

The impact of university students' critical thinking skills and information sharing behaviors on digital media literacy skills

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of university students' critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors on their digital media literacy levels. Conducted with 301 students from various departments during the 2023–2024 academic year, the study adopted a relational screening model and employed three main scales: Digital Literacy Scale, Information Sharing Behaviors Scale, and Marmara Critical Thinking Tendencies Scale. The results revealed significant and positive relationships between critical thinking, information sharing, and digital media literacy. However, no significant difference was found between those who received media literacy education and those who did not. The findings highlight the importance of fostering critical thinking skills to enhance students' digital media literacy.

Keywords: Digital media literacy, critical thinking, information sharing

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has led to profound changes in individuals' access to information, information-sharing practices, and critical thinking skills. Traditional media tools have largely been replaced by digital media platforms, which has deeply affected individuals' processes of news consumption, learning, and communication. Today, digital media plays a central role not only as a source of entertainment or news but also in academic, professional, and social contexts. This transformation necessitates that individuals consume media content consciously, question the accuracy of the information they produce and share, and develop their critical thinking skills. Digital media literacy is a multidimensional concept encompassing individuals' abilities to understand, evaluate, and produce information in digital environments (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). This skill enables individuals to critically question the information they encounter online and to adopt an informed stance against misinformation and deception.

The widespread use of social media platforms and digital news sources has accelerated individuals' access to information while simultaneously increasing the risk of information pollution. Young adults, such as university students, use these platforms extensively and actively participate in online information-sharing processes. Therefore, examining the relationship between digital media literacy, critical thinking skills, and information-sharing behaviors has become increasingly important. In digital media environments, individuals are often exposed to content shaped by algorithms. Pariser (2011) points out that the echo chambers created by individuals on social media platforms cause them to encounter content that only confirms their own views. This situation can hinder critical thinking skills and make it difficult for individuals to be open to opposing opinions.

Digital media literacy is not merely an isolated technical skill within this complex digital ecosystem. Rather, it functions as a dynamic outcome that is heavily shaped by these cognitive and behavioral factors. Rather than viewing it as a static trait, contemporary literature increasingly positions digital media literacy as a dependent variable influenced by an individual's mental processing and online habits. On the cognitive side, critical thinking serves as a primary predictor of this literacy; it provides the analytical filter necessary to deconstruct complex media messages, question hidden motives, and detect manipulation (Buckingham, 2003; Paul & Elder, 2019). Without strong critical thinking, digital media literacy remains superficial and limited to technical tool usage. On the behavioral side, active information-sharing practices and the responsibility individuals assume when spreading content (Pennycook & Rand, 2021) directly influence their literacy levels. As individuals share information, navigate digital feedback, and confront potential misinformation, they gain a deeper, experiential understanding of how digital platforms function, which in turn elevates

their overall digital media literacy over time (Livingstone, 2004). Therefore, treating digital media literacy as a core outcome requires a comprehensive investigation into how cognitive filters like critical thinking and behavioral actions like information sharing interact to shape it (Jones-Jang et al., 2021).

Information sharing is a fundamental process that allows individuals to take an active role in academic, social, and cultural contexts on digital media platforms. However, the reliability, accuracy, and impact of shared information are increasingly being questioned. In today's digital world, information sharing affects not only individuals but also reaches wide audiences and shapes public opinion. Therefore, understanding how university students' information-sharing habits relate to their digital media literacy and critical thinking skills is considered important for developing effective educational strategies in this area. In the context of Turkey, research examining the relationship between university students' digital media literacy, critical thinking, and information-sharing behaviors is quite limited. In this regard, the present study aims to analyze university students' digital media literacy levels, critical thinking skills, and information-sharing habits and to reveal the relationship among these three variables.

1. Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking is the ability of individuals to evaluate complex information, question its accuracy, and make logical inferences. It is not limited to accessing information alone; rather, it emphasizes the necessity of questioning the reliability and validity of the information obtained. This process enables individuals to think independently and to develop original solutions to the problems they encounter. At the same time, it involves a wide range of multifaceted and complex mental activities, such as being open to innovation, accessing reliable sources of knowledge, respecting others' perspectives, and conducting evaluations from a scientific and holistic point of view (Yılmaz Özelçi, 2012). In this process, a subject is examined in depth, analyzed through a critical lens, and logical conclusions are drawn. A disposition toward critical thinking entails openness to examining events and situations from multiple perspectives (Bakır & Eğmir, 2022). Understanding critical thinking in the context of media enables individuals to question media messages and to grasp the underlying intentions behind them. For instance, in analyzing content encountered on digital media platforms, critical thinking encompasses questioning not only the accuracy of the content but also its ethical dimensions (Paul & Elder, 2019). Within the field of media and communication, critical thinking refers to the capacity to analyze media content, identify disinformation, and interpret media manipulations (Potter, 2013). Filtering out misinformation that spreads rapidly on social media through emotional reactions is directly linked to individuals' media literacy skills (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In today's information-saturated and rapidly changing world, it is not sufficient for university students merely to acquire knowledge; they are also expected to possess the ability to analyze, question, and evaluate it. In this regard, critical thinking skills emerge as one of the fundamental factors directly influencing academic success. Students' capacity to interpret academic texts and to structurally analyze the arguments within them enhances both their academic achievement and the depth of their learning (Zapata-Rivera et al., 2024). Furthermore, critical thinking is not only valuable in academic contexts but also serves as an effective tool in social life. Its significance has become even more pronounced in coping with the information pollution of the digital age. Questioning the accuracy of content encountered on social media, preventing the spread of misinformation, and fostering digital awareness reflect the extent to which individuals have mastered critical thinking skills (Hafida, 2025). Therefore, the critical thinking skills that university students acquire during their education contribute not only to academic achievement but also to digital media literacy, social responsibility, and professional effectiveness. Hence, it is of great importance that these skills be systematically cultivated from the early stages of the educational process.

2. Information Sharing Behaviors

Information sharing is a process that supports individuals in achieving their goals, contributes to problem-solving processes, and fosters the development of innovative ideas (Cummings, 2004). Nonaka (1994) emphasizes that information sharing constitutes one of the cornerstones of knowledge creation and innovation within organizations. In university settings, the effective exchange of knowledge among students enhances critical thinking processes and strengthens academic interaction. This process is also regarded as a significant factor that accelerates individual learning. Information sharing within communities enables individuals to develop themselves and to make informed, knowledge-based decisions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students' information-sharing behaviors are considered not only as part of individual learning processes but also as one of the fundamental dynamics of collective knowledge production and academic solidarity. In this context, information sharing is argued to support not only students' academic achievement but also the development of skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and social responsibility (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). Information sharing occurs both through face-to-face interaction and digital platforms, with the dynamics of each environment directly influencing student behavior. Digital environments facilitate knowledge-sharing processes and accelerate the flow of information among individuals. The systematic transfer of knowledge allows team

members to work more efficiently and generate quicker solutions to problems. With the spread of digital technologies and social media platforms, information-sharing processes have gained momentum, eliminating temporal and spatial constraints (Bates, 2015).

However, this behavior is not monolithic; it is a bidirectional process involving "knowledge contributing" (sharing content) and "knowledge collecting" (receiving content) (Alakurt & Keser, 2016), and its nature varies significantly across digital platforms. For instance, on microblogging sites like X or Threads, student sharing focuses on rapid text-based propagation, such as reposting news or sharing article hyperlinks via hashtags. On visually-driven networks like Instagram or TikTok, it shifts to multimedia dissemination through infographics and short video tutorials. Meanwhile, on instant messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram, sharing occurs within closed peer loops, characterized by exchanging academic PDFs, campus announcements, or lecture notes. Because each platform dictates distinct sharing activities, they inherently demand different levels of digital verification and cognitive responsibility from students. In line with this perspective, the present study conceptualizes information-sharing behavior through this multifaceted framework, examining both its contributing and collecting dimensions across digital platforms.

