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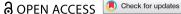
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ABSTRACT

By providing citizens with the knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in the democratic process, the media plays a vital role in the growth and consolidation of the democratic project. Also essential is citizens' aptitude to critically examine, assess, produce and understand media and its social role in a democracy. The current study explores the role of media literacy in democratic engagement and social change among South African university students. The paper attempts to contextualise how students' levels of media literacy led them to political participation, critical thinking and overall contribution to social change in a post-apartheid era. The paper draws on the cognitive mobilisation theory to argue that better media literacy helps students think critically about media, and improve their political knowledge, involvement and contribution to social change. Data for this study were collected by conducting in-depth interviews with $n = 30$ university students who were selected through a convenience sampling strategy. Results revealed that media literacy significantly influences university students' engagement in democratic processes and societal transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Media literacy also enhances their political knowledge, participation and critical analysis of media messages. These findings have implications for policy and practice in media literacy education.

Introduction

Media literacy is vital in fostering and enhancing democratic engagement and societal transformation among university students (Van der Linde 2010). It enables individuals to access, analyse, evaluate and create high-quality media content, fostering critical thinking and informed participation in democratic processes. Media literacy is essential in democracy as it enables students to decode messages, grasp media impacts and engage in democratic discourse (Adu and Badaru 2020). Due to its benefits, it has been argued that university curricula should integrate comprehensive media literacy

modules that empower students with the necessary skills to engage critically with media (Van der Linde 2010).

An experimental study conducted among university students in Ghana provided evidence that media literacy empowers consumers to make informed judgements about the quality of information (Adjin-Tettey 2022). Regrettably, the current South African media landscape is characterised by very low levels of media literacy among the youth, leading to political apathy and disengagement from the democratic process (Adu and Badaru 2020). Furthermore, the low levels of media literacy contribute to a lack of informed citizenry capable of holding political leaders accountable and participating in the democratic process (Badaru and Adu 2021). According to Van der Linde (2010), the low level of media literacy is attributable to the lack of structured media education at the university level, which hinders students' capacity to effectively engage in democratic activities and critically engage with the media.

Researchers have shown an increased interest in the impact of media literacy on democratic engagement and societal transformation. For example, Adu and Badaru (2020) examined university students' media use and their political participation. Their results indicated that media exposure was positively associated with political participation. Similarly, Van der Linde (2010) evaluated the necessity for media literacy education within the journalism curriculum and established it as necessary to promote democratic engagement. Anyiwo, Richards-Schuster, and Jerald (2021) also established how media literacy can help democratise participation for marginalised groups in society.

Although studies have examined media use, attitude towards political issues and media literacy, there is a lacuna in research that focuses on how exactly the media literacy skills of university students enhance political participation and democratic engagement in the digital age. Thus, it is also not clear what the experiences of students regarding media literacy are, what factors explain their current levels of media literacy, or how media literacy helps them to analyse media content and critically contribute to societal transformation, as well as how media literacy can be an enabler to foster greater political engagement.

Drawing on the cognitive mobilisation theory and the case study of university students conveniently sampled from the three KwaZulu Natal (KZN) universities (the Durban University of Technology (DUT), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of Zululand (UniZulu)), this paper explores the role of media literacy in fostering democratic engagement and societal transformation. The paper responds to the following empirical questions:

i. What is the perception of university students regarding the significance of media literacy in enhancing their engagement in democratic processes?
ii. What are the experiences of university students with media literacy, and how do these experiences influence their political participation?
iii. How do university students use media literacy skills to analyse media content and contribute to societal transformation?

Following this introduction, this paper is structured as follows. First, we present a review of the literature from previous studies, part of which is dedicated to setting the tone for what media literacy is. The next section discusses the theoretical framework grounding the study. This is followed by a discussion of the methods adopted to collect data. The subsequent section presents the findings, followed by a discussion of the findings. The final section concludes the paper and offers recommendations.

Literature review: media literacy, media access and political participation

Media literacy

The late 1970s saw the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) realise the usage and impacts of media in enhancing media literacy among citizens. UNESCO described the media as a "parallel school" for children and adolescents, recognising possible conflicts between media and traditional education (UNESCO 1984, 6). UNESCO preferred "media education" to "media literacy". Media education encompasses studying, learning and teaching media in different contexts and levels. It examines the historical context in which media emerged, the expression it serves, the uses to which it is put, the technologies involved, the social functions it fulfils and its effects on communication and perception (UNESCO 1984, 8).

UNESCO held an international conference in Grunwald, Germany, in 1982 to address the public's education regarding mass media (Altun 2012). The "Grunwald Declaration on Media Education" asserted the need for the development of critical awareness among users of the media. It sought to develop users' knowledge base, skills and attitudes. Later, in 1990, during the "New Directions in Media Education" conference in Toulouse, the term "media literacy" was adopted. Media literacy can be briefly defined as understanding media structures and being able to analyse their artistic and ideological aspects. However, UNESCO continued with the "media education" concept in its research findings. In 1999, UNESCO revisited this concept during Vienna's "Educating for the Media and the Digital Age" conference. This event marked progress in understanding media literacy (Altun 2012).

