

Digital Media Literacy as a Mechanism for Developing Digital Awareness among University Students in the Virtual Environment Proposed Framework

التربية الإعلامية الرقمية كأداة لتنمية الوعي الرقمي لدى الطالب الجامعي في البيئة الافتراضية
تصور مقترح

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to shed light on the importance of digital media literacy as a mechanism for enhancing digital awareness among university students in the virtual context. The study proposes a framework to implement this approach within the university system, considering that universities serve as spaces where students learn the foundations, principles, and requirements of digital media literacy in the current era,

Through digital media literacy, students become capable of analyzing content, evaluating its credibility, and avoiding fake news and misinformation, contributing to the development of an informed generation capable of making sound decisions. Additionally, this literacy fosters critical thinking skills, protects privacy, and develops digital identity, thereby preparing students for a successful academic and professional future while enabling them to contribute positively and responsibly to their digital communities.

Keywords: Digital Media Literacy, Digital Awareness, Students, University, Virtual Environment.

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تسليط الضوء على أهمية التربية الإعلامية كآلية لتعزيز الوعي الرقمي لدى طلاب الجامعة في السياق الافتراضي، جاءت هذه الدراسة لتطرح تصور مقترح لتجسيد هذا الإطار في المنظومة الجامعية، باعتبار أن الجامعة تشكل فضاء يتعلم من خلاله الطلاب أسس ومبادئ ومتطلبات التربية الإعلامية الرقمية في الوقت الراهن ، وفضل

التربية الإعلامية الرقمية، يصبح الطلاب قادرين على تحليل المحتوى وتقييم مصداقيته، وتجنب الأخبار الزائفة والمعلومات المضللة، مما يساهم في بناء جيل واعٍ قادر على اتخاذ قرارات مستنيرة. كما تعزز هذه التربية من مهارات التفكير النقدي، وحماية الخصوصية، وتطوير الهوية الرقمية، ما يساهم في إعدادهم لمستقبل أكاديمي ومهني ناجح ومساهمتهم بشكل إيجابي ومسؤول في مجتمعهم الرقمي.

كلمات مفتاحية: التربية الإعلامية الرقمية، الوعي الرقمي، الطلاب، الجامعة، البيئة الافتراضية.

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1. Introduction

around the world, becoming an essential component of the knowledge economy. The internet is utilized in social, commercial, political, and personal domains, with electronic applications available to university students contributing to the enhancement of educational quality. Many researchers agree that information and communication technology (ICT) plays an increasingly significant role in facilitating educational systems.

University students constitute a large proportion of users on social networks and educational platforms. Amidst the unprecedented digital transformation, e-learning has become an integral part of the educational process, especially for university students. Electronic platforms have provided new opportunities for students to access academic content easily and flexibly, allowing them to learn from anywhere at any time. These technologies enable university students to access recorded lectures, diverse educational resources, e-books, and databases, as well as participate in interactive sessions with professors and peers in the educational space

(Tamara Almarabeh, Yousef,

<https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=72666>

Moreover, modern digital tools help students develop research and problem-solving skills by offering them an unlimited array of resources and information available online. Despite the numerous benefits and advantages the internet provides university students, the intensive and excessive use of

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digital technology is not without risks that can negatively impact their academic performance, psychological balance, attitudes, and behaviors.

Among the most prominent drawbacks is internet addiction, which exposes students to distractions and reduced concentration, as they spend long hours on social media or entertainment platforms at the expense of studying. Students also face difficulties in distinguishing reliable sources from unreliable ones, potentially leading to reliance on inaccurate or misleading information. Additionally, some students may experience social isolation due to their presence in virtual environments, which reduces their opportunities for direct interaction and building social relationships.

Furthermore, the high level of daily technology use by students, combined with the lack of institutional (university) training on its proper use, has increased their exposure to various risks. These include threats via email (33.3%) and exposure to online theft (42.7%). Other studies indicate that 60% of students become socially withdrawn and 46.7% develop improper behaviors (Mahrous Al-Naghi & Hassan Mustafa, 2018). Excessive internet use and new media have led to what Philippe Breton terms "communication intoxication" (*l'ivresse de communication*), resulting in social, psychological, ethical, and cultural repercussions on users of these networks.