It is further highlighted that students take responsibility for the accuracy of the information they share, a practice that contributes to the development of their information literacy skills (ACRL, 2015). Moreover, environments where diverse perspectives and experiences are exchanged enable students to adopt broader perspectives and foster multidimensional thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Such sharing processes are also noted to facilitate the formation of learning communities (Wenger, 1998). While engaging in knowledge exchange, students also gain emotional support, enhance their motivation, and participate more actively in the learning process. Particularly within group projects, study groups, and academic clubs, knowledge sharing is seen to strengthen peer interaction and to nurture a culture of collaborative learning (Slavin, 1995). Overall, information-sharing behaviors yield significant benefits at both the individual and community levels and can be understood as reshaping the dynamics of academic life in an increasingly digitalized world.

3. Digital Media Literacy

Digital media is a form of media in which content is produced, distributed, and consumed through digital technologies rather than analog tools. By integrating multiple types of content—such as text, sound, images, video, and animation—it differentiates itself from traditional media. At the same time, digital media symbolizes a broader technological transformation, one that extends from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, and from there to today's AI-driven Web 3.0 and Web 4.0 phases. Social media platforms in particular (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter, YouTube) have become extensions of individuals' daily lives, transforming into spaces where cultural, economic, and political interactions take place (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Digital media not only enables content consumption but also allows individuals to participate in processes of content creation, dissemination, interpretation, and feedback. Consequently, it breaks the one-way flow of classical communication models and establishes a participatory, dynamic, and pluralistic structure (McStay, 2016). In today's world, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally altered how university students access, produce, and share information. One of the most significant outcomes of this change is digital media literacy, which extends beyond being a mere set of technical skills and instead encompasses the multidimensional competencies that allow individuals to engage in the digital world with critical thinking, ethical responsibility, and awareness (Livingstone, 2008). Digital media literacy equips students with the ability to distinguish valid, accurate, and reliable sources within the information overload of digital environments, thereby helping them build resilience against fake news, disinformation, and manipulative content (Hobbs, 2010). Furthermore, this competence extends beyond information acquisition to include awareness of digital security, online privacy, and digital rights. Protecting personal data, managing digital footprints, and adopting ethical practices on platforms such as social media contribute to the development of students' digital citizenship consciousness (Rheingold, 2012). In the digital age, media literacy is not limited to understanding media content in the traditional sense but has become a multidimensional competency that requires being active and conscious participants in digital environments. The European Commission's Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.2) integrates media literacy with domains such as digital information and data literacy, communication, collaboration, safety, and problem-solving, thereby providing a comprehensive perspective (European Commission, 2022). This framework highlights the skills needed for individuals to critically assess digital media content, contribute creatively, and participate actively in digital society. In the U.S. education system, media literacy holds a significant position within the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS framework emphasizes not only the analysis of traditional texts but also of digital media content. Moreover, the strategic use of media texts (e.g., video content and digital materials) in classrooms is seen as a way to strengthen students' new literacy skills (Moore & Redmond, 2014). This illustrates how media literacy is integrated into contemporary educational standards and how it contributes to nurturing students as creative and critical thinkers. Additionally, digital media literacy supports the development of critical thinking skills, enabling individuals to recognize the ideological and commercial purposes underlying media content (Hobbs, 2010). In the digital age, media literacy forms the foundation of digital citizenship awareness and responsibility. For these reasons, media literacy is an indispensable competency that allows individuals to communicate effectively in the information age, critically evaluate media messages,

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and participate actively in democratic societies. In this study, the effects of university students' critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors on their digital media literacy skills were examined. Critical thinking is regarded as an essential skill that enhances individuals' ability to approach and evaluate information. Information-sharing behaviors encompass the ways in which individuals exchange and interact with information on digital platforms. Understanding the effects of these behaviors on digital media literacy is crucial for comprehending the processes of accessing and sharing information in the digital age. By analyzing the influence of these two main variables—critical thinking and information-sharing behaviors—on digital media literacy, the study aims to develop a broader understanding of university students' digital media use.

In line with the purpose of the study, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the digital literacy levels of university students?
- Do the digital literacy levels of university students differ depending on whether they have taken a course or received training related to media literacy?
- Do university students' critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors significantly predict their digital literacy levels?

4. Method

In this study, the correlational survey method, one of the quantitative research approaches, was employed. This research design is used to analyze the direction and strength of the relationship between two or more variables.

