



The Relationship Between Media Literacy and Civic Participation Among Young Adults in Latvia

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to examine the relationships between different aspects of media literacy as an increasingly needed life-skill, and practices of active citizenship. In our empirical work, we rely on the notion of media literacy as a multidimensional concept consisting of: (1) functional consumption, (2) critical consumption, (3) functional prosumption, and (4) critical prosumption of media. Our sample consists of 406 respondents (36% males and 64% females) in the age group of 18–30. Results show that civic activity is predicted by the functional prosumption, and critical prosumption of media. Based on our results, we argue for media literacy promotion in school and university curricula with an increased emphasis on various practices of information production and sharing as forms of self-expression and media prosumption being a vital part of active citizenship and citizen engagement.

Keywords: Media literacy · Media consumption · Media prosumption · Civic participation · Participatory democracy

1 Introduction

Recognition of young people's rights to participate in decision making about issues concerning their education, well-being and other issues is growing [1]. Therefore, decreasing levels of civic participation among young people have already bothered scholars, policy makers and educators for some decades [2]. For quite a long time the belief was that the rapid development of various Web 2.0 based technologies, and promotion of media literacy and digital skills in school curricula might stimulate civic and political engagement among youth [2, 3]. However, as the previous studies indicate [4, 5] (for a meta-analysis of previous studies see [6]), civic engagement does not naturally arise from active use of digital media and the Internet. Consequently, one must ask what kind of civic activity youth prefer and how it fits with their digital and media skills and practices online. The weak connections between media use and civic engagement has triggered suggestions that different types of media literacy are related to different forms of civic engagement [7]. Respectively, taken as a whole, digital media use does not appear to relate to civic engagement, but when examined by the type of media use, the relationship appears to be much more complex.

Media literacy is widely understood as a multidimensional concept comprising abilities to access, gather and analyse information in traditional and new formats and platforms, and to create informed opinions, and share them with others, again, by using a variety of traditional and new platforms and formats. Recently, new promising theoretical models of media literacy have emerged to measure the specific competences that people need to fully participate in digital media environments. In the current study, we make use of the theoretical model that distinguishes between four domains of media literacy: functional consumption, critical consumption of media, functional prosumption, and critical prosumption of media [8–11]. We employed this four-dimensional model and a variety of measures of civic activity to study the relationships between media literacy practices and civic participation among young adults in Latvia (age 18–30). In the context of digital media use and civic participation, Latvia makes an interesting case. It is among the countries with the highest levels of Internet use on a daily basis [12], but at the same time, a country where young people’s civic knowledge and intentions for civic activity repeatedly score notably below the average EU level [13, 14]. Thus, in this article we ask the following question: how are the functional and critical dimensions of media consumption and prosumption related to civic participation activity among young adults in Latvia?

2 Theoretical Models of Media Literacy for the 21st Century

The rise of new media and the emergence of Internet technologies and mobile communication tools demands a new kind of media literacy. Traditionally media literacy is understood as the skill to critically investigate media types, examine media effects, consciously access and use media, distinguish and evaluate media content [15]. Being media literate in the 21st century means also to be able to use media for one’s creative expression, participation and engagement in the public sphere via written and electronic media content, such as text, image, audio and video [16–18]. The new focus of media literacy is on the collective creation of media content over static media content consumption, social interaction instead of isolated surfing, and active participation and engagement with and through media content over passive reception [19]. In the digital media environment, the boundaries between sender and receiver become blurred, leading to a convergent “*participatory*” culture where it is difficult to distinguish between media producers and consumers, and new forms of participation in media emerge, based on the technical and socio-cultural characteristics of the digital tools [19]. A participatory culture shifts the focus of creation from the individual to community engagement, to collaboration and networking [20]. Toffler’s [21] concept of prosumer is often employed to describe the practices of an individual who is a producer and a consumer simultaneously, producing his/her own imagery drawn from his/her consumption of popular mass media. According to Jenkins et al. [20], prosuming competence, besides artistic expression and sharing skills, comprises some social, emotional and cognitive aspects as well, namely: “*In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of connection to one another (at the very least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)*” [20, p. xi].

Chen et al. [8] employed the concept of prosumer and proposed a new theoretical model of media literacy conceptualizing it as two continuums: (1) from consuming to prosuming media literacy; and (2) from functional to critical media literacy. Media literacy skills of consuming in this model refers to competencies to access media messages, and employ media at various levels, while prosuming media literacy, in contrast to consuming competences, are skills to produce media content and participate in media environments through the use of pre-existing media content, artifacts, and the technical benefits of digital tools. Drawing on Buckingham's definition of functional and critical media literacy, Chen et al. [8] defined functional media literacy as competencies to operate media tools in order to access and create media messages and understand them on the textual level, while they viewed critical media literacy as competencies to analyse and judge media messages at various contextual levels [8].

