they become active interpreters capable of contextualizing messages within broader political, social, and cultural frameworks.

Potter further refines the definition of media literacy by proposing that it comprises multiple dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral components [14]. The cognitive dimension refers to the intellectual processing of media content — evaluating accuracy, reliability, and bias. The emotional dimension concerns understanding the psychological impact of media messages, particularly those designed to elicit fear, anger, or empathy. The aesthetic dimension relates to appreciating the creative and stylistic qualities of media, while the moral dimension emphasizes ethical awareness regarding representation, stereotyping, and truth. Taken together, these dimensions form a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals engage with media on both rational and affective levels.

In the digital era, the scope of media literacy has broadened to encompass information and digital literacy, reflecting the interconnected nature of technological and communicative competencies. UNESCO conceptualizes media and information literacy as an integrated set of skills that enable individuals to engage effectively with digital information while maintaining ethical standards and critical awareness [15]. This framework highlights the importance of understanding how algorithms, data collection practices, and corporate interests influence the visibility and credibility of online content. As Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler demonstrate, exposure to untrustworthy sources and disinformation can significantly distort political perceptions, particularly when individuals lack the necessary literacy to evaluate information critically [16]. Therefore, developing media literacy in digital contexts is not merely an educational goal but a civic imperative aimed at safeguarding democratic integrity.

Public opinion, as a concept, has long been recognized as a central component of democratic life. It represents the collective attitudes, beliefs, and judgments that citizens hold toward political issues, institutions, and actors [17]. The mass media, through its ability to shape discourse and define social reality, plays a pivotal role in forming and directing public opinion. Habermas argues that the media serves as a public sphere — a space for rational-critical debate — where citizens deliberate and negotiate shared meanings [17]. However, in practice, media institutions often act as gatekeepers that determine which issues receive attention and how they are framed. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory provides a seminal explanation for this phenomenon, suggesting that the media does not tell people what to think but what to think about by influencing issue salience [18].

In the digital age, this process has become increasingly complex. The rise of social media and algorithmic personalization has decentralized the traditional mechanisms of agenda-setting, redistributing influence among journalists, platforms, and users [19]. Pariser's notion of the "filter bubble" illustrates how algorithms curate personalized information environments, reinforcing users' pre-existing beliefs while excluding dissenting perspectives [19]. This selective exposure contributes to ideological polarization, as citizens are more likely to encounter information that aligns with their opinions rather than challenges them. The implications for democratic discourse are profound: while digital platforms expand access to information, they simultaneously fragment the public sphere into multiple, isolated communities of opinion. The ability to recognize and resist these algorithmic biases is therefore a crucial aspect of contemporary media literacy.

Framing theory complements agenda-setting by explaining how issues are presented and interpreted. Entman defines framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations [20]. In political contexts, framing is used strategically by media institutions, governments, and political actors to influence public interpretation of events. For instance, framing an issue such as immigration as a "security threat" versus a "humanitarian challenge" can significantly shift public attitudes and policy preferences. Media literacy enables individuals to deconstruct these frames, uncover underlying assumptions, and assess the rhetorical strategies at play. Without such critical capacity, audiences risk internalizing biased narratives that distort democratic understanding.

The relationship between media literacy and political participation is well-documented in contemporary scholarship. Individuals with higher levels of media literacy demonstrate greater engagement in political discussions, higher trust in credible sources, and a stronger inclination toward fact-based decision-making [21]. Kahne and Bowyer argue that media literacy serves as both a protective and generative force: it shields individuals from manipulation while fostering informed and constructive participation in civic life [21]. In online spaces, where misinformation and emotional appeals

proliferate, media literacy equips users with the discernment to identify credible information and the confidence to express opinions responsibly.

Mihailidis and Viotty further contend that media literacy should be seen as a form of civic empowerment that extends beyond fact-checking to encompass values of empathy, inclusivity, and ethical dialogue [22]. They suggest that cultivating media literacy contributes to what they call “civic intentionality” — the conscious use of media for social good. Similarly, Hobbs and Jensen emphasize that media literacy education promotes not only individual critical thinking but also collective democratic resilience [23]. By understanding how media systems operate, citizens become better equipped to hold power accountable, engage in reasoned debate, and resist the manipulative dynamics of disinformation campaigns.

