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## Original Research Article

## Impact Of Social Media on University Students' Media Literacy in Yunnan Province

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the level of media literacy among university students in Yunnan Province, with a focus on the role of social media in shaping their media competencies. The research aims to: (1) assess students' current media literacy levels, (2) examine the relationship between demographic characteristics and media literacy, (3) explore the influence of social media usage, and (4) propose guidelines for improving media literacy in this context. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered to 450 students, and analyzed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression analysis. Additionally, qualitative insights were gathered from in-depth interviews with 20 participants to explore their motivations and perceptions regarding media use. The results indicate that social media platforms such as WeChat (97.78% usage), Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu play a central role in students' daily communication and information consumption. However, media literacy levels vary significantly, particularly in critical thinking, content evaluation, and information filtering. Demographic factors such as gender, age, and academic year were found to influence media literacy, with senior students demonstrating higher proficiency. Notably, social media usage accounts for approximately 52% of the variance in media literacy levels, indicating a strong predictive relationship.

The study concludes that social media exerts a significant positive influence on media literacy. It recommends integrating media literacy education into university curricula, emphasizing critical thinking, ethical awareness, and practical media engagement. Collaboration among educators, families, and social media platforms is essential to foster a more informed and responsible student population.



## Introduction

The advent of social media has profoundly transformed the ways in which individuals, particularly university students, access, interpret, and engage with information. In the context of Yunnan Province, undergraduate students increasingly rely on digital platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (TikTok), and Bilibili for communication, entertainment, and informal learning. These platforms have emerged as dominant channels for information dissemination, significantly influencing students' perceptions, behaviors, academic practices, and social interactions.

Despite the ubiquity of social media, concerns regarding its impact on students' media literacy especially in less economically developed regions such as Yunnan warrant critical attention. Media literacy, as defined by Potter (2013), encompasses the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media across various formats. This competency is essential for informed and responsible engagement with the digital environment. In an era characterized by information overload and the proliferation of misinformation, media literacy equips individuals to critically assess content credibility, recognize bias, and make informed decisions in a complex media landscape. The relationship between social media use and media literacy is inherently complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, social media has the potential to foster critical thinking by exposing users to diverse viewpoints and facilitating public discourse. Platforms such as Weibo and Douyin offer access to a wide range of content that, when engaged with thoughtfully, may enhance users' analytical capacities. On the other hand, the algorithmic architecture of these platforms often promotes content that aligns with users' existing beliefs, thereby reinforcing echo chambers. This dynamic can limit exposure to alternative perspectives, diminish critical engagement, and heighten vulnerability to misinformation and ideological polarization. In Yunnan, a province marked by unique cultural, geographic, and socio-economic conditions, these challenges are further exacerbated. Compared to more developed coastal regions such as Beijing and Shanghai, Yunnan continues to face disparities in digital infrastructure and access to educational resources. While internet penetration and social media use have expanded, institutional support for media literacy education remains limited. As a result, many students in Yunnan may lack the necessary tools to engage critically with digital content, leaving them more susceptible to superficial media consumption and the spread of misinformation. Moreover, the nature of content promoted on social media platforms often prioritizes entertainment over educational value. While platforms like Douyin and Bilibili offer highly engaging formats, their emphasis on brevity and visual appeal may encourage passive consumption rather than critical analysis. This trend poses a further obstacle to the development of deep media literacy skills among undergraduate students.

Given these considerations, it is imperative to examine the influence of social media on the media literacy of undergraduate students in Yunnan. This study seeks to investigate the extent to which social media shapes students' media literacy competencies and to identify contextually relevant strategies for enhancing media literacy education in the region. By addressing the specific challenges faced by students in Yunnan, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on digital literacy and education in the contemporary media landscape.