4.1. Participants

Data were collected online via Google Forms during the 2023–2024 academic year. A convenience sampling method was employed, whereby researchers reached out to available university students across various departments in Türkiye. Participants were contacted through accessible online communication channels, including institutional student networks and social media platforms. On the first page of the online form, an informed consent disclosure was provided to outline the research objectives, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality guidelines. To mitigate response fatigue and ensure data integrity, the scales were configured to be completed in a single, uninterrupted, and self-paced online session. The average completion time for the survey was approximately 10–12 minutes. The sample of the study consists of students aged 18–30 and above who are enrolled in associate, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs at universities across Türkiye. Within the scope of the research, data were collected from 301 students. The characteristics of the participants are presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Personal Information Form

Variables		(n)	%
Gender	Male	151	50,0
	Female	150	49,7
Age	18-20	137	45,4
	21-24	101	33,4
	25-29	39	12,9
	30 and above	24	7,9
Education Level	Postgraduate	37	12,3
	Undergraduate	264	87,7
Media Literacy	Yes	40	13,2
	No	261	86,4
Total		301	100

4.2. Data Collection Instruments

In this study, the “Information Sharing Behaviors Scale” developed by Alakurt and Keser (2016), consisting of 21 items, was used to measure students' information-sharing behaviors. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value of this scale was calculated as 0.976. To determine critical thinking tendencies, the “Marmara Critical Thinking Tendencies

Scale” developed by Özgenel and Çetin (2018), comprising 28 items, was employed. In this study, the Cronbach’s Alpha value of this scale was calculated as 0.982. The “Digital Literacy Scale,” developed by Bayrakcı and Narmanlioğlu (2021) with 29 items, was utilized to assess digital media literacy skills. It consists of 6 dimensions: a) Ethics and Responsibility defines the ethical, moral, and legal frameworks of online behavior, focusing on information confirmation, user accountability, and the protection of digital rights. An example item is "I can inquire from different sources whether the information I accessed online is correct or not." b) General Knowledge and Functional Skills evaluates both the understanding of digital systems (licensing, security) and the practical skills required for troubleshooting hardware and network settings. An example item is "I know what hardware and software technologies mean". c) Daily Usage evaluates how effectively and frequently individuals utilize various digital tools and technologies within their daily lives. An example item is "I can add a web page that I use to bookmarks or favorites". d) Advanced Production evaluates advanced competencies in shifting from a digital consumer to a producer through coding and product development. An example item is "I can use at least one programming language". e) Privacy and Security refers to the knowledge and practices required to safeguard digital identities and data through robust authentication, privacy controls, and threat awareness. An example item is "I know how to create a strong password". f) Social Dimension refers to the professional and interpersonal aspects of digital literacy, focusing on collaborative content creation, media publishing, and domain -specific software utilization. An example item is "I can design and publish a website using web design systems". In this study, the Cronbach’s Alpha (α) value for this scale was calculated as 0.976. These values indicate that the scales have high internal consistency; therefore, their reliability is high. Additionally, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers to gather information on the demographic and personal characteristics of the students included in the study.

4.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, t-tests, and simple regression analysis were applied in the analysis of the data. Before performing regression analysis, certain assumptions regarding the data must be met. To examine these assumptions, the normality of the data was first tested by inspecting skewness and kurtosis coefficients, as well as histograms (Figure 1) and normal P-P plots (Figure 2). It is acknowledged that for the normality assumption to be satisfied, skewness and kurtosis values should fall within the range of -1.5 to $+1.5$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The skewness and kurtosis values were calculated as follows (Table 2): for the “Digital Literacy(DO_TOP)” variable, skewness = -0.710 and kurtosis = -0.168 ; for the “Critical Thinking(CT_TOP)” variable, skewness = -0.907 and kurtosis = 0.595 ; and for the “Information Sharing(IS_TOP)” variable, skewness = -0.991 and kurtosis = 0.512 .