Livingstone (2004) emphasised the need to adapt to new digital media technologies, focusing on a skills-based approach to media literacy. She defined it as the public's ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across different contexts. These definitions reflect the increasing demand that audiences understand how media works. With education, technology and society, the concept keeps on changing. Hobbs (1999) defined media literacy as knowledge and competencies required for social participation.

Most definitions of media literacy emphasise the competencies one should have to access, analyse, create, evaluate and use different types of media effectively (Hobbs 1999; Livingstone 2004). Media literacy in this study is operationalised as the ability to construct personal meaning from the symbols that we encounter daily through television, radio, newspapers and the internet (Thoman 1999). According to Schwarz (2001), media literacy refers to the power to choose and question media, and the awareness of the presence of media around us. Van Deursen and Dijk (2016) synthesise these views by arguing that media literacy combines knowledge, skills and attitudes. This would involve the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. Critical thinking, creativity, ethics and technical skills form part of its definition.

Media access and political participation

The body of research on access to media suggests that it significantly enhances youth political participation, particularly through digital platforms. Through social media, young people are provided with the tools and means to access information, discuss issues and engage in politics. For example, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) illustrate that Nigerian youth tend to be very active on social media platforms such as Facebook and

WhatsApp in discussing and sharing political campaigns that greatly influenced them to engage in politics. Similarly, Ida, Saud, and Mashud (2020) indicate that the engagement of Indonesian and Pakistani youth with social media has helped both their engagement in political learning and their participation for active engagement in political discourses. This shows that digital media acts as a critical driver in encouraging youth involvement in political processes.

Research further supports that media access not only enables access to political information but also promotes political efficacy among young people. Studies conducted by Lee and Xenos (2020) revealed that incidental news exposure on social media and increased political participation have bidirectional influences. Research further supports that social media not only enables access to political information but also promotes political efficacy among young people. In a similar vein, Allam et al. (2020) provide evidence that media literacy can help boost integrity in political participation among young people via access, evaluation and action about political information through credible platforms, fostering a better-informed and more engaged citizenry.

While digital platforms, like social media, have democratised access to information, barriers persist due to impediments to digital access. Kaskazi and Kitzie (2021) established how digital media renders political involvement particularly onerous for the people of youth in the margins. Their research also revealed that the digital platforms, though opening a space for political participation, have been internally restricted due to socio-technical challenges and exposure to misinformation, which then restricts the complete engagement of the young populace from the margins (Kaskazi and Kitzie 2021). This suggests that media access enhances political participation. However, unequal access and media literacy create further inequality amongst different groups.

Furthermore, the digital divide furthers inequality among citizens in terms of political participation. Ragnedda and Muschert (2020) argue that inequity in access to digital technologies reproduces social inequalities that reduce political participation amongst young, marginalised people from underdeveloped nations. In the same vein, Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli's (2023) study on the influence of social media on political mobilisation among Nigerian youths has asserted that even though social media remains pivotal, unequal access has yet to be surmounted to make sure full participation is achieved, especially in rural areas. This implies that with any initiative aimed at increasing political participation through access to media, the shrinking of the digital divide should also be taken into consideration.

Despite these obstacles, the overall effect of the media on youth political participation remains positive. Digital platforms, especially social media, not only provide access to political information but also allow the youth to participate more in democratic processes. Allam et al. (2020) pointed out that the practice of media literacy allows youth to critically analyse the political content and thus engage with greater integrity in political activities. In a related study, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) noticed that social media use in Nigeria greatly enhanced youth involvement in political advocacy and public consultations.

The literature suggests that access to media—most importantly, access to social media—significantly increases youth political participation through many channels of information, engagement and mobilisation. However, in improving access to media, it is equally important that the disparities in digital literacy and infrastructure are bridged

so as not to leave any young person, especially those from marginalised communities, behind in full political participation.

Media literacy and youth participation in democratic processes and social transformation

The existing literature highlights that media literacy is essential for equipping university students to critically analyse media, increasing their political knowledge and enhancing their participation in democratic processes (Ojebuyi and Salawu 2015; Schwarz 2001). Studies have suggested that media literacy allows the young to meaningfully engage in political content and contribute towards social change. Media literacy campaigns, for example, improve political awareness among university students in South Africa and facilitate democratic activities (Ojebuyi and Salawu 2015). Ojebuyi and Salawu (2015) conclude that media literacy campaigns enhance political awareness among South African university students and thus they are better engaged in democratic activities. Schwarz (2001) reiterates that through the acquisition of media literacy skills, one can critically evaluate information for better conduct of democratic processes. These findings point to the role of media literacy in building a core of political knowledge and participation among university students.

Research has revealed that media literacy helps students navigate the challenges they face about misinformation. For instance, Cunliffe-Jones et al. (2021) note that misinformation literacy details ways of identifying misinformation, hence allowing one to make informed political decisions. On a similar note, Vukani and Obioha (2024) contend that social media platforms, coupled with media literacy skills, provide students with the tools to engage critically in political debates, increasing their overall participation in political life. The rise of digital platforms for political participation stresses the need for stronger media literacy to help students critically engage with content and avoid misinformation.

Media literacy increases political knowledge and allows citizens to participate actively in political activities. Badaru and Adu (2021) established that students in university would be more likely to participate in elections and other civic activities by accessing media platforms for political information. This is further supported by Donati (2023), who showed, in South Africa, that access to mobile Internet raised the level of voter turnout. He underlined the role of media literacy in the mobilisation of young voters. These studies, Badaru and Adu (2020) and Donati (2023), hint at how media literacy will directly impact students towards actively participating in democratic processes in contributing towards wider social transformation in South Africa.