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## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 1. National Research

#### 1) Related Research on Media Literacy Education and Media Integration

In the digital age, media literacy has become a fundamental competency for navigating an increasingly complex and converged media environment. The rapid evolution of communication technologies and the blurring of boundaries between traditional and new media demand an updated educational response. Zhou Ling (2016), in the study "Research on Integrated Media Literacy Education for Undergraduate Communication Majors", highlights the need for media literacy education that reflects the realities of media convergence. This essay explores the concept of media literacy education in the context of media integration, analyzes Zhou Ling's contributions, and discusses broader implications for curriculum development and pedagogical practices in communication studies.

#### 2) Related Research on Media Literacy in the Digital Age

In the digital era, media literacy is no longer a niche skill but a fundamental necessity for individuals to engage effectively and responsibly with the world around them. With the widespread use of social media platforms, especially among college students, the ability to access, evaluate, produce, and respond to information has become increasingly complex. Zhang Xiaohan and Wang Yichun (2023), in their study on college students' use of social media and its impact on media literacy, address critical concerns about navigating this digital landscape. Their work highlights the need for accessible and student-centered approaches to media literacy education particularly ones that align with students' media habits and social environments. This essay explores their findings and connects them with broader research on digital-age media literacy.

#### 3) College Students' Media Literacy in the New Media Era

In the new media era, media literacy is not an optional skill but a foundational competency for academic, professional, and civic life. Li Yingxi's (2015) case study in the Xi'an region underscores that while college students are deeply embedded in digital environments, they face significant challenges in developing critical, ethical, and participatory media skills. The study provides actionable recommendations—such as educational policy support, curriculum reform, and fostering media self-discipline—that are crucial for bridging the gap between media usage and media understanding. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, media literacy education must be reimagined not only as a technical toolkit but as a form of cultural and civic empowerment.

#### 4) Development of Media Literacy Scales

In the digital age, where information is abundant and media platforms are deeply integrated into daily life, the ability to critically engage with media has become a fundamental skill. Media literacy, broadly defined, encompasses the skills required to access, analyze,



evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication. Recognizing the growing importance of this competency, researchers and educators have increasingly sought effective ways to measure it. Among the notable contributions in this area is the work of Li Yuan (2022), who, in her doctoral thesis, develops a comprehensive measurement scale aimed at assessing college students' media literacy.

## **5) Research on the Implementation of Media Literacy Education**

Yuan Hui and Li Jinzhen's 2016 research provides valuable insights into the practical application of media literacy education within the Chinese higher education system. By advocating for the integration of media literacy into ideological and political theory courses, they highlight a path toward a more critically engaged and media-savvy student population. In a world where media influences nearly every aspect of personal, political, and cultural life, equipping students with media literacy skills is not just beneficial but essential. As such, the implementation of comprehensive and integrated media literacy programs stands as a vital educational reform for the 21st century.

## **2. International Research**

### **1) Social Media Literacy Practices in Multilingual Contexts**

Osman Solmaz's 2017 study offers valuable insights into how multilingual graduate students perform social media literacy as a socially situated and linguistically rich practice. By adapting their linguistic repertoires and social skills to the demands of various media platforms, these students exemplify the evolving nature of literacy in the digital age. Understanding social media literacy through this lens not only broadens the definition of literacy itself but also calls for more inclusive and context-aware approaches to teaching and learning in multilingual contexts.

### **2) Impact of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy**

In an era dominated by digital communication and ubiquitous social media platforms, the need for critical media literacy has become increasingly important. Nolan Higdon's 2022 study, "The Critical Effect: Exploring the Influence of Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy on College Students' Social Media Behaviors and Attitudes," offers vital insights into how critical media education shapes the online behaviors and perceptions of college students. His research underscores the transformative potential of critical media literacy pedagogy in fostering a more reflective, ethical, and informed approach to social media use.

### **3) Social Media Literacy in Community College Education**

As digital landscapes continue to evolve, the need for comprehensive social media literacy becomes increasingly critical. Angela M. Kohnen, Christine Wusylko, and Max Sommer's (2023) research underscores the vital role community colleges play in this educational endeavor, particularly in supporting first-generation college students. By embedding social media literacy within the curriculum and recognizing its sociocultural



dimensions, community colleges can empower students to become critical consumers and creators of information, better prepared to thrive in both academic and real-world contexts.