The literature collectively demonstrates that media literacy, public opinion, and political participation are interconnected within a mutually reinforcing framework. Media literacy enhances the ability of citizens to process information critically, which in turn influences how they form political opinions and engage in participatory actions. Conversely, low levels of media literacy can lead to distorted perceptions, political apathy, and susceptibility to manipulation. As digital communication continues to evolve, the cultivation of media literacy emerges not merely as an educational goal but as a strategic necessity for the preservation of democratic values and informed citizenship. The digital public sphere now demands individuals who are not only technologically competent but also critically conscious — citizens capable of interpreting information ethically, deliberating rationally, and contributing constructively to the political discourse of their time.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology aimed at comprehensively understanding the role of media literacy in shaping public opinion and political participation in the digital era. The central objective of this approach is to interpret social phenomena as experienced by individuals, focusing on how citizens perceive, process, and act upon political information within digitally mediated environments. The qualitative framework allows for a nuanced exploration of meaning and experience, while a number of quantitative expressions are embedded in the design to enhance analytical precision and provide structured interpretation of observed patterns.

The research design is interpretive and inductive, emphasizing the subjective realities of participants. The study involves a purposive selection of respondents—individuals actively exposed to political information through digital platforms. Participants are selected based on varying degrees of media literacy, educational background, age, and professional experience. The purposive sampling approach is used because it allows the researcher to target individuals most capable of providing in-depth insights about the phenomenon being studied. Although the total number of respondents is ten, each participant represents a distinct sociocultural and educational spectrum, ensuring diversity of viewpoints and data richness. The diversity distribution across demographic categories is expressed through a proportional representation model:

$$P_i = \frac{f_i}{N} \times 100\%$$

where P_i denotes the proportion of a particular demographic group, f_i is the number of individuals belonging to that group, and N represents the total sample size. This formulation provides a simple quantitative overview of participant composition and ensures transparency in sample structure.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews complemented by document analysis and observational notes. The interview guide was designed to elicit both cognitive and affective dimensions of media literacy. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate freely, providing rich qualitative data for interpretive analysis. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a thematic framework inspired by the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Although this process is qualitative in nature, the internal consistency of coding categories was measured using a reliability coefficient based on the Cronbach’s Alpha formula:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_T^2} \right)$$

In this equation, k represents the total number of themes, σ_i^2 is the variance of each theme, and σ_T^2 is the total variance across all themes. The resulting coefficient provides a mathematical estimation of coding reliability and internal coherence between themes. An α value greater than 0.70 is considered acceptable, suggesting that the thematic structure demonstrates consistency and interpretive stability.

Given the focus on understanding how media literacy affects perception and participation, this research also constructs an auxiliary analytical model to express literacy as an index. The Media Literacy Index (MLI) provides a standardized score that synthesizes the respondent's performance across five critical dimensions: access (A), analysis (L), evaluation (E), creation (C), and participation (P). The composite index is calculated using the formula:

$$MLI = \frac{A + L + E + C + P}{5}$$

Each dimension is rated on a five-point qualitative scale derived from observed responses and interpreted behaviors during interviews. A high value of MLI (close to 5) reflects strong critical competence and awareness of media processes, while a low value indicates limited understanding and susceptibility to misinformation. Although this formulation introduces a numeric representation into a qualitative study, it functions as an interpretive aid rather than a statistical measurement, allowing the researcher to visualize differences among respondents.

Parallel to the MLI, the level of political engagement is quantified through a Political Participation Index (PI), which measures both the frequency and intensity of political activities performed by respondents, including online discussions, campaign participation, information sharing, and voting behavior. The participation index is expressed mathematically as:

$$PI = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^m w_i \cdot f_i}{m}$$

Here, w_i denotes the weight assigned to each activity based on its civic significance, f_i represents the frequency of the activity as observed or reported, and m is the total number of participation categories. The weighted structure ensures that high-impact civic behaviors such as voting or volunteering are assigned greater significance compared to passive activities like liking or sharing posts.

Once both indices are obtained, a simple correlation model is employed to examine the proportional association between literacy and participation. The correlation coefficient (r) is computed as:

$$r = \frac{\sum (MLI_i - \bar{MLI})(PI_i - \bar{PI})}{\sqrt{\sum (MLI_i - \bar{MLI})^2 \sum (PI_i - \bar{PI})^2}}$$

This formula measures the degree of linear relationship between respondents' literacy levels and their participation scores. A positive correlation ($r > 0$) suggests that higher literacy levels correspond to greater political involvement, while a negative correlation ($r < 0$) would indicate an inverse relationship. Although inferential statistics are not the primary focus of qualitative research, such mathematical modeling strengthens the interpretive argument by revealing structural coherence between qualitative themes and observable behavior patterns.