Moreover, media literacy integrated into higher learning institution curricula has also been proven to increase the political participation of students. Al-Khaza'leh and Lahiani (2021) identified universities as one of the most essential places where awareness of politics is developed through teaching and imparting media literacy skills for students to be productive in democratic participation. This is consistent with the findings of Badaru and Adu (2021: 6), who opined that "institutions of learning have been regarded as an important role player in raising political awareness of persons through various pedagogical approaches". In general, evidence from previous studies shows that media literacy among university students is a stimulus to the proper degree necessary to attain political involvement and effect social change in post-apartheid South Africa.

Theoretical framework: cognitive mobilisation

Cognitive mobilisation theory stresses that access to information, especially through the media and education, provides the capability for independent analysis and action regarding political information (Aguilera-Jiménez and Gallardo 2020). It emphasises how, with increased access to the contents of politics, the individual lessens his dependency on the traditional political structure, relying more on his cognitive skills in the democratic process (Inglehart 1970). More media exposure may, thus, enhance the capacity of individuals to make politically rational decisions, hence enabling autonomous political participation. It also helps in political mobilisation because, through social media, the individual can engage directly with political content.

Cognitive mobilisation is a concept related to the works of Ron Inglehart (1970) and Russell Dalton (2008). Inglehart (1970) observed European society, which was shifting towards post-materialist values, making people align more with European than national institutions. He linked cognitive mobilisation to the former ideas of "social mobilisation" as introduced by Lerner (1958) and Deutsch (1961), who studied how new forms of nationalism replaced the older loyalties of empires. Lerner (1958) and Deutsch (1961) attributed this shift to the expansion of communication networks, such as mass media, which broadened the perspectives of wealthier, better-educated individuals beyond the limited, local concerns of earlier times. Social mobilisation meant the breakdown of obsolete communication methods and the upsurge of extended ways to access information. Inglehart's (1970) cognitive mobilisation theory was later applied by Dalton to explain changes in partisanship and political behaviour, but its core argument is that the societal changes driven by both media and educational advancement remain. Inglehart (1970, 47) argued that formal education, along with mass communication, was creating both transnational and national perspectives in Europe, defining cognitive mobilisation as the "growing spread of political skills necessary to participate in the larger political world".

The theory assumes that digital and social media allow citizens to bypass traditional political intermediaries like parties and social groups. However, meaningful participation in democratic processes requires such cognitive skills as critical thinking and information processing. Furthermore, cognitive mobilisation increases political participation because people begin feeling more capable of interpreting political messages and involving themselves in civic life (Woolard 2018).

The application of cognitive mobilisation theory to this study's key questions follows. First, regarding students' perception of the importance of media literacy, under the presented theory, it is easy to guess that students who have greater media literacy should be more likely to appreciate the importance of its role in enhancing democratic engagement (Woolard 2018). Second, students' experiences in media literacy are cognitively mobilised or independent of political participation through exposure to political media. Finally, it explains how students utilise media literacy skills for critical analysis in contributing to societal changes; cognitive mobilisation has emphasised critical thinking in democratic participation.

This is justified based on this theory's relevance to the study's central argument: media literacy arms students with active means of participation in politics and furthering social transformation. Situating the study within the cognitive mobilisation theory, therefore,

enhances the justification that media literacy acts as a motivating factor for students' political knowledge, critical thinking and practice in post-apartheid South Africa.

Methods and instruments

The qualitative case study was employed to gather university students' perspectives on media literacy's role in promoting democratic participation and social transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. This design enabled the researcher to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of media literacy among university students by analysing the phenomenon in its natural setting and from the participants' viewpoints (Hancock, Algozzine, and Lim 2021). The choice for the research design is informed by similar studies, like that of Hetrick et al. (2020), who conducted a multi-year ethnographic case study to understand how social media influenced educational reform and civic action. The researchers collected rich and nuanced data that captured the complexities of the participants' experiences and perspectives on media literacy by conducting in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (Hancock, Algozzine, and Lim 2021).

Sampling of participants

For the interviews, convenience sampling was used to draw $n = 30$ participants registered at Kwa-Zulu-Natal's three public universities: DUT, UKZN, and the University of Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Convenience sampling is often employed in qualitative research where the primary objective is to gather in-depth insights rather than generalise findings to a larger population. According to Creswell (2013), convenience sampling allows researchers to select participants based on their availability and willingness to participate, which is essential when dealing with practical constraints such as time, resources and access to participants.

The participants included 10 students from DUT (five females and five males), 10 from the UKZN Howard College campus (six males and four females), and 10 students (seven males and three females) from UniZulu. In choosing the participants, the researchers were not interested in their level of study. Significantly, the participants were conveniently selected from several faculties and departments within each university to ensure a diverse representation of opinions, experiences and perspectives, recognising the potential overlap between media and communication studies and other academic fields (Muringa and McCracken 2021).