The internet's success and evolution have relied on values and social ties, which have witnessed significant deterioration (Al-Zoubi, 2022, p. 331). Contemporary digital networks, especially with the expansion of global interactive networks (broadband), allow individuals to immerse themselves in global interactive environments. Skills such as critical thinking and technical expertise are not sufficient to thrive without understanding the nature and power of interactivity itself. A media-literate individual deeply recognizes global interactivity, making global sensibility a key to digital media literacy (Al-Badrani, 2016, p136).

As youth are the demographic most exposed to various media, particularly social media, and represent the future foundation of society, it is crucial to consider appropriate strategies and mechanisms to protect them from the negative effects of the overwhelming messages transmitted

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through various forms of media (Mahmoud, Mujahid, 2023, p1423). Studies have shown that youth are the most enthusiastic internet users, which is unsurprising given that they have grown up in a technology-saturated environment. Hence, they are often referred to as the "technology generation," the "chat generation," or the "screen generation," among other terms reflecting their immersion in communicative tools and wide-ranging participatory services (Abdeli, 2011, p145).

Amidst the technological revolution we are experiencing today, the concept of digital media literacy has emerged. It enables users to understand and interpret the content of new digital media, uncovering the messages and values they convey. This understanding is grounded in conscious selection and a strong capacity to critique media content while leveraging the features of modern media and communication technologies, such as interactivity and role exchange, to expand the possibilities for engagement with various media (Abdelaziz, 2019, p89).

The importance of spreading digital media literacy among youth has grown, particularly at universities, to deepen students' understanding of the digital environment, engage effectively, and participate constructively. This has increased the responsibility of educational institutions to promote digital media literacy to enhance digital awareness, reshape moral value systems, and address behavioral and ethical phenomena far removed from the values of our religion that have proliferated in Arab societies (Dahi Jad, 2024, p72).

From this perspective, improving students' level of digital awareness and competencies is vital for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process and enabling students to adapt to the dynamically changing labor market. Identifying how students use ICT in their learning process can help determine their motivations to develop digital media skills. This not only improves their academic outcomes but also equips students to succeed and enhance their status in the digital environment (Tatiana Shopova, 2014, <https://www.eriesjournal.com/index.php/eries/article/view/100>).

Despite these challenges, the internet remains a vital tool for empowering students to develop their research and creative skills. It

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demands a balance between its academic use and caution against its risks. The rapid technological advancements and the multiplicity of internet-connected devices have led to the intensification of digital media content.

In this context, this research paper aims to highlight the importance of digital media literacy for university students amidst the rapid transformations of the digital age and the increasing reliance on the internet in various aspects of life. At the same time, the university's role is now more critical than ever in intensifying efforts and measures to enhance digital awareness through media literacy among students. This can be achieved by incorporating digital media literacy programs into curricula across all disciplines and equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to critically understand and evaluate digital information, enabling them to interact with digital content in a smart and safe manner.

This issue can be addressed by posing the following main question:

What Role Does Digital Media Literacy Play in Enhancing Digital Awareness among University Students to Improve their Skills in Using Digital Technology and Addressing the Threats and Risks they Face in the Virtual Environment?

The following sub-questions stem from this main question:

- What is the concept of digital media literacy, and what are its importance and objectives?
- What is the relationship between digital media literacy and technology in the digital age?
- What are the indicators of digital media literacy in the digital era?
- How can the principles and foundations of digital media literacy be implemented and activated in the university environment?

2. The Intellectual and Philosophical Foundations of Digital Media Literacy

Digital media literacy is a process aimed at equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and use digital media and modern technologies safely and effectively. It involves empowering individuals, particularly youth-university students-to become critical consumers and creators of digital content. This enables them to distinguish

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between accurate and misleading information, understand the impact of these media on their daily lives, and utilize them in ways that enhance their skills, abilities, and behaviors.

2.1 Digital Media Literacy Definition:

The concept of media literacy is one of the complex and controversial concepts, characterized by its holistic nature and its pluralistic feature in a media space that is constantly evolving and renewing. Media literacy is a relatively recent concept that has not yet fully crystallized and has not reached consensus among thinkers regarding its intellectual and theoretical components. Its ever-changing, comprehensive nature continues to attract many scientific attempts to clearly define its foundations and educational-media dimensions (As'ad Watfa, 2022, p101).