To further assess the variability of responses across themes, the study employs the standard deviation model to evaluate the dispersion of respondents' literacy scores:

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2}{n - 1}}$$

This expression provides insight into the distribution of literacy competencies among respondents, reflecting whether their media literacy levels are relatively homogeneous or widely divergent. A high standard deviation suggests significant diversity in respondents' interpretive capacity, while a low deviation indicates convergence in understanding and evaluative behavior.

To strengthen validity, the study applies triangulation through multiple sources and data forms, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in multiple perspectives. Triangulation is supported mathematically by computing an inter-rater agreement coefficient (K), often referred to as Cohen's Kappa:

$$K = \frac{P_o - P_e}{1 - P_e}$$

In this equation, P_o denotes the observed agreement between coders, and P_e represents the expected agreement due to chance. A value of $K > 0.75$ indicates strong reliability, meaning that coding interpretations among multiple analysts are consistent and robust. This provides additional methodological rigor by quantifying the alignment between independent qualitative judgments.

Furthermore, to represent sentiment polarity in respondents' discourse, a Sentiment Coefficient (S_c) is constructed to quantify the orientation of opinions toward digital political content:

$$S_c = \frac{P - N}{P + N}$$

where P represents the number of positive statements reflecting critical awareness or engagement, and N represents negative statements reflecting misinformation, confusion, or apathy. The coefficient ranges from -1 to +1, where values near +1 indicate a predominantly critical and literate stance, values near -1 indicate negative or uninformed attitudes, and values near 0 represent neutrality or ambivalence.

All qualitative data—interview transcripts, observation notes, and secondary documents—are processed through iterative coding procedures. Open coding identifies recurring patterns and conceptual categories; axial coding organizes these categories into broader relational frameworks; and selective coding synthesizes them into overarching themes. The interpretive process is continuous, moving back and forth between data and theory, ensuring that conclusions emerge from the evidence rather than preconceived assumptions. To enhance interpretive precision, a normalization model is occasionally applied to convert qualitative coding frequencies into proportional ratios:

$$N_i = \frac{f_i}{\sum f_i}$$

This normalized ratio (N_i) represents the proportion of each thematic category relative to the total number of coded instances, allowing thematic dominance and salience to be visualized quantitatively.

Finally, ethical considerations are central to the methodological design. All respondents are treated as autonomous agents with informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality assured throughout the process. The confidentiality, integrity, and availability (CIA) principles are maintained in data handling and storage to ensure that all research materials remain secure and accessible only for legitimate academic purposes. The conceptual balance between qualitative interpretation and quantitative formalization ensures that this methodology remains scientifically rigorous while retaining its interpretive depth. The mathematical components serve not as replacements for narrative understanding but as supportive instruments to substantiate qualitative reasoning with analytical precision.

In essence, this methodological framework integrates interpretive inquiry with analytic formalization, providing both conceptual depth and empirical clarity. It acknowledges that the study of media literacy, public opinion, and political participation cannot be separated from the multidimensional complexity of digital communication. Therefore, by combining descriptive qualitative interpretation with structured quantitative representations, the study achieves both narrative richness and methodological robustness, offering a balanced approach to understanding how citizens critically engage with information, construct opinions, and participate in the digital public sphere.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal the intricate interconnections between media literacy, public opinion formation, and political participation within the digital era. The findings demonstrate that media literacy is not a static attribute but an evolving competency shaped by technological exposure, educational background, emotional disposition, and the social environment in which individuals interact. The analytical process, supported by both qualitative interpretation and quantitative representation, shows that literacy affects how citizens perceive political information, how they trust media systems, and how they translate perception into action. In this chapter, results are presented alongside interpretive discussion to highlight the relationship between literacy and engagement, while several tables are included to provide a more structured understanding of data patterns.

The analysis begins by identifying respondents' overall literacy performance using the Media Literacy Index (MLI). The MLI aggregates five key dimensions of literacy—access, analysis, evaluation, creation, and participation—each reflecting a different layer of media competence. Respondents' scores are calculated from the normalized responses derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts. The following table represents the literacy performance of all ten respondents.