The sample size ($n = 30$) is justified by the focus on achieving depth and richness of data, rather than statistical generalisability. Therefore, the sample size of 30 participants in this study aligns with established qualitative research norms, ensuring a manageable yet diverse pool of participants for gathering rich, contextual data. In qualitative research, the goal is often to reach saturation, where additional data collection no longer provides new insights (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative case studies typically involve 20–30 participants, depending on the depth of inquiry required. Each university was represented by 10 participants. Regarding gender, there were 13 females and 17 males. In terms of race, most of the respondents were Africans (24), followed by Indians (4), Coloured (2) and White (1).

The selection of participants included diverse faculties to ensure varied points of view. At DUT, participants were from the Faculties of Humanities; Engineering; Business

Administration; Health Sciences; Social Sciences; Arts and Design; and Information Technology. Similarly, UKZN participants were from faculties such as Law, Arts and Culture, Engineering, Science, and Education. At UniZulu, participants represented various faculties such as Agriculture, Commerce, Environmental Science, Humanities, Social Work, and Health Sciences. The sample represents a case of diversity that, in turn, allows exploring media literacy and political participation from several different academic disciplines.

The inclusion of students from three different universities ensures a wide range of perspectives. The diversity in gender, academic departments and campuses also strengthens the study's ability to capture varied experiences and opinions related to media literacy and democratic participation. Previous studies have shown the value of diverse participant pools in qualitative research, especially in fields related to education and media, where experiences can differ significantly based on background and academic discipline (Patton 2015). The representation of multiple faculties and departments also ensures that the study addresses potential interdisciplinary influences on media literacy and democratic engagement.

Data collection

The decision to conduct 30 individual semi-structured interviews was motivated by the need for rich, in-depth insights into how perceived media literacy influences political participation and democratic engagement among university students. Qualitative studies often use interviews with open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences on complex issues like media literacy and political behaviour (Creswell 2013). The sample size of 30 participants followed the criteria of qualitative research and prioritises depth instead of generalisation (Creswell and Poth 2016). Each interview, lasting 30–45 minutes, followed a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility while focusing on key research questions (Patton 2015). Interviews were done via Microsoft Teams due to its ease and feasibility for virtual academic purposes, offering the possibility of real-time transcription, hence minimising errors and increasing data reliability (Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020). This tool also ensures that access could be provided regardless of participant geographical dispersion—a noted advantage in post-pandemic research. Informed consent was obtained from the participants after a meeting that explained the purpose of the study in detail, in a bid to follow ethical guidelines on researching and for personal trust and openness with the researcher, which is important in eliciting honest responses (Creswell 2013).

Data analysis

A thematic analysis process, following Braun and Clarke's framework (2006), was utilised to analyse interview transcripts from Microsoft Teams. The flexibility inherent in this method means systematic identification, organisation and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data. The thematic analysis enables the researchers to go beyond the manifest level of data to surface deeper meanings and insights. These transcripts were first checked against the original recordings for accuracy, and then cleaned for the actual capture of what was said by participants. This peer review process is in line with Creswell's (2013) assertion that verification must be conducted to enhance the credibility of qualitative research findings.

Data analysis started with coding, where meaningful units of text about the critical research questions were identified. Coding in qualitative research is an elaborate process of granularising complex data into manageable chunks (Saldaña 2021). Subsequently, the codes were grouped to form the initial themes, which is again supported by Patton's (2015) assertion that categorisation of data is an essential element of developing themes or comprehensive insights. These themes were reviewed, named and defined, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, and then analysed and interpreted considering the key empirical research questions. Thematic analysis is well suited for exploring complex phenomena in media literacy and political participation because it offers a detailed yet flexible approach to understanding qualitative data.

Findings

The section below discusses the findings from the participants' interview responses. The questions that the participants were asked were derived from the research questions of the study, including how media literacy influenced their involvement in democratic activities and impacted their political participation, and how they used their media literacy skills to evaluate content and contribute to social or political change.

Media literacy as a critical engagement with media for informed decision-making

A theme that emerged was that of "critical engagement with the media". This theme describes how students might evaluate and analyse the content of media and how their ability allows them to make decisions. Many participants noted that media literacy helps them identify biases and misinformation, enabling informed decision-making. This is in line with the principles of cognitive mobilisation theory, which postulates that access to media serves to increase the individual's cognitive capacity to handle democratic processes (Amechi, Innocent, and Ikechukwu 2018). When students engage with media reflectively, they can grasp underlying messages and avoid falling victim to biased information. This also enables them to contribute more effectively to democracy. For instance, Participant 1 from DUT stressed her ability to identify propaganda during elections. The participant pointed out how critical evaluation aids in making informed decisions:

> Media literacy to me means being able to critically engage with the content we see in various forms of media and understand the underlying messages. It's incredibly important for participating in democracy because it allows us to make informed decisions rather than being swayed by biased or misleading information. (Participant 1)

Moreover, another participant paid attention to the analytical aspect of media literacy. The participant focused on discerning truth and misinformation. His experience in evaluating the impact of government policies on engineering projects illustrates the practical application of critical evaluation skills in professional and political contexts. The participant stated that,

> Media literacy, in my view, is the ability to access, analyse, and evaluate media content critically. It's crucial for understanding legal policies and their implications on society. When a controversial bill (the National Health Insurance Bill) was passed recently, my media literacy

skills helped me dissect various media reports and legal commentaries to form an informed opinion on the matter. (Participant 30)

Participant 5 explains that media literacy involves critically evaluating messages from various media sources. They state that it is crucial for democracy as it allows them to assess political campaigns and propaganda effectively. The participant emphasised the usefulness of these skills during the 2024 national and provincial elections, where they could analyse different narratives to understand the core issues and students' demands.