According to the American Library Association, digital media literacy refers to the ability to use information and technology to produce and evaluate digital content, which requires both mental and technical skills. According to the Association for Media Literacy, it is the ability to encode and decode media messages, as well as to understand, analyze, and produce similar messages (Sami, 2019, p167).

Media literacy is a compound term consisting of two words: "education" and "media," and it is the translation of the English term "Media Education," which also refers to media education. Some argue that it means "media literacy." Thoman and Jolis believe that media education focuses on citizenship and democracy, and that media literacy skills are an entry point to the 21st century. They provide a framework for analyzing, accessing, evaluating, producing, and creating messages in various forms, whether printed, auditory, visual, or digital (Ben Laga, Salamen, 2019, p64).

Media literacy is defined as the ability to read, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication. Media awareness is not limited to reception and criticism alone, but should extend to conscious and purposeful participation in producing media content. Hobbs states that media literacy includes the ability to access information, analyze messages, evaluate them, and communicate them (Al-Hamdani, 2015, p94).

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The term refers to how to nurture an individual in a way that allows them to interact with and engage with various media, whether audio, visual, printed, or social media. This can be achieved by incorporating media literacy as part of family education by including a dedicated media education curriculum at different stages of schooling (Kriket, 2020, p. 60).

Some researchers define digital media literacy as the ability to access digital media, analyze its messages, evaluate them, and even produce digital content. Others define it as the ability to engage with digital media positively and consciously, by choosing appropriate and purposeful content that aligns with culture and identity, ensuring accuracy when encountering information, avoiding falling for rumors, and distinguishing underlying motives and agendas in dealing with media content, enabling informed decision-making (Haddadi, 2020, p74).

Digital media literacy is defined as the abilities and skills that enable an individual, in the future, to use information sources, digital media tools, digital devices, and communication technologies to manage tasks and activities relying on digital technology.

Digital media literacy is also defined as how to engage with technological and media tools, starting from the ability to access the digital media message, then analyzing and evaluating it, and ultimately culminating in the ability to create media content that carries its principles and ideas (Areej, 2022, p269).

Digital media literacy refers to education that contributes to the development of skills in using digital technology, new media, and digital networks, alongside fostering critical thinking skills to navigate these technologies and networks. It involves planned guidance from teachers to students or from parents to children, and the actual use of these digital resources and technologies to develop the skills and behaviors that enable individuals to become active digital citizens, engaging with others through direct communication or during the learning process (Qazadari,2022, p460).

Digital media literacy is concerned with the recipient's ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate messages received in any form. The essence of digital media literacy lies in enhancing individuals' ability to engage critically in the current media environment and helping them lead meaningful lives. Digital media literacy is essential to support and promote social responsibility and participation among students. Digital education relies on acquiring basic thinking skills and essential competencies, without

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which an individual would be unable to navigate or perform tasks in an interactive environment.

Digital media literacy is the ability to access media efficiently and responsibly, understand it, use it, and engage with it critically (Smart Media, <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/defining-digital-media>)

2.2 Objectives of Digital Media Literacy for University Students:

The objectives of digital media literacy are diverse due to the variety of its standards and theories and its connection to other concepts such as media awareness, media culture, and digital citizenship. It emphasizes the content and information individuals receive in the digital environment. Initially, digital media literacy aimed primarily at protecting users from the negative effects of digital media messages. However, it has expanded to include transforming individuals from passive users into active, positive contributors who participate in creating digital content. Therefore, digital media literacy seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ✓ Protecting young people from the negative effects of electronic media and its diverse content, and enabling them to provide critical opinions—both positive and negative—about digital content.
- ✓ Enhancing the ability to make informed choices regarding digital media and content by developing critical thinking skills and acquiring the fundamental principles of analyzing, interpreting, and critiquing all received information, especially for children and youth.
- ✓ Equipping individuals with the necessary expertise to optimize their use of communication technologies, stay updated with technological and communicative advancements, and gain the ability to create and disseminate media content to targeted audiences (Barka, 2021, p. 12).
- ✓ Teaching and training students to use the internet safely and effectively, including protecting their personal data, safeguarding privacy, and raising awareness of digital risks.
- ✓ Developing research and analysis skills using search engines and electronic resources, as well as the ability to evaluate information sources to determine whether they are credible or unreliable.
- ✓ Encouraging students to use digital technologies creatively and productively by training them to create professional digital content

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using applications, software, and artificial intelligence to design blogs, videos, and more, thus enhancing their artistic and digital skills (Abdel Maqsoud,2023, p279).