Table 1. Media Literacy Index (MLI) of Respondents

Respondent	Access	Analysis	Evaluation	Creation	Participation	MLI
R1	4.8	4.9	5.0	4.6	4.9	4.84
R2	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.1	4.0	4.22
R3	3.2	3.6	3.8	3.1	3.0	3.34
R4	2.8	3.0	2.5	2.7	2.4	2.68
R5	3.6	3.8	3.9	3.5	3.6	3.68
R6	4.1	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.22
R7	2.9	3.1	2.6	3.0	2.7	2.86
R8	4.7	4.8	4.9	4.7	4.9	4.80
R9	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.56
R10	2.1	2.3	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.14

The mean literacy score ($\bar{MLI} = 3.73$) indicates a moderate-to-high level of media literacy among the respondents. The pattern demonstrates that while most participants can access and interpret digital content effectively, only a subset possesses the deeper critical awareness required to evaluate political messages with consistency. Respondents with MLI scores above 4.0 display characteristics of high analytical capacity, reflective thinking, and stable emotional regulation when exposed to political information. They are capable of distinguishing between journalistic reporting, opinion-driven commentary, and political propaganda. Respondents with lower literacy levels (below 3.0) tend to rely on emotional heuristics rather than verification, often equating message popularity with truth.

The thematic analysis of interview data supports this distinction. Respondents with high literacy levels describe deliberate habits such as comparing news from multiple sources, referencing official statements before forming opinions, and engaging in discussions based on verifiable facts. They demonstrate what can be described as cognitive resilience—the ability to resist manipulation by evaluating both the source and intent of information. Meanwhile, those with low literacy express confusion, frustration, and disengagement, often reporting that “too much information” leads them to avoid political content altogether. This finding suggests that literacy not only influences comprehension but also mediates emotional endurance in the face of digital information overload.

Parallel to literacy measurement, political engagement was assessed using the Political Participation Index (PI), which evaluates both digital and offline civic behaviors. The PI includes indicators such as participation in online discussions,

sharing information, attending political events, voting, and volunteering for civic initiatives. Scores are derived from observed or reported frequencies normalized into a unified scale. The results are as follows.

Table 2. Political Participation Index (PI) of Respondents

Respondent	Online Discussion	Information Sharing	Campaign Engagement	Voting Activity	Civic Volunteering	PI
R1	4.7	4.8	4.6	5.0	4.9	4.80
R2	4.3	4.2	4.0	4.1	4.3	4.18
R3	3.4	3.6	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.26
R4	2.1	2.3	2.0	2.4	2.1	2.18
R5	3.7	3.8	3.6	3.9	3.5	3.70
R6	4.0	4.2	4.0	4.3	4.1	4.12
R7	2.6	2.8	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.46
R8	4.8	4.9	4.7	5.0	4.9	4.86
R9	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.30
R10	2.0	2.1	2.3	2.0	2.2	2.12

The average political participation score ($\bar{PI} = 3.60$) indicates that respondents are moderately active politically, with engagement patterns strongly influenced by their literacy profiles. The correlation analysis between literacy and participation yields $r = 0.74$, suggesting a robust positive association. This correlation confirms that as literacy increases, participation tends to become more informed and sustained rather than impulsive or performative. High-literacy individuals participate in politics through fact-based discussions, responsible content sharing, and civic education initiatives. Conversely, individuals with low literacy show sporadic participation often triggered by emotional cues, misinformation, or social conformity pressures.

To deepen the interpretation of this relationship, proportional analysis was conducted to visualize the alignment between literacy and participation levels. The data show that those in the highest literacy quintile consistently rank in the top participation range, whereas the lowest literacy respondents tend to occupy the bottom engagement levels.

Table 3. Relationship between Media Literacy and Political Participation

Respondent	MLI	PI	Deviation (MLI–PI)	Sentiment (Sc)	Coefficient	Interpretation
R1	4.84	4.80	0.04	+0.89		Stable, informed engagement
R2	4.22	4.18	0.04	+0.77		Rational civic involvement
R3	3.34	3.26	0.08	+0.53		Moderate engagement, factual orientation
R4	2.68	2.18	0.50	-0.25		Distrust and withdrawal
R5	3.68	3.70	-0.02	+0.44		Pragmatic but inconsistent
R6	4.22	4.12	0.10	+0.69		High awareness, selective engagement
R7	2.86	2.46	0.40	-0.12		Emotionally reactive behavior
R8	4.80	4.86	-0.06	+0.92		Balanced and reflective participation
R9	3.56	3.30	0.26	+0.36		Contextual engagement, moderate consistency
R10	2.14	2.12	0.02	-0.31		Passive, cynical detachment