> Media literacy involves understanding and critically evaluating the messages we receive from various media sources. It's essential for democracy as it ensures citizens can critically assess political campaigns and propaganda. I found it particularly helpful during the 2024 national and provincial elections where I could sift through different narratives to understand the real issues at play and the demands of the students. (Participant 5)

From the responses above, the general view was that media literacy is the ability for one to critically engage with media for informed decision-making. Media literacy allowed the university participants to analyse media messages systematically and thoughtfully. This process includes assessing the credibility of information sources, identifying biases, understanding the context and framing media narratives, as well as recognising the intentions and influences behind the content.

Enhanced political engagement through media literacy education

The theme of "political engagement through media literacy education" shows how media literacy education, through courses, workshops and self-study, reinforces students' political participation. Most participants stated that media literacy equips them to produce and process political content, enhancing protest participation, advocacy and voting. This aligns with cognitive mobilisation theory, which suggests media access enhances independent political activity by boosting cognitive abilities. Respondents emphasised that media literacy courses directly enhanced their critical evaluation skills, which they viewed as key to meaningful political participation. For instance, Participant 4 stressed that the structured education in media analysis has provided her with tools to understand and engage with political information. This leads to more informed political participation. Participant 4 said:

> During my time at DUT in the Humanities faculty, I've had several opportunities to engage with media literacy education. I've taken courses that specifically focus on media analysis and communication studies. These classes have provided me with theoretical knowledge and practical skills in evaluating media content. (Participant 4)

Another Participant 5 expressed that their exposure to media literacy courses offered by the institution has deepened their understanding of media's role in shaping societal norms and values. For this participant, their critical perspective allows them to participate in political activities like student politics and debate with a nuanced understanding of how the media influences public opinion and political discourse. Participant 5 said,

> At DUT in the Social Sciences faculty, I have been fortunate to take courses specifically designed to enhance media literacy such as media studies and sociology. My understanding of media literacy has evolved to include a critical examination of how media shapes societal norms and values. (Participant 5)

Additionally, another group of participants stressed that the integration of media modules into education courses has broadened their perspective on the role of media in engaging and educating the public. The participants expressed that this knowledge translates into more active and effective participation in political activities, especially in educational advocacy and reform movements. "In the Education faculty at UKZN", one participant stated, "media literacy was included in our educational technology and communication courses. My understanding has grown to appreciate the role of media in education and how it can be used effectively to engage students" (Participant 10). Moreover, some participants from UniZulu stressed that the media subjects that are offered have deepened their appreciation of the media's power in shaping public opinion and cultural norms. This critical understanding enhances their political activities and engagements. To illustrate, Participant 24 stressed that their media literacy allows them to challenge and influence media narratives and the public discourse using commenting and asking critical questions on some circulated media content. The articipant said,

> At UniZulu, media literacy was a significant part of our curriculum through media studies and cultural analysis courses. My understanding has deepened to appreciate the power of media in shaping public opinion and cultural norms. I can comment on political issues and criticise them where I feel that the narrative is not accurate. (Participant 24)

Media literacy programmes enhance the political participation of university students. Universities contribute to creating a better-informed and more active society by teaching students to critically evaluate the messages aired via the media. Participants responses are in line with the key arguments of the cognitive mobilisation theory, which argues that exposure to media increases political involvement among individuals (Inglehart 1970). Media literacy can even empower the student to take part in political processes, to demand changes in policy, or to organise for social justice. These activities are important for a healthy democracy and further evoke the transformative power of media literacy in developing active and informed citizenship.

Media literacy as a driver of critical engagement with democracy

The theme of critical engagement with democracy highlights how participants perceive the relationship between media literacy and their involvement in democratic processes. Most participants expressed that without media literacy, engaging with democracy would be ineffective. It enables them to handle political intricacies, evaluate governments' policies and even recognise biases promoted by the media. This aligns well with the core assumptions of cognitive mobilisation theory, which suggests that access to information through media enhances individuals' ability to engage more effectively in democratic processes (Kaskazi and Kitzie 2021). To illustrate, Participant 24 emphasises government policy, Participant 26 focuses on societal issues, and Participant 19 focuses on media bias, relating how media literacy shapes their political understandings. The following insights highlight the possible role that media literacy might play in civic education as an integrated component, enhancing the capacity of students to participate democratically and critically analyse political life in South Africa.

One participant from UKZN explained how their ability to analyse and understand media and media content has assisted them in comprehending the student and national political discourse and understanding South African democratic principles. They said,

"Media literacy has opened my eyes to the nuances of democracy in our post-apartheid society. By critically analysing news and political discourse, I've gained a deeper understanding of democratic principles and their application in South Africa today" (Participant 6).