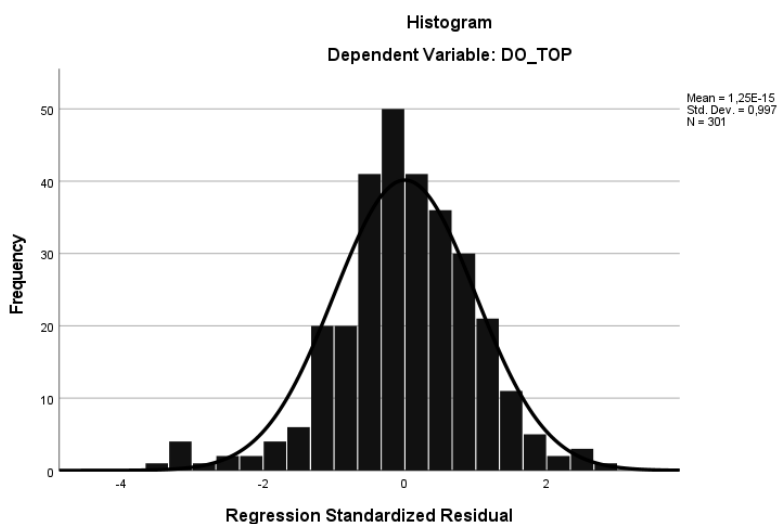


Fig. 1 Histogram Charts.

Table 2. Kurtosis and Skewness Values

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE
DO_TOP	301	1,00	5,00	3,4968	1,03626	-,710	,140	-,168	,280
CT_TOP	301	1,00	5,00	3,8136	,92862	-,907	,140	,595	,280

IS_TOP	301	1,00	5,00	3,5163	1,00255	-,991	,140	,512	,280
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It was observed that these values fell within the acceptable range, and therefore the normality assumption was satisfied. Additionally, by examining the histograms and normal P-P plots, the normal distribution of the data was visually confirmed.

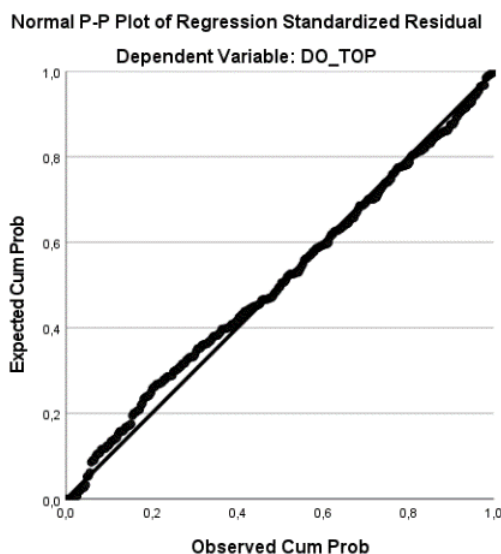


Fig. 2 Normal P-P Plots.

The Durbin-Watson coefficient was calculated as 2.100. Kalaycı (2006) notes that it is desirable for this value to be below 2.5. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no autocorrelation problem among the variables. Finally, multicollinearity among the independent variables was examined. For this purpose, VIF and tolerance values were analyzed. It is stated that to determine whether multicollinearity exists, the VIF value should be less than 10 and the tolerance value should be greater than 0.2 (Field, 2009; Kalaycı, 2006). As a result of the analysis, the VIF value was found to be 1.817 and the tolerance value 0.550, indicating that there is no multicollinearity issue among the variables. Since these assumptions were satisfied, it was decided to perform a simple regression analysis among the variables.

5. Results

5.1. Digital Media Literacy Levels

To determine students' digital literacy levels, the scores obtained from the scale were examined, and the arithmetic means of the sub-dimensions were calculated. In interpreting the arithmetic scores, the data presented in Table 3 were taken into consideration.