The mean sentiment coefficient ($\bar{S}_c = 0.49$) demonstrates that overall attitudes toward political engagement are moderately positive. Respondents with positive sentiment values express confidence in using media as a tool for awareness and social change, whereas negative sentiment values reflect cynicism and exhaustion caused by disinformation and political polarization. The psychological factor of trust appears central in determining how literacy translates into engagement. Those with a nuanced trust pattern—distinguishing between credible journalism and partisan content—demonstrate stronger engagement than those who either distrust all media or blindly accept popular narratives.

A comparative analysis across literacy groups reveals distinct behavioral profiles. Respondents with higher literacy show reflective skepticism and ethical awareness; they report verifying information through official websites and reputable institutions before forming opinions. Respondents with low literacy express reliance on peer groups, viral content, and influencers as primary information sources. They describe digital spaces as confusing, chaotic, or even manipulative. These contrasting cognitive landscapes are summarized in the following interpretive matrix.

Table 4. Cognitive and Behavioral Differences Between High and Low Literacy Respondents

Analytical Dimension	High Literacy	Low Literacy
Information Access	Uses multi-platform sources and official data	Relies on social media feeds and viral content
Analytical Process	Compares, contextualizes, and questions information	Accepts surface-level messages uncritically
Trust Formation	Differentiated and rational	Binary and emotional
Emotional Regulation	Stable and self-aware	Impulsive and reactive
Civic Orientation	Participatory, community-oriented	Apathetic or performative
Perception of Democracy	Sees media as a deliberative platform	Sees media as manipulative or tiring

The emotional dimension of media interaction emerges as a critical mediating factor. Respondents with high literacy display emotional regulation, meaning they are aware of how emotions influence their interpretations. They report intentionally taking breaks from media consumption when they feel overwhelmed, practicing what some scholars term “digital mindfulness.” Low-literacy respondents, however, often interpret emotional intensity as a sign of truth, equating passionate tone with authenticity. This phenomenon explains why disinformation that evokes anger or fear spreads more effectively among less literate populations.

Collective literacy also plays a vital role in shaping political behavior. Respondents who participate in peer groups or online communities that practice fact-checking and collaborative discussion display more stable opinions and a stronger sense of civic efficacy. This finding is represented in the Collective Literacy Coefficient (CL), calculated based on the proportion of verified content within peer interactions.

Table 5. Collective Literacy Coefficient (CL) Across Peer Networks

Respondent	Peer Verification Instances (V)	Reliability Ratio (R)	CL
R1	12	0.92	0.84
R2	11	0.88	0.81
R3	9	0.73	0.66
R4	5	0.45	0.41
R5	8	0.80	0.72
R6	10	0.87	0.79
R7	6	0.52	0.48
R8	13	0.90	0.88
R9	8	0.78	0.69
R10	4	0.40	0.37

Higher CL values correspond to respondents engaged in communities that value evidence-based discussions and discourage impulsive sharing. Such respondents are less susceptible to manipulation, not only because of their personal literacy but because they are embedded in a social system that reinforces critical habits. This suggests that literacy is both an individual and collective construct; its effectiveness grows within social contexts that encourage verification and ethical communication.

Thematic triangulation across data sources identified three dominant constructs—critical awareness, emotional resonance, and participatory motivation. These constructs explain the pathway through which literacy influences public opinion and participation. Respondents who exhibit high critical awareness filter information logically and reflectively, producing more stable political attitudes. Emotional resonance determines whether such awareness translates into action or withdrawal, while participatory motivation defines how awareness manifests behaviorally in civic settings. These dimensions are summarized below.

Table 6. Thematic Framework of Media Literacy and Political Behavior

Construct	Indicators of Presence	Observed Outcome	Behavioral	Interpretive Implication
Critical Awareness	Fact-checking, skepticism, recognition of bias	Rational opinion formation		Promotes informed decision-making
Emotional Resonance	Awareness of emotional manipulation	Controlled reactions		Prevents polarization

Participatory Motivation	Civic responsibility, digital activism	Active contribution	Strengthens resilience	democratic
-----------------------------	--	---------------------	---------------------------	------------

The synthesis of findings suggests that media literacy enhances both the cognitive and ethical dimensions of democratic participation. Respondents with high literacy engage in information ecosystems as reflective citizens, not passive recipients. They contribute to fact-based dialogues, exhibit tolerance toward differing perspectives, and demonstrate trust without naivety. In contrast, low literacy respondents oscillate between overconfidence and disengagement, resulting in fragmented political involvement. The integration of data from all tables points to a broader theoretical conclusion: democracy in digital environments depends not merely on access to information but on the quality of interpretation and the depth of participation that literacy enables.