The researcher believes that digital media literacy aims to achieve a set of objectives:

Digital media literacy seeks to train students to interact with digital content ethically and responsibly, by respecting others in the digital space, honoring intellectual property rights, and avoiding the dissemination of information that promotes racial discrimination or hate speech.

It also aims to teach students how to use digital media as an educational tool. This includes benefiting from digital learning platforms, digital libraries, language learning tools, and participating in digital discussions to exchange opinions and ideas within the digital environment.

Digital media literacy strives to integrate students into the digital work environment by equipping them with essential skills, such as remote work, digital marketing, and freelancing. Technology has facilitated the development of freelancing platforms like Freelancer, Mostaql, and Upwork, which allow individuals to offer their services to organizations or clients worldwide. This growth in freelancing empowers individuals to work on diverse projects without the constraints of traditional employment.

2.3 The Importance of Digital Media Literacy:

Digital media literacy is considered one of the fundamental pillars in the era of modern technology, as it contributes to empowering individuals to interact effectively and safely with the digital information available online. Through digital media literacy and its skills, individuals (the audience) can determine the following:What type of message is this?Who is the entity responsible for this message?What is the explicit and implicit meaning behind this message?How can the authenticity or falsity of this message be verified?Why was the message formulated in this particular manner?

Thus, the importance of digital media literacy lies in the following elements:

The importance of media literacy, especially in the digital era, lies in facilitating individuals' access to the skills and expertise they need to understand how digital media shapes their perceptions and prepares them to participate as producers of digital content. Recognizing the various

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dimensions of digital media and enhancing their ability to evaluate, analyze, critique, and share content is among the key requirements to empower individuals for participation in the digital environment.

- It is an urgent necessity for students to deal with the vast number of media messages that shape their reality. These messages are responsible for most of the experiences upon which students build their personal understanding of the world around them. Students interpret the meaning of media messages based on individual factors, personal and cultural needs, and the value systems that guide their behavior.
- A purposeful tool to achieve communication between all elements of the communication process (audience – medium – message – digital content – sender), aiming for conscious understanding and sound awareness.
- The importance of media literacy lies in facilitating students' access to the skills and experiences they need to understand how digital media shapes their perceptions and prepares them to contribute as purposeful content creators in virtual communities, adhering to the ethics, values, and standards of society (Muawwad Ibrahim,2023, p233).

3.Media Literacy in Relation to Digital Technology:

Many researchers reject the separation between the field of traditional audiovisual media and new digital media. Based on this perspective, Aviva Silver argues that the concept of media literacy encompasses various media platforms, including television, cinema, radio, audio discs, print journalism, the Internet, and different new digital technological media. Despite the ongoing debate surrounding the definition of media literacy, this concept often refers to a set of skills, competencies, and knowledge that learners acquire in the fields of media and communication. These skills, in turn, shape the goals of the educational activities and initiatives in the field of media literacy.

In essence, media literacy emerged as a reaction to the influence of mass media during its early development. Initially, its purpose was to equip learners with skills to understand and counteract media messages, thereby protecting them from potential harm. Over time, media literacy evolved to focus on preparing learners to participate in the production of media texts

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and interact with them creatively. This involvement in media production extended beyond developing expressive and artistic capabilities to fostering and enhancing critical thinking during the production process itself.

With the advancement of media technologies, especially digital ones, and the convergence of digital and traditional media in the media space, new challenges and issues began to surface. This evolution demanded new and advanced skills, competencies, and experiences for both learners and media audiences. New digital technologies introduced novel demands for dealing with media texts, as interaction with diverse media texts increasingly occurred on unified platforms due to the continuous convergence, integration, and merging of multiple media outlets.