#### **4) Defining Media Literacy**

Jim Potter's (2022) Analysis of Definitions of Media Literacy serves as a vital resource in demystifying a complex and evolving concept. By categorizing definitional elements and highlighting the interconnected skills of content creation, critical analysis, and media ethics, Potter provides a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be media literate. This clarity is crucial for developing effective educational strategies that empower individuals to navigate and contribute thoughtfully to today's media-saturated world.

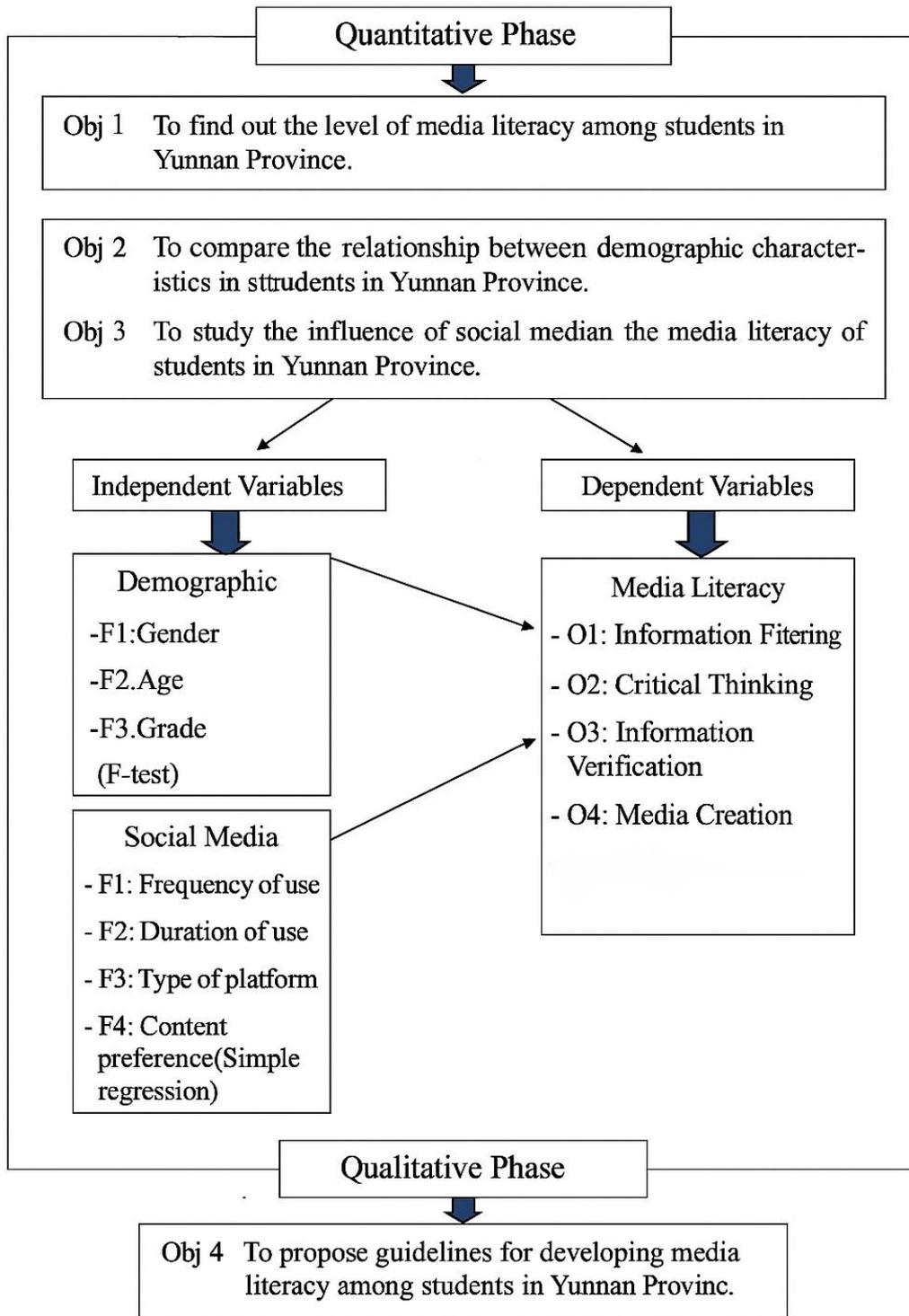
#### **5) Mediality Enriching Media Literacy**