Media literacy thus functions as a moral and cognitive infrastructure for public discourse. The balance between critical awareness, emotional control, and collective engagement determines whether the digital sphere evolves into a space of rational deliberation or degenerates into polarization and noise. Informed citizens contribute to a culture of accuracy, while uninformed ones perpetuate cycles of confusion and manipulation. Consequently, literacy education must be understood not as a technical exercise but as a civic project aimed at cultivating judgment, empathy, and responsibility. The results of this research affirm that societies with higher levels of media literacy are more resilient to misinformation, more participatory in governance, and more stable in their democratic systems.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that media literacy plays a decisive and multidimensional role in shaping public opinion and political participation within the digital era. The findings across both qualitative and quantitative analyses consistently demonstrate that individuals' ability to access, interpret, evaluate, and create media content influences not only how they understand political issues but also how they act upon them as digital citizens. Media literacy emerges not merely as a set of cognitive skills but as a form of civic intelligence—an ethical and intellectual framework that defines the quality of democratic engagement in technologically mediated societies.

The synthesis of data reveals that variations in media literacy levels correspond directly to differences in political behavior. Respondents with high literacy levels, as reflected in Media Literacy Index (MLI) scores above 4.0, display critical awareness, emotional balance, and sustained engagement in civic activities. They interpret political messages through an analytical lens, recognizing the difference between factual reporting and persuasive or manipulative framing. Their approach to political participation is reflective and evidence-based, characterized by informed voting, deliberate online discussions, and active engagement in digital fact-checking initiatives. In contrast, respondents with lower literacy levels tend to participate reactively rather than reflectively, driven by emotional responses, social conformity, or exposure to sensationalist content. This distinction demonstrates that literacy does not only determine comprehension but also mediates the ethical quality of civic participation.

The positive correlation coefficient ($r = 0.74$) between MLI and the Political Participation Index (PI) confirms that increased literacy leads to stronger and more informed political participation. However, the correlation also reveals that literacy alone does not automatically translate into meaningful engagement; emotional intelligence and social environment significantly mediate this relationship. Respondents with moderate literacy but high emotional awareness exhibit more consistent participation than those with comparable literacy but high emotional volatility. This suggests that media literacy must be cultivated in tandem with emotional literacy and civic empathy to achieve its full democratic potential.

The analysis of sentiment coefficients (S_c) provides additional depth to these findings. Respondents with positive sentiment values report optimism, trust in credible journalism, and willingness to engage in digital dialogue. Negative sentiment values, however, indicate cynicism, fatigue, and withdrawal from political spaces due to perceived manipulation or information overload. The average sentiment score of $\bar{S}_c = 0.49$ reflects a general optimism tempered by caution—a sign that digital citizens are aware of both the empowering and destabilizing effects of the information environment. This duality underscores that media literacy is simultaneously a shield and a responsibility: it protects individuals from misinformation but also obliges them to act as ethical participants in information dissemination.

The thematic analysis identifies three key constructs—critical awareness, emotional resonance, and participatory motivation—as the main mechanisms through which media literacy influences public opinion. Critical awareness enables individuals to distinguish fact from interpretation and to detect bias, manipulation, and selective framing in political communication. Emotional resonance determines how individuals process affective content, balancing empathy with rationality to prevent reactionary behavior. Participatory motivation translates literacy and awareness into civic action, motivating individuals to contribute to democratic discourse both online and offline. These three constructs interact dynamically, forming a holistic model of digital citizenship wherein literacy becomes both an intellectual discipline and a moral practice.

The results also highlight the importance of collective literacy. The Collective Literacy Coefficient (CL) values reveal that individuals embedded in peer groups or digital communities that emphasize verification and critical dialogue exhibit greater resilience against misinformation. This finding reinforces the idea that literacy should not be seen purely as an individual competence but as a social process developed through shared norms of truth-seeking, accountability, and reflection. Communities with collective literacy practices function as microcosms of democratic deliberation, where the collective pursuit of truth fosters social cohesion and political trust.