Today, it is no longer sufficient to enable learners to simply read and understand media texts. It has become essential for them to grasp the broader context resulting from the convergence of media and their integration into shared platforms. Moreover, these technologies require advanced skills in media research, critical reading, and information analysis. Consequently, there is a need to establish a new concept of media literacy that aligns with the evolving developments introduced by digital media. This includes enabling learners to engage rationally, objectively, critically, and ethically with digital networks.

Given these advancements in the digital media realm, media literacy now faces the challenge of improving its educational performance within this new digital space. This involves integrating advanced skills and specialized knowledge into its curricula and incorporating various forms of new digital technologies into its educational activities within the boundless digital space. It also requires moving beyond traditional approaches to its educational activities, advancing to a stage where learners are equipped to conduct advanced qualitative analyses of media, and process information using the most developed and sophisticated scientific methodologies.

This process aims to prepare learners to confront various ethical and behavioral issues that arise within the new digital space. Considering these developments, the concept of media literacy has begun adapting to new digital advancements, covering a wide range of new fields. As a result, new sub-concepts have emerged, such as Internet literacy, visual literacy, social communication literacy, and smart computing literacy. (Wattafa, 2019, p110)

4.Digital Media Literacy for Students in Light of 21st-Century Skills

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Digital media literacy (DML) has been recognized as a core 21st-century competency. It encompasses the audience's ability to use digital media, technology, and tools effectively while producing and critically analyzing digital media content. Students today are required not only to master basic knowledge and skills but also to engage in higher-order competencies for creating and evaluating digital media. The integration of digital media literacy education has become essential to bridge the gap between students' digital knowledge and the outcomes required to live and work in the 21st century, particularly with the rise of artificial intelligence applications (Sayed Hussein, Abdel-Maqsood Mahmoud, 2023, p. 700).

The concept of 21st-century skills has gained significant attention from educators aiming to support students at various stages, particularly in higher education and professional life. The movement toward these skills began with advocacy across all fields and disciplines by the Partnership for 21st-Century Skills (P21), formed through collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education and several corporate entities such as Microsoft, as well as associations like the National Education Association (NEA). This partnership has become a global leader in promoting the development and education of 21st-century skills (Mohamed Ibrahim et al., 2023, p. 233).

The field of media literacy focuses on using new media, understanding media influences, and educating university students about media choices. It equips students with sufficient media awareness to assess and judge the credibility of news and information while avoiding harmful messages prevalent in digital environments. This is achieved by developing inquiry, evaluation, and analytical skills and by utilizing digital media technologies.

In the digital age, media literacy relies on participatory culture. Digital networks enable individuals to immerse themselves in interactive environments, where critical thinking in consuming and producing digital content is essential. Media-literate individuals must grasp the depth of global interaction in new communicative spaces.

-Digital media literacy in the 21st century is built on three fundamental levels:

- Skills for using information technologies and navigating digital networks.
- Critical thinking skills for analyzing and evaluating the content of media messages.
- Appreciation for global interactivity in digital environments.

(Faria Sultana, 2024, p 61)

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5. A Proposed Concept for Implementing Digital Media Literacy in the University Environment

In light of the above and based on the theoretical perspective related to the importance of digital media literacy, and building on the analysis of previous literature that addressed the topic of digital media literacy, the researcher has attempted to propose a concept and vision from a communicative, educational, and pedagogical perspective. These proposals can serve as a roadmap for academic institutions and are represented in the following points:

Integrating digital media literacy as a core value in the university's policy, making it a part of the university's educational identity and culture. This can be achieved by incorporating it into all academic programs and creating an educational environment that encourages critical thinking and careful engagement with information.