The concept of mediality, as proposed by Eva M. Berger, R. Logan, Anat Ringel, and Andrey Miroshnichenko in *MEDIACY: A Way to Enrich Media Literacy* (2019), represents a significant advancement in the field of media literacy education. By extending traditional frameworks to include an understanding of media effects and technologies themselves, mediality provides a richer, more comprehensive foundation for engaging with media in today's complex digital environment. Integrating mediality into media literacy practices helps learners become not just critical consumers but also insightful analysts of the very media ecosystems that shape modern communication and culture.

As social media has become a crucial medium for digital communication in the current era, it plays a significant role in shaping university students' media literacy in Yunnan Province. The interaction between social media usage and students' demographic characteristics are the key variables for this research, which can be represented as shown in the following figure.



**Theoretical Framework**



**Figure 1** Theoretical Framework

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## Objectives

1. To find out the level of media literacy among students in Yunnan Province.
2. To compare the relationship between demographic characteristics and media literacy of students in Yunnan Province.
3. To study the influence of social media on the media literacy of students in Yunnan Province.
4. To propose guidelines for developing media literacy among students in Yunnan Province.

## Hypotheses

1. University students in Yunnan Province exhibit varying levels of media literacy, with higher proficiency in technical skills but lower proficiency in critical thinking, content evaluation, and information filtering.
2. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and academic year are significantly associated with students' media literacy levels, with senior students demonstrating higher media literacy proficiency than juniors.
3. The frequency and diversity of social media usage positively predict the level of media literacy among university students.
4. Social media usage accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in media literacy, beyond the effects of demographic factors.

## Methodology

### Population and Sample

The study surveyed 450 undergraduate students from universities in Yunnan Province using stratified sampling to ensure diversity across year, gender, discipline, and social media use. Additionally, 20 interviewees from six groups (students, media professionals, scholars, educators, consumer protection experts, and parents) were selected for in-depth interviews.

### Variables

Independent variables include demographics (gender, age, academic year) and social media behaviors (frequency, duration, platform, content). The dependent variable is media literacy, measured by skills in filtering information, critical thinking, verification, and media creation. The study examines how demographics and social media use influence media literacy.

### Research Scope

Participants came from three Yunnan universities representing diverse types comprehensive, medium-sized, and specialized. Data was collected over 12 months (May 2024–May 2025) through questionnaires and observations in classrooms, libraries, dorms, discussions, and online interactions.



## Research Tools

Quantitative data was collected via a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items on demographics, social media use, and media literacy. Qualitative data came from in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected experts from six groups, exploring personal experiences and views on media literacy.

## Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed online to 450 students with strict quality control, discarding invalid responses. Interviews with 20 key informants were conducted online using open-ended questions to gain deeper insights, complementing the quantitative results.

## Results

**Table 1** Analysis of Gender Differences in the Use of Social Media

Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Average Value	Standard Deviation	T Test
How many times do you use social media each day?	woman	233	2.936	1.11	T=0.842 P=0.400
	man	217	2.848	1.097	
How long do you usually spend on social media each time?	woman	233	2.695	1.251	T=-0.926 P=0.355
	man	217	2.806	1.294	

Note: \* \* and \* represent the significance level of 1% and 5% respectively.