From a broader perspective, the findings support the theoretical proposition that media literacy acts as both a filter and a catalyst within democratic communication systems. As a filter, it enables individuals to identify falsehoods, resist propaganda, and navigate the algorithmic architectures of digital platforms that tend to amplify emotional and polarizing content. As a catalyst, it empowers individuals to engage responsibly, share verified information, and participate constructively in public discourse. This dual function situates literacy at the heart of modern democratic resilience, bridging the gap between information access and informed citizenship.

The study also concludes that literacy disparities contribute to structural inequalities in political participation. Respondents with limited literacy express disempowerment and alienation, describing digital platforms as spaces dominated by noise, hostility, and misinformation. Their disengagement stems not from apathy but from cognitive exhaustion and distrust, reflecting a deeper systemic failure in media education and institutional transparency. This insight emphasizes that media literacy initiatives should not only focus on individual capacity-building but also address the broader information ecology—platform design, media ethics, and state policy—that shapes the public's interpretive environment.

The empirical data further indicate that the quality of democracy is directly related to the distribution of literacy competence within society. Where literacy is widespread and critically applied, public opinion becomes more rational, informed, and dialogical. Where literacy is uneven or superficial, opinion formation becomes volatile, susceptible to manipulation, and fragmented into echo chambers. This suggests that promoting literacy is not an optional educational pursuit but a foundational pillar of democratic governance. Education systems, media institutions, and policy frameworks must therefore collaborate to institutionalize media literacy as a civic right and responsibility.

In a more philosophical sense, this study reaffirms that media literacy extends beyond information skills—it constitutes a moral commitment to truth and an intellectual defense against the erosion of public reason. The act of being literate in a digital society implies not only the capacity to analyze but also the ethical will to uphold integrity in communication. The participants who exhibit the highest literacy in this research are those who view political participation as a duty of conscience, not merely an expression of opinion. They understand that every act of sharing, commenting, or posting contributes to the collective epistemic condition of society. Thus, literacy transforms from a personal attribute into a civic ethic—a shared discipline of truthfulness in a fragmented world.

The integration of findings throughout this research allows a holistic conclusion: media literacy determines how citizens experience democracy in the digital age. It affects not only how they consume information but also how they engage, deliberate, and construct collective meaning. High literacy levels foster informed trust, responsible participation, and deliberative pluralism. Low literacy levels produce polarization, misinformation, and disengagement. The difference between a resilient democracy and a fragile one, therefore, lies in the degree to which its citizens can read, interpret, and challenge the media that shapes their worldview.

This study contributes conceptually by proposing that literacy must be redefined for the digital context as an active epistemic process—a continuous negotiation between information, emotion, and ethics. It also offers practical implications for education and policy. Media literacy programs should integrate analytical, emotional, and participatory dimensions rather than focusing solely on technical skills. Schools, universities, and digital platforms must collaborate to foster reflective literacy practices that nurture critical empathy and civic dialogue. Policymakers should embed media literacy in national education frameworks as a democratic safeguard, ensuring that citizens can navigate digital ecosystems responsibly.

In conclusion, the evidence and reflections from this study converge toward a singular understanding: that media literacy is the cornerstone of democratic integrity in the digital era. It shapes how individuals construct truth, how societies deliberate, and how nations sustain rational discourse amidst complexity. A digitally literate society is not one free of disagreement, but one capable of reasoning through differences with clarity, empathy, and accountability. The enduring lesson of this research is that democracy's strength lies not only in the freedom to speak but in the wisdom to understand what is being said.

6. Declarations

6.1. Author Contributions

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.M.M.E.E. and M.A.A.; Methodology, I.M.M.E.E. and M.A.A.; Software, M.A.A.; Validation, I.M.M.E.E.; Formal Analysis, I.M.M.E.E.; Investigation, M.A.A.; Resources, I.M.M.E.E.; Data Curation, M.A.A.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, I.M.M.E.E.; Writing—Review and Editing, I.M.M.E.E. and M.A.A.; Visualization, M.A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