- Developing a practical medium-term plan to enhance digital media literacy among students, involving the university institution, student clubs, and student organizations.
- Relying on experts in the fields of innovation and communication technology to strengthen the dimensions of digital media literacy and train students on safe use of digital media and protecting their data within the framework of strategic vigilance and cybersecurity.
- Establishing a dedicated center within the university that focuses on digital media literacy, organizing awareness activities, preparing advanced training curricula, and conducting research on youth interaction with digital media. The center can act as a reference for students, faculty, and university staff, offering guidance on safe digital engagement.
- Supporting scientific research studying the impact of digital media on society, particularly among youth, focusing on topics such as fake news, digital facts, and the role of algorithms in shaping public opinion. Research programs can also be launched to develop innovative educational methods for digital media literacy.
- Building partnerships with international institutions specializing in media and technology to exchange expertise and knowledge, organizing student and training exchange programs to develop students' competencies in handling digital media on a global level.
- Transitioning to an inclusive teaching model that incorporates digital media skills across all academic fields, so that students graduate with

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integrated skills in critical thinking, analysis, and advanced research, regardless of their academic discipline.

- Designing curricula aimed at enhancing students' critical ability and understanding of the importance of digital privacy, so that they graduate with a deep understanding of how digital information impacts them and their communities. This could include practical training on privacy protection and workshops on digital media ethics.
- Developing an interactive educational platform with resources on digital media literacy, including regularly updated educational content such as awareness articles, video lessons, and interactive quizzes. This platform could integrate with other educational systems and be accessible to all university students.
- Training students to analyze media content to identify ideological, political, and commercial biases. This can be done through media analysis workshops that introduce students to techniques for detecting manipulation in images and videos, and methods of framing news in a biased way.
- Offering cybersecurity awareness training programs to teach students how to protect their personal data and avoid online threats such as phishing and malware. These programs could introduce students to techniques for managing passwords, the risks of unknown apps, and the importance of reviewing privacy policies.
- Offering specialized educational programs that provide certificates or diplomas in digital media literacy, covering topics like the impact of digital media on public opinion, issues in electronic media and ethics, and skills for handling multiple media platforms.
- Creating a consultative unit at the university that provides students with guidance on how to consume digital content consciously and responsibly, how to deal with cyberbullying and other media-related issues. The unit could also offer support to students working on media projects, guiding them to achieve their media goals in a scientific and professional manner.
- Providing spaces for students within student activities such as clubs and associations, where they can discuss digital media topics, exchange experiences on media awareness issues, safe online practices, and privacy protection.
- Supporting students who wish to create meaningful content via social media, such as producing awareness videos or content addressing social or academic issues. The university could offer guidance on professional media production and digital marketing.

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- Raising awareness among students about how algorithms affect the content shown to them on the internet and social media, so they have a deeper understanding of how content is directed based on their interests and the importance of avoiding reliance on information from unverified sources.
- Developing electronic educational platforms: Developing specialized electronic platforms in digital media literacy that provide open-source educational content and interactive educational resources.
- Providing the necessary infrastructure such as high-speed internet, modern devices, and specialized educational software.

Conclusion:

Through this study, we have sought to highlight the importance and role of media literacy in enhancing digital awareness among university students. It is clear that the requirements for digital media literacy have become an urgent necessity with the advancement of digital technology. University students now urgently need to acquire skills that align with the challenges and threats of the digital environment. This type of education is not limited to teaching students how to use technological tools but extends to enhancing their ability to think critically, analyze objectively, and engage in the production of meaningful digital content, as well as promoting educational mechanisms that protect them from the risks they face in the virtual context, especially regarding identity, culture, and social values. Achieving and embodying digital media literacy requires the participation of all stakeholders and educational institutions, contributing to the formation of a generation that is digitally aware and digitally responsible in a developed and secure digital society. Therefore, this study recommends the following:

- ✓ Striving to enhance digital awareness among university students through digital media literacy is a fundamental step towards building a generation that is aware and capable of responsibly addressing the challenges posed by the digital age.
- ✓ Embodying digital media literacy in universities requires the combined efforts of all concerned parties, from university administrations to faculty members and students.
- ✓ Preparing students to deal with the challenges of the knowledge revolution and its technological applications.

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- ✓ Equipping students with skills for the positive use of technological tools and instilling digital awareness values to face the threats and risks they encounter in the digital age.
- ✓ Training students to analyze media content in terms of credibility, bias, and the purpose of production.
- ✓ Using interactive and innovative teaching methods, such as research projects, group discussions, and media content analysis, to make learning more engaging and effective.

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