Table 3. Arithmetic Score Evaluation Table

Score Range	Level	Competence
1.62-3.07	Low	They have basic digital skills at the entry level, allowing them to perform routine tasks, usually under the guidance of a colleague.
3.08-3.62	Below Average	They independently understand issues and efficiently solve simple, routine tasks.
3.63-4.17	Average	They independently solve non-routine, moderate problems and demonstrate an intermediate adaptability to the digital age through ongoing learning.
4.18-4.72	Good	They independently navigate complex digital scenarios and guide others in routine tasks, demonstrating a strong ability to apply and analyze digital technologies in their own life.
4.73-5.00	High	An expert in their field, they guide others through professional problem-solving and independently design innovative concepts and processes

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The descriptive analyses of students' digital literacy levels are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Descriptive Analyses of Students' Digital Literacy Levels

Variables	N	Min.	Max.	Std. Dev.	X
Ethics and Responsibility	7	1,00	5,00	1,1547	3,837
General Knowledge and Functional Skills	6	1,00	5,00	1,2182	3,283
Daily Use	6	1,00	5,00	1,1769	3,718
Professional Production	2	1,00	5,00	1,3954	2,665
Privacy and Security	4	1,00	5,00	1,2453	3,698
Social Dimension	4	1,00	5,00	1,2498	3,105

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean score for the Ethics and Responsibility dimension was $M = 3.83$, indicating a average level. The mean score for the General Knowledge and Functional Skills dimension was $M = 3.28$, reflecting a below average level of perception. The mean score for the Daily Use dimension was calculated as $M = 3.71$, showing a average level. The Professional Production dimension had a mean score of $M = 2.66$, indicating a low level. The mean score for the Privacy and Security dimension was $M = 3.69$, reflecting a average level of perception. Finally, the Social Dimension had a mean score of $M = 3.10$, suggesting a below average level of perception. These results demonstrate that the perceived levels across the dimensions vary. An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether having taken a course or training related to media literacy significantly affected students' digital literacy levels. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Independent Samples t-Test Results

Variables	Situation	N	$\bar{X}$	Std. Dev	t	P
Digital literacy	Yes	40	3,81	1,163	-2,066	,479
	No	261	3,44	1,009		

According to the data, the mean score of individuals who reported having digital literacy was $M = 3.81$ ($SD = 1.163$), while the mean score of those who reported not having digital literacy was $M = 3.44$ ($SD = 1.009$). A t-test was conducted to determine whether this difference was statistically significant. The t-test results indicated that the difference between the mean scores was not statistically significant ($t = -2.066$; $p = 0.479$, $p > 0.05$). The large p-value suggests that the digital literacy status did not have a significant effect on the scores and that there is no statistically meaningful difference.

5.2. The Impact of Critical Thinking and Information Sharing Behaviors on Digital Media Literacy

In the model, digital literacy was used as the dependent variable, while critical thinking and information sharing were used as independent variables, and a simple regression analysis was conducted. The results of the simple regression analysis predicting university students' digital literacy levels are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Simple Regression Analysis Results

Variables	B	SE	β	t	P	Bivariate r	Partial r
Constant	0,444	0,183		2,419	0,016		
Critical Thinking	0,405	0,061	0,362	6,607	<0,001	0,641	0,269
Information Sharing	0,430	0,057	0,416	7,576	<0,001	0,659	0,308
R= 0,711	R ² =0,506						
F(2, 298)= 152,739	p=<,001						

According to the regression analysis results, the constant was found to be 0.444 with a standard error of 0.183. For the critical thinking variable, the unstandardized coefficient (B) was 0.405, the standard error was 0.061, the standardized coefficient (Beta) was 0.362, the t-value was 6.607, and the p-value was < 0.001 . Additionally, the bivariate correlation for critical thinking was 0.641, and the partial correlation was 0.269. For the information sharing variable, the unstandardized coefficient (B) was 0.430, the standard error was 0.057, the standardized coefficient (Beta) was 0.416, the t-value was 7.576, and the p-value was < 0.001 . Its bivariate correlation was 0.659, and its partial correlation was 0.308. The overall explanatory power of the regression model was high ($R = 0.711$, $R^2 = 0.506$) and the model was statistically significant ($F(2,298) = 152.739$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that critical thinking and information sharing are strong and significant predictors of digital literacy, together explaining 50.6% of the variance in digital literacy levels.