**Table 2** Difference Analysis of Social Media Use in Different Age Groups

Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Variance Test
How many times do you use social media each day?	18 to 20 years old	131	2.901	1.087	F=0.472 P=0.702
	21 to 23 years old	157	2.828	1.075	
	24 to 26 years old	123	2.919	1.149	
	Over 26 years old	39	3.051	1.146	
How long do you usually spend on social	18 to 20 years old	131	2.718	1.273	F=1.747 P=0.157
	21 to 23 years old	157	2.599	1.234	
	24 to 26 years old	123	2.911	1.274	
	Over 26 years old	39	2.949	1.376	



Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Variance Test
media each time?					

Note: \* \* and \* represent the significance level of 1% and 5% respectively.

**Table 3** Difference Analysis of Social Media Use in Different Grades

Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Variance Test
How many times do you use social media each day?	freshman	142	2.831	1.098	F=0.569 P=0.635
	Sophomore	125	2.848	1.078	
	junior	120	2.992	1.096	
	senior	63	2.937	1.19	
How long do you usually spend on social media each time?	freshman	142	2.648	1.25	F=1.033 P=0.378
	Sophomore	125	2.816	1.221	
	junior	120	2.692	1.295	
	senior	63	2.952	1.373	

Note: \* \* and \* represent the significance level of 1% and 5% respectively.

**Table 4** Correlation Analysis Results

	Media Literacy Assessment	The Impact of social media on Behavior and Decision-Making	Social Psychology and Education	The Impact Of social media
Media Literacy Assessment	1(0.000**)			
The Impact of social media on Behavior and Decision-Making	0.656(0.000**)	1(0.000**)		
Social Psychology and Education	0.594(0.000**)	0.671(0.000**)	1(0.000**)	
The Impact of social media	0.664(0.000**)	0.687(0.000**)	0.751(0.000**)	1(0.000**)

Note: \* \* and \* represent the significance level of 1% and 5% respectively.



**Table 5** Results of Regression Analysis

Constant	Non- S		S	T	P	Vif	R <sup>2</sup>	R	F
	B	S	Beta						
	0.625	0.156	-	4.005	0.000**	-	0.52	0.517	F=161.098 P=0.000***
The Impact of social media on Behavior and Decision-Making	0.356	0.049	0.35	7.332	0.000**	2.114			
Social Psychology and Education	0.094	0.053	0.094	1.794	0.073	2.559			
The Impact of social media	0.412	0.062	0.354	6.607	0.000**	2.661			
Dependent variable: Media Literacy Assessment									

Note: \*\* and \* represent the significance level of 1% and 5% respectively.

## Discussion

This study aimed to assess the media literacy levels of university students in Yunnan Province and explore the role of social media usage in shaping their media competencies. The findings highlight several important insights.

First, consistent with Although students generally demonstrate strong technical media skills such as navigating digital platforms, using search engines, and engaging with social media their critical media literacy skills tend to be significantly weaker. Specifically, areas such as critical thinking, content evaluation, and information filtering present notable challenges. Many students struggle to assess the credibility of sources, identify bias, or distinguish between reliable information and misinformation. This disparity suggests that proficiency in using media tools does not necessarily translate into the ability to interpret or evaluate media content thoughtfully. This finding is consistent with prior research by Livingstone (2004) and Potter (2013), who emphasize that surface-level engagement with media such as frequent use or basic digital fluency does not equate to deeper evaluative competencies. As such, there is a pressing need to move beyond teaching operational digital skills alone and instead foster students' analytical and reflective capacities to navigate today's complex media environment effectively.