Similar to Participant 6, Participant 4 from DUT emphasised the importance of understanding political nuances. They stressed the idea of deciphering underlying messages in political discourse:

> Media literacy has been crucial in helping me understand the dynamics of political power in our country. It's about deciphering the real message behind political campaigns and news reports. I know how to read media content from an objective and analytical position. I asked critical questions about the sources and the narratives being communicated in media content. (Participant 4)

Participant 18 focused on evaluating government policies, showing a more specific application of media literacy in understanding state actions. The participant stated that:

> In our post-apartheid society, media literacy has been a tool for me to critically assess government policies and their impact. It allows me to be more than just a passive consumer of information. Because of the skills, I have to engage with media content, I approach each and every single media message with the intention to deeply understand. When engaging with government policies, I ask critical questions such as what is this policy intended to achieve, who are the beneficiaries, what is it for the state to come up with such policies. These questions allow me to gain nuanced understanding of the media content. (Participant 18)

Participant 26 focused on a broader spectrum of social issues by echoing previous participants' sentiments on analysing political discourse. They linked media portrayals to an understanding of democratic functions.

> Media literacy has influenced my political decision-making by enabling me to critically evaluate media messages and understand biases. When I encounter media portrayals of social issues, I start by examining the source's credibility and checking for potential biases. I then cross-reference the information with multiple sources to get a well-rounded view. For example, during debates on healthcare reforms, I critically analysed media reports, identifying discrepancies and biases in coverage. This process helped me understand the broader societal implications of the reforms and informed my advocacy efforts. It [media literacy] should be mandatory in universities because it fosters informed citizenship. (Participant 26)

Finally, Participant 19 brings a different perspective by focusing on identifying biases in news presentation, unlike Participant 6 who speaks more generally about the nuances of democracy.

> Through media literacy, I can identify biases in how news is presented, which influences my understanding of democratic debates and decisions in our society. When I consume news, I start by examining the language and tone used by the media outlet to detect any biased or sensationalist reporting. I also look for the sources cited in the articles and consider their credibility and potential biases. For example, during the recent elections, I analysed the coverage of different candidates by various news outlets. By comparing their reporting styles and the emphasis placed on different aspects of the candidates' campaigns, I could discern which outlets were favouring certain candidates over others. This critical evaluation helps me form a more balanced and informed opinion on political matters. (Participant 19)

The responses above demonstrate the various ways media literacy affects the participants' involvement in democracy. The wide-ranging influence of media literacy is apparent,

encompassing activities such as analysing political discourse, assessing government policies and comprehending societal challenges. These findings indicate that media literacy plays a vital role in enabling university students to engage in democratic processes actively.

Enhanced awareness of and participation in democratic processes

The theme "increased awareness of and involvement with democratic processes" reveals how students perceive media literacy as an enabling practice that makes them more aware and active in democratic life. It helps one make more sense of and participate in democratic processes by, for example, realising the effects that media have on public opinion and policy, identifying biases, or even using media for activism. Many participants mentioned that media literacy has helped them to be more active and knowledgeable participants in politics. All participants said that better media literacy made them more interested in political and social issues. This in line with cognitive mobilisation theory assumptions that media access leads to greater political involvement (Bauer et al. 2021).

Participant 5 spoke about how media literacy has influenced their engagement with elections coverage. They explain that media literacy involves understanding and critically evaluating the messages from various media sources. This is essential for democracy as it ensures citizens can critically assess political campaigns and propaganda. Participant 5 said,

> Media literacy involves understanding and critically evaluating the messages we receive from various media sources. It's essential for democracy as it ensures citizens can critically assess political campaigns and propaganda. For instance, when following election coverage, I analysed various media reports on candidates, identified biased reporting, and understood the context behind the messages. This critical evaluation enabled me to make more informed decisions and actively engage in advocating for social justice and participating in social movements. (Participant 5)

Participant 21 described the way their ability to engage with media content and media forms allowed them to engage in social change programmes. They stated that:

> I've seen firsthand how media literacy empowers students to engage in social change initiatives. For instance, during the July 2021 unrest, we were able to use our skills to dissect media reports, identify biases, and counter misinformation. We would scrutinise news articles, looking at the language used, the sources cited, and the overall framing of the issues. By doing so, we could challenge the narratives that downplayed underlying causes and highlighted disruptions instead. This critical engagement enabled us to communicate our message more effectively and advocate for equality and justice, continuing the legacy of our post-apartheid journey. We're more equipped to use media as a platform for advocating equality and justice, ensuring that our voices are heard, and our causes are accurately represented. (Participant 21)

Similarly, Participant 17 discussed how media literacy has influenced her engagement with political processes, particularly elections.

> Through media literacy, I've learned to critically engage with election coverage, understanding the strategies used by different political parties. This has made me more active in political discussions and more informed as a voter. Through media literacy, I've learned to critically engage with election coverage, understanding the strategies used by different political parties. For example, during the 2024 South African elections, I analysed the campaign messages from various parties, looking at how they framed their policies and the language they

used. By cross-referencing these messages with independent reports, I could identify biases and propaganda, which helped me understand the true intentions behind their promises. This critical engagement has made me more active in political discussions and more informed as a voter. (Participant 17)

Participant 14 explained that media literacy has been crucial in understanding the role of social media in mobilising for social causes. They described how they used their media literacy skills to analyse social media platforms, identify influential voices, and craft messages that resonate with their community:

Media literacy has helped me understand the role of social media in mobilising for social causes. I've been part of campaigns that address issues in our community, using the skills I've gained to spread awareness. For example, during a campaign to address water scarcity, I analysed social media platforms to identify key influencers and crafted targeted messages that successfully mobilised our community for a protest. (Participant 14)

Participant 22 discussed how media literacy skills are vital for dissecting political rhetoric and propaganda. The participant provided an example of their role in student governance, where they often debate university policies. By applying media literacy techniques, they could critically analyse official statements and campaign promises, identify underlying biases, and present counterarguments based on information.