6. Discussion

This study has revealed the effects of university students' critical thinking skills and information sharing behaviors on digital media literacy. The findings largely align with existing studies in the literature. High critical thinking skills contribute to individuals' ability to analyze digital media content more consciously and develop resistance to misinformation (Yılmaz & Yiğit, 2024; Zou'bi, 2022). However, some studies indicate that social media addiction may negatively impact these skills (Zhang et al., 2024), suggesting that the influence of social media varies depending on context and usage habits. Information sharing behaviors were also found to be significantly related to digital media literacy. In particular, sharing academic content contributes to individuals' more critical evaluation of media texts. However, it should be noted that this relationship is not solely dependent on the quantity of shared information but also on its quality and accuracy. Furthermore, individuals' self-assessments of their media literacy levels were observed not to fully align with objective measurements (Barut Tuğtekin, 2021), indicating a need for more valid and observation-based assessment methods when evaluating media literacy. The results also show that digital media users are often exposed only to content that reinforces their existing views due to algorithmic filters (filter bubbles, echo chambers), which can weaken critical thinking (Pariser, 2011). In this context, educational programs aimed at enhancing media literacy should not be limited to technical skills; they should also include cognitive flexibility, algorithmic awareness, and digital ethics. Although this study demonstrates the contribution of critical thinking and information sharing to media literacy, it also highlights that the effects on media literacy may vary according to social media usage habits, platform types, and individual cognitive awareness levels. Future research is recommended to employ larger samples, diverse cultural contexts, and objective measurement methods.

Conclusion

This study provides a framework for understanding the effects of university students' critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors on digital media literacy. Digital media literacy is a multidimensional competence that encompasses individuals' abilities to consciously analyze, evaluate, and effectively use media content. In this context, critical thinking and information sharing emerge as essential elements that enable individuals to exist effectively in digital media environments. The findings of this research reveal the significant effects of critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors on digital media literacy and explain in detail the critical role these skills play in individuals' information management processes in the digital age. When examining the sub-dimensions of digital media literacy, it was found that participants demonstrated a high level of awareness in the dimensions of "Ethics and Responsibility," "Daily Use," and "Privacy and Security." These findings indicate that students have reached a certain level of understanding in terms of general ethical principles and daily use processes on digital media platforms. However, it was determined that their perceptions of "General Knowledge and Functional Skills," "Professional Production," and "Social Dimension" were at a moderate level. This result suggests that students need to further develop these skills in order to use digital media platforms more effectively. The study found that taking a course or receiving training related to media literacy did not create a statistically significant difference in digital media literacy ($t = -2.066$, $p = 0.479$). This finding indicates the need to review the content and methods of media literacy education. Educational processes should not only focus on the transfer of knowledge but also be enriched with activities that promote critical thinking, inquiry, and analytical approaches. In the process of developing critical digital literacy, it has been stated that education focusing solely on technical skills is insufficient, as such approaches do not fully support students' competencies in questioning, analyzing, and evaluating digital media content (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Therefore, it is important to support media literacy programs with new models that include interactive, practical, and analytical approaches. Research has shown that there is a positive but low-level significant relationship between critical thinking skills and digital literacy, and that these two skills are complementary to each other (Yılmaz & Yiğit, 2024). According to the results of the study, critical thinking skills and information-sharing behaviors explain 50.6% of the variance in digital media literacy levels. This ratio can be considered a strong indicator emphasizing the importance of these two factors in the development of digital media literacy. It was found that information-sharing behaviors have a significant effect on digital media literacy. This finding suggests that information-sharing processes enable individuals to take a more active role in digital media and enhance their media