The influence of demographic factors, particularly academic year, provides clear support for Hypothesis 2 and highlights the significant role of educational experience in shaping media literacy development. The finding that senior students generally exhibit higher levels of media literacy proficiency suggests that prolonged exposure to academic environments contributes to the cultivation of more advanced evaluative and critical thinking skills. Over time, students



are likely to engage more deeply with academic content that requires them to analyze, question, and synthesize information from a variety of sources skills that directly translate to more sophisticated media literacy. Additionally, coursework in higher years may place greater emphasis on source credibility, argumentation, and research integrity, further reinforcing critical engagement with media. Although differences related to gender and age were less pronounced, their presence indicates that media literacy is also influenced by more complex and individualized factors. These subtler demographic dynamics such as socialization patterns, access to resources, or prior exposure to media literacy training warrant further investigation to better understand how diverse student backgrounds affect their ability to navigate and critique media content.

Importantly, the study provides robust support for both Hypotheses 3 and 4 by demonstrating that social media usage serves as a strong positive predictor of media literacy among students, accounting for more than half of the variance in their measured competencies. This significant correlation challenges prevailing assumptions that increased engagement with social media inherently undermines users' critical thinking or evaluative skills. Instead, the findings suggest that frequent and varied interactions with social media platforms may foster greater familiarity with diverse content formats, sources, and perspectives, thereby enhancing students' capacity to critically assess and interpret information. Such a perspective reframes social media not merely as a site of distraction or misinformation, but as a potential space for developing essential media literacy skills when engagement is intentional and reflective. Nevertheless, insights from the qualitative data complicate this optimistic view by revealing students' nuanced understanding of the risks posed by misinformation, algorithmic bias, and echo chambers. Participants expressed a recognition of their own limitations in critically evaluating digital content, underscoring the complex and dual-edged role that social media plays: while it can serve as a tool for cultivating media literacy, it also necessitates the development of more deliberate strategies for critical consumption and discernment in digital environments.

These results emphasize the critical role of social media as both a tool and a challenge for media literacy education. They suggest that educators should leverage students' existing social media practices to promote deeper critical thinking and ethical awareness, rather than discouraging platform use altogether.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the growing body of research on media literacy by focusing on university students in Yunnan Province and illuminating the significant role of social media in shaping their media competencies. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how demographic characteristics and social media engagement interact to influence media literacy. Findings indicate that while students are proficient in basic technical skills, there is a clear need to enhance critical thinking, content evaluation, and information filtering abilities. Social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu are integral to students' daily lives and serve as important channels for developing media literacy skills. To address these needs, this study recommends integrating media literacy education into university curricula with a focus on critical thinking, ethical use of media, and practical engagement strategies. Collaboration among educators, families, and social media platforms is essential to foster a more informed, discerning, and responsible student population.



Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of media literacy interventions and examine how evolving social media landscapes continue to influence young adults' competencies in different cultural contexts.

## Recommendations

### Contributions to Knowledge

This study highlights how social media use can enhance media literacy among university students in Yunnan, China, especially when they engage critically. It challenges negative views of social media and links Media Literacy Theory with Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain how motivations shape media skills.

1. Understand College Students' Media Literacy Conduct surveys and interviews to assess students' media recognition, critical thinking, and media habits in Yunnan Province.
2. Study Social Media Usage Patterns Analyze frequency, content preferences, interaction styles, and privacy awareness across platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and others.
3. Examine Impact of Social Media Types and Frequency Explore how different social media content and usage levels affect students' media literacy and critical thinking skills.
4. Integrate Media Literacy Education with Practice Develop courses, expert talks, and hands-on media projects to enhance students' practical media skills and critical thinking.
5. Develop Training Strategies Using social media Set clear goals and personalized learning paths using social media platforms for interactive media literacy education, including regular assessment and feedback.

### Recommendations for Future Research

1. Deepen Theoretical Understanding Build refined models on how social media use influences media literacy across platforms and content types.
2. Expand Education Methods and Fields Innovate media literacy education by integrating it into other courses and using new technologies like AI and AR to boost engagement.
3. Strengthen Interdisciplinary and Empirical Research Collaborate across sociology, psychology, and communication fields, and use data-driven studies to validate and improve media literacy programs.
4. Focus on Long-term and Sustainable Effects Study the lasting impact of media literacy education and develop mechanisms to ensure its ongoing effectiveness and growth.

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