Being media literate means I can dissect political rhetoric and propaganda. This skill is vital for my participation in student governance, where we often discuss and address issues affecting our university. For instance, during debates about tuition hikes, I analysed official statements for biases and used factual data to present strong counterarguments, ensuring that student voices were heard and considered. (Participant 22)

Participant 29 expressed that their understanding of media literacy had heightened their awareness of the difficulties encountered by marginalised populations. They elucidated their use of this consciousness to champion the rights of these people by scrutinising media depictions, discerning distortions, and magnifying genuine voices across diverse platforms. As an illustration, students actively engaged in a campaign to bring attention to the prejudice experienced by migrant workers. Students utilised their proficiency in media literacy to craft powerful stories that captured the interest of the media and garnered public backing.

Media literacy has made me more aware of the plight of marginalised communities. I use this awareness to advocate for their rights and ensure their voices are heard in the democratic process. For instance, I analysed media portrayals of migrant workers, identified common misrepresentations, and used social media to amplify their authentic stories, which helped garner public support and media attention for their cause. (Participant 29)

Participants revealed that media literacy is essential for deeper and more active involvement in democratic processes. It empowered them to critically analyse election coverage, engage in community activism and participate in student governance. This reflects cognitive mobilisation theory, which posits that access to information enhances individuals' ability to engage critically in democracy. The responses show that students' understanding of democracy extends beyond voting, encompassing community mobilisation, government involvement and social justice advocacy. This demonstrates media literacy's role in fostering informed, multidimensional political participation.

Media literacy as a catalyst for active citizenship and social transformation

The theme of active citizenship through media literacy shows its role in increasing political and social involvement. Participants highlighted that media literacy helps them critically evaluate media content. This leads to informed participation in democracy and social justice. For example, Participant 4 used media literacy to combat misinformation during COVID-19 and to promote public health. Others applied it to environmental activism and political debate (Participants 8, 13, 14). This supports cognitive mobilisation theory, which argues that access to media empowers individuals to engage critically in democratic processes (Spann and Agarwal 2023). Overall, media literacy enables meaningful contributions to policy discussions and social change.

Participant 4 expresses the role of media literacy in public health, specifically as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participant expressed that they could filter out misinformation and disseminate accurate information by critically evaluating media content. For this participant, this skill has assisted them to contribute meaningfully to discussions around community health and safety, in the process influencing societal well-being through informed public health advocacy. The participant said,

> To me, media literacy means being aware of how media influences our perceptions and behaviours. It's vital for public health campaigns and understanding policy changes because it helps us navigate through information critically. During the COVID-19 pandemic, my media literacy skills were crucial in filtering out misinformation and accessing accurate health information, which I then shared with my community to promote safe practices. (Participant 4)

Participant 8 stressed that they use their media literacy skills to assess the environmental impacts of engineering projects. They can also engage in informed discussion about sustainable development and advocate for environmentally responsible engineering practices, thereby contributing to social transformation. The participant stressed that,

> Media literacy means having the ability to interpret media messages critically and understand their broader implications. It's important for making informed decisions, especially in democratic processes. For example, I used my media literacy skills to understand the environmental impacts of certain proposed engineering projects by critically evaluating news articles and reports. (Participant 8)

Another participant from UniZulu leverages media literacy for environmental activism. The participant stressed that by evaluating the credibility of environmental reports, they can advocate effective conservation policies and contribute to environmental sustainability efforts. This illustrates the transformative potential of media literacy in the realm of environmental policy. This participant stressed that, "To me, media literacy involves understanding and evaluating environmental information in the media. It's essential for informed environmental activism and policy-making. Media literacy helped me assess the credibility of reports on environmental conservation and advocate for better environmental policies" (Participant 13).

Participant 14 from (UniZulu) stressed that they use media literacy to engage in political debates and to understand the social implications of political decisions. Their ability to critically analyse media content enhances his participation in democratic processes and be a more informed and active citizen.

> Media literacy is the ability to critically analyse media content and understand its broader implications. It's important for understanding societal issues and participating in democratic

processes. During political debates, media literacy helped me understand the social implications of various political decisions and engage in more informed discussions. (Participant 14)

Participants demonstrated that media literacy is crucial for social change. It helped them filter misinformation during COVID-19. It also helps them advocate for environmental legislation and engage in informed discussions on policy and ethics. This aligns with cognitive mobilisation theory, which suggests that access to information empowers individuals to engage critically in democratic processes (Sharma, Kar, and Gupta 2024). Media literacy not only increased their political involvement but also equipped them to challenge biases, push for policy reforms, and contribute to public health education and social justice. Overall, their responses illustrate how media literacy enhances their ability to drive positive societal change.