literacy. In particular, it was understood that participation in collaborative learning and sharing processes on digital platforms contributes to the development of digital media literacy. Critical thinking skills were found to have an effect on digital media literacy as strong as that of information-sharing behaviors. The ease of access to information in digital media environments requires individuals not only to reach information but also to evaluate information sources from a critical perspective. Individuals with critical thinking skills can cope with misinformation and evaluate media content analytically to reach accurate information. This demonstrates that digital media literacy should be supported not only by technical skills but also by cognitive abilities. It has been stated that there is a complementary relationship between media literacy and critical thinking skills; when these two concepts are considered together, individuals can develop a more conscious and questioning attitude toward media content (Kurt & Kürüm, 2010). Considering the purpose of media literacy, it is emphasized that individuals need to possess critical skills to be conscious media users. Critical thinking, in essence, is a way of thinking that involves questioning skills. Therefore, incorporating the development of critical thinking skills into media literacy education enables individuals to conduct more in-depth analyses of media content. When examining the relationship between information sharing and digital media literacy, it is observed that individuals acting more consciously and responsibly in information-sharing processes directly affects media literacy. Koltay (2011) states that individuals' digital literacy levels are an important determinant in information-sharing processes and that the ability to select reliable information sources is one of the cornerstones of media literacy. The findings of the study support the necessity of addressing media literacy education from a more critical perspective. In this regard, media literacy programs should not only focus on teaching technical skills but also be restructured to help individuals become conscious and questioning participants in digital environments. It is emphasized that digital media literacy contributes to individuals' ability to evaluate media content from a critical perspective, thereby enabling the development of more conscious digital citizens (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In particular, the integration of interactive educational models, simulations, and case analyses into course content will contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking education enables individuals not only to evaluate media content superficially but also to analyze it in depth and consider different perspectives. Media literacy is considered to transform individuals from passive consumers of information into conscious and responsible content producers, and this transformation supports individuals' active and informed participation in democratic processes (Hobbs, 2011). In this context, media literacy education should not remain limited to theoretical knowledge but should also be supported by practical learning methods. The findings indicate that digital media literacy positions individuals not only as media consumers but also as conscious content producers. Training individuals who produce and guide media content consciously, rather than using digital media tools passively, is an important step in combating misinformation. Media literacy should be considered as an integrated process encompassing critical thinking, information sharing, and democratic participation (Pérez Tornero & Varis, 2010). It is emphasized that, in the digital media age, individuals' roles as conscious content producers, as well as consumers, play a vital role in combating disinformation (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Finally, the results of the study indicate that greater emphasis should be placed on critical thinking and information-sharing processes to enhance individuals' awareness of media literacy. Incorporating comprehensive courses that address critical thinking and media literacy together into university curricula will contribute to the development of conscious media users both individually and socially. It is noted that media literacy education should not be limited to developing the ability to understand media messages but should also encourage individuals to evaluate these messages critically and to develop social awareness (Kellner & Share, 2007). In this context, integrating critical thinking and media literacy within education systems through a holistic approach will help individuals make more conscious decisions in the digital world.

Recommendations for Future Research

- This study was limited to university students. Future research could examine different age or occupational groups to explore the relationship between digital media literacy skills, critical thinking, and information-sharing behaviors more comprehensively.
- A quantitative method was used in this study. Future research could employ qualitative or mixed methods to gain deeper insights into university students' digital media literacy skills.
- This study was designed to include university students across Turkey. Similar studies conducted in different countries could comparatively assess the impact of cultural factors on digital media literacy skills.
- In addition to the variables identified in this study, further models could include other variables that may affect digital media literacy, such as motivation, personality traits, or media usage habits.

Recommendations for the Development of Digital Media Literacy Skills

- Courses aimed at improving digital media literacy skills could be added to university curricula, or the content of existing courses could be updated.
- Interactive workshops, seminars, and online training programs could be organized to enhance students' critical thinking and conscious information-sharing behaviors.

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- Social media platforms and digital content creators could produce content and organize awareness campaigns to help users improve their media literacy skills.
- To increase students' levels of digital media literacy, guidebooks and educational materials developed by academics and media experts could be provided through various media tools.
- Universities and non-governmental organizations could collaborate to support projects and research promoting digital media literacy.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice in Digital Media Literacy

- Educational institutions and government policies could make digital media literacy programs mandatory by introducing regulations that support the development of these skills.
- The Ministry of National Education and universities could organize national campaigns to raise awareness of digital media literacy across all segments of society.
- Media organizations could take responsibility by developing policies that promote the dissemination of accurate and reliable information.
- Comprehensive guides could be prepared to inform the public about ethical rules and responsibilities in digital media use, thereby raising social awareness.
- Collaboration among stakeholders from various sectors—educators, media organizations, technology companies, and public institutions—should be encouraged to enhance digital media literacy skills.
- In line with these recommendations, the goal is to improve digital media literacy skills, enhance academic and social awareness, and promote conscious media use.

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Ethics

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