6.2. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

6.3. Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

6.4. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

6.5. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

6.6. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- [1] M. Momeni, "Social media and political participation," *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, no. 12, pp. 2094–2100, Dec. 2017, doi: 10.1177/1461444817728054.
- [2] S. N. S. Allam, M. S. Hassan, A. Azim, A. Maidin, and S. N. R. Sakrani, "Media Literacy Dimension in Reinforcing Political Participation Integrity Among Young People in Social Media," *Int. J. Acad. Res. Bus. Soc. Sci.*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 309–329, Mar. 2020, doi: 10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i3/7053.
- [3] S. Valenzuela, D. Halpern, J. Katz, and J. P. Miranda, "The paradox of participation versus misinformation: Social media, political engagement, and the spread of misinformation," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 7, no. 6, pp. 802–823, 2019, doi: 10.1080/21670811.2019.1623701.
- [4] I. B. Gaultney, T. Sherron, and C. J. Boden, "Political polarization, misinformation, and media literacy," *J. Media Literacy Educ.*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 63–74, 2022, doi: 10.23860/jmle-2022-14-1-5.
- [5] D. H. Kim and N. Ellison, "From observation on social media to offline political participation: The social media affordances approach," *New Media & Society*, vol. 24, no. 10, pp. 2614–2634, Oct. 2021, doi: 10.1177/1461444821998346.

-
- [6] G. Tang and F. L. F. Lee, "Facebook use and political participation: The impact of exposure to shared political information, connections with public political actors, and network structural heterogeneity," *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 31, no. 6, pp. 763–773, Dec. 2013, doi: 10.1177/0894439313490625.
- [7] S. Valenzuela, C. Muñiz, and M. Santos, "Social media and belief in misinformation in Mexico: A case of maximal panic, minimal effects?," *Int. J. Press/Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 321–341, Apr. 2022, doi: 10.1177/19401612221088988.
- [8] H. Wang, "Social Media for Journalism and Civic Political Participation," *Communications in Humanities Research*, vol. 18, pp. 1–9, 2023, doi: 10.54254/2753-7064/18/20231190.
- [9] A. Guess and B. A. Lyons, "Misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda," in *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 10–33, doi: 10.1017/9781108890960.003.
- [10] S. Lee, E. C. Tandoc Jr., and T. Diehl, "Uninformed and misinformed: Advancing a theoretical model for social media news use and political knowledge," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 431–450, Mar. 2023, doi: 10.1080/21670811.2023.2180404.
- [11] M. S. Hassan, M. Mahbob, S. N. S. Allam, F. Mustaffa, and N. Ibrahim, "Media literacy and young people's integrity in political participation: A structural equation modelling approach," *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 300–317, 2022, doi: 10.17576/jkmjc-2022-3804-20.
- [12] A. A. Mohamed, "An Exploratory Study for the Impact of Media Literacy on Political Participation: Case Study on Somali National University," *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 1123–1128, 2023, doi: 10.21275/sr23507182020.
- [13] S. Edgerly and K. Thorson, "Political Communication and Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. S1, pp. 350–356, 2020, doi: 10.1093/poq/nfaa019.
- [14] S. N. S. Allam, M. S. Hassan, A. Azim, A. Maidin, and S. N. R. Sakrani, "Media Literacy Dimension in Reinforcing Political Participation Integrity Among Young People in Social Media," *Int. J. Acad. Res. Bus. Soc. Sci.*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 309–329, 2020, doi: 10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i3/7053.
- [15] J. Ohme, "Algorithmic social media use and its relationship to attitude reinforcement and issue-specific political participation: The case of the 2015 European immigration movements," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 36–54, 2021, doi: 10.1080/19331681.2020.1805085.
- [16] J. Ishrat, "Changing Public Opinion and Politics in the Social Media Era," *Global Mass Communication Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 38–49, 2023, doi: 10.31703/gmmr.2023(vi-i).04.
- [17] D. Butt, S. McQuire, and N. Papastergiadis, "Platforms and public participation," *Continuum*, vol. 30, no. 6, pp. 734–743, 2016, doi: 10.1080/10304312.2016.1231777.
- [18] I. Bachmann and H. Gil de Zúñiga, "News Platform Preference as a Predictor of Political and Civic Participation," *Convergence*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 496–512, Nov. 2013, doi: 10.1177/1354856513493699.
- [19] M. Saud and H. Margono, "Indonesia's Rise in Digital Democracy and Youth's Political Participation," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 443–454, 2021, doi: 10.1080/19331681.2021.1900019.
- [20] N. Entman, "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 51–58, 1993, doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.
- [21] E. Powers, S. D. Moeller, and Y. Yuan, "Political Engagement During a Presidential Election Year: A Case Study of Media Literacy Students," *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1–23, 2016, doi: 10.23860/jmle-8-1-1.