Discussion

A key finding of this study is that media literacy equips students with the ability to discern misinformation, particularly during periods of heightened political activity such as elections. This gives them the skill and capacity to make informed decisions and be shielded from biased or fake information. Participants indicated that media literacy helped in understanding political campaigns and media portrayals in the 2024 South African elections. This supports the assertion of the cognitive mobilisation theory that access to information empowers political engagement (Allam et al. 2020; Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020). This finding corresponds to a study by Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) that established the political participation of Nigerian youths in the democratic processes of their country was better when they could critically assess the political contents on social media. This suggests that media literacy shifts individuals from passive consumers to active political participants, enhancing informed citizenship.

This study also revealed media literacy encourages other forms of engagement besides traditional political participation, such as voting. Participants reported that the skills they had acquired in critically evaluating media content had enabled them to become engaged in the areas of advocacy, student governance, and social justice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, media literacy skills helped participants in filtering misinformation, thus creating room for them to take part in public health discussions in their communities. The foregoing assertion is in good correspondence with the findings of Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli (2023), on how social media literacy created a platform for Nigerian youths to engage in effective and active discourse and advocacy. These findings also support the research of Kaskazi and Kitzie (2021), who recognised the role that media literacy plays in marginalised groups' efforts to bring about social change. The results imply that media literacy is a tool for both comprehending media and promoting social change via engaged civic participation.

The findings of this study also strongly support the integration of media literacy into university curricula. The students consistently self-reported that formal education in media literacy through courses and workshops equipped them with critical competencies to thoughtfully engage with media and participate in political and social discussions. This finding resonates with cognitive mobilisation theory, underpinned by the idea that effectively empowering people towards critical engagement with media content serves as a very important constituent element in fostering

democratic processes (Omotayo and Folorunso 2020; Spann and Agarwal 2023). Previous studies (Allam et al. 2020) also linked media literacy to the consolidation of political integrity among youths on social media. This places universities at the epicentre of creating better informed and engaged citizens through systematic media literacy education that would have a trickle-down effect on improving the democratic complexion of society.

Compared to other studies, this research extends the line of argument that the effects of media literacy are multidimensional. Prior research was more focused on evaluating media literacy in terms of the ability of the individual to understand media content (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020; Lee and Xenos 2020). This study provides evidence that media literacy supports broader political and social engagement. The findings indicate that media literacy empowers people to recognise misinformation and use media for fostering policy changes, advocating social justice, and participating in governance. This brings a new perspective to recent scholarly pursuits which have tended to focus on the informational role of media literacy without full consideration of its place within active societal participation (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020; Lee and Xenos 2020).

The integration of media literacy within university curricula holds great significance for practitioners of policymaking. This paper postulates that enhanced media literacy might allow for increased political participation among the youth, who are the most important vehicle in the consolidation of democratic institutions. Equipped with critical thinking and media analysis skills, universities would foster a generation of informed citizens who can rise against misinformation with ease and advocate policy reforms with efficiency. Furthermore, media literacy programmes might serve to address pressing societal issues such as sustainability and public health, as the engagement of participants in these aspects has also shown. This supports Allam et al.'s (2020) argument that media literacy is now an imperative requirement to instigate active citizenship and integrity in political participation. For this reason, media literacy should be an ingredient of core civic education, and policymakers should consider it as such, to enhance active citizenship and advocacy of social justice.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing literature on media literacy in the digital age. While previous research, such as that of Ida, Saud, and Mashud (2020), focused on traditional media, this study highlights the importance of media literacy in the context of digital media, where misinformation and manipulation are more prevalent. The findings support calls for media literacy programmes tailored to digital platforms, particularly in countering fake news and manipulating public opinion (Kaskazi and Kitzie 2021). As digital platforms become increasingly central to political communication, the ability to critically evaluate online content is vital for informed political participation and social engagement.

This paper suggests that media literacy is an important tool for enhancing democratic engagement in societal transformation. Embedding media literacy into university curricula enables higher learning institutions to develop informed and active citizens with the competencies to navigate the challenging media landscape and contribute meaningfully to social change. The point here is that media literacy education has a prominent role in policy development, particularly on issues involving misinformation and democratic processes in an increasingly digital world.

Conclusion

The study aimed to establish how media literacy influenced political participation and democratic engagement among university students in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This paper has demonstrated that media literacy is crucial in empowering students to analyse media content discerningly, enabling them to recognise biases, disinformation, and propaganda. This active engagement with media is highly needed within democratic life as informed decisions can be made.

This study's findings provide new insights into how media literacy influences the improvement of political awareness and democratic engagement among university students, with a specific focus on South Africa. Interviews reveal that students see media literacy as an empowering tool, providing essential skills for navigating media and actively participating in democracy. The findings of this study also support the idea that the inclusion of media literacy instruction within the university curriculum is necessary for increased political involvement and heightened analytical thinking abilities among students. By reaffirming the significance of media literacy in promoting democratic engagement and social transformation in South Africa's post-apartheid society, this study advances the field of media literacy research.

Although this study is significant, its main limitation is the number of samples upon which it was based. Hence, the outcome cannot be generalised. We therefore recommend other studies that use larger and various sample sizes to validate the findings of the present research and explore the long-term effects of media literacy instruction. Future research should also focus on conducting more cross-national studies to establish the broader relevance of these findings and the durability of any impact of media literacy on political involvement.

Disclosure statement

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