Lin et al. [10], in their theoretical model, took the work of Chen et al. [8] further and proposed a model consisting of four domains of media literacy: functional and critical consuming, and functional and critical prosuming. In the functional consuming literacy domain Lin et al. [10] distinguished between consuming skills and understanding abilities. In the crucial consuming literacy domain they distinguished between analysis, synthesis and evaluation [10]. A critical media consumer, according to this framework, can identify biased or manipulated messages, and can critically engage in the deconstruction and verification process. Functional prosuming literacy, according to Lin et al. [10], comprises three aspects: prosuming skills, distribution, and production. Prosuming skills are technical abilities to use various technologies for digital content creation such as combining, rearranging and duplicating text, audio, and video pieces into digital media formats. Finally, critical prosumption comprises participation as one's interactive engagement in digital media platforms by sharing, engaging in meaningful discussions and negotiations with others, identifying deception and respecting the diversity of values and ideologies. Koc and Barut [11] developed these two previous theoretical models of media literacy by putting more focus on some unique affordances of digital media environments, especially in the domain of critical prosuming, and creating an operational tool to measure an individual's media literacy in Web 2.0 environments.

3 Civic Participation and Media Literacy

Active citizenship has usually been associated with the power of individuals in the process of civic and political decision making [22]. Since Masterman [23] published his seminal works, scholars and educators have hoped that media education and media literacy will positively influence pro-social activity and make young people more engaged in social and political matters [24]. It is clear that the Internet and especially Web 2.0, indeed have affordances that support various forms of engagement and participation. Digital media in some sense provide what Habermas [25] called the *"ideal speech situation, where everybody with the competences to act and speak is allowed to participate, everyone can introduce and/or question any assertion, and express her or his attitudes, desires, and needs"* [25, p. 86]. Therefore, young people's general enthusiasm for using digital tools is perceived as promising in terms of

promoting active citizenship, and political socialization through direct experience with online publishing, debate, and collective action [3, 26, 27]. The processing of information resources promotes the emergence of a collective identity, which is an “*individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution*” [28, p. 285].

New technology promotes the emergence of new forms of engagement that are sufficiently different from the traditional notions of civic participation [29]. Digital technology enables us to expand beyond the traditional so called “*minimalist*” democratic participation [3] where being politically active means being involved in institutionalized politics, have an interest in government matters, and participate in elections [1]. The much broader concept – “*maximalist*” democratic participation [3] – manifests itself through various pro-social practices spanning many spheres, including work, home, family, church, and school, revealing the dynamics of changing political and social conditions [30].

Civic engagement is linked to general habits of media use [31], and specifically the use of social networking sites [32, 33]. Active participation in video production is found to correlate with a positive attitude towards news consumption and intent towards civic engagement among youth [34]. Previous studies have demonstrated that a search for information online is a significant predictor of civic involvement and participation in online discussions [7, 35]. Purdy [7] also found that a socially expressive use of the Internet such as content or opinion sharing online, positively relates to online civic activities. In addition, positive links appeared between news consumption online and participation in interpersonal discussions about socio-political issues as a form of offline civic activity [36]. However, several studies [1, 4, 5] indicate that civic engagement neither online nor offline does not naturally arise from the active use of digital media and the Internet. Actually, for some youth, active use of the Internet and social media has been shown to be a powerful distraction from becoming active in their communities [1], or developing an interest in civic matters, and political efficacy [37]. Some [4, 16, 30] argue for more civic education in schools, with a special emphasis on interactive, project-based, peer-to-peer approaches that include media creation, content sharing, and other participatory practices, which is strongly echoed by other authors, (see [15, 38]). Such mixed results indeed call for more studies where individual aspects of media literacy are taken into account, and their relationships with various civic participation practices are examined.

4 Methods

Participants. In this study we employed data from a larger project in which we collected data about a number of different variables related to media literacy, civic engagement activities, digital self-efficacy, and various demographic factors. Our initial sample consisted of 798 participants (62.9% female respondents and 37.1% male respondents, age 18 to 72). For the purposes of this particular study we made a subsample consisting of participants in the age group of 18–30 and focused specifically on the aspects related to media literacy and civic participation. This subsample

consisted of 406 participants: 64% females and 36% males ($M = 22.22$, $SD = 3.35$). The education levels of the subsample were: primary (5.9%), secondary (64.5%), and higher education (29.6%).

Instruments. The participants filled in the questionnaire consisting of: New Media Literacy Scale [11] and an original Civic Participation Questionnaire, as well as respondents' demographics such as age, gender, and education. The New Media Literacy Scale [11] was adapted in Latvian as part of this study. The New Media Literacy Scale consists of four sub-scales: functional consumption (e.g., It is easy for me to make use of various media environments to reach information), critical consumption (e.g., I can combine media messages with my own opinions), functional prosumption (e.g., I am able to use the software necessary for developing media content (text, image, video, etc.)), and critical (e.g., I am able to develop original visual and textual media content such as videos clips and web pages). The instrument contained 35 items, and a five-point scale was used for answers: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. In previous studies, Cronbach's alpha varies from .85 to .93 [11]; in the current study, the variation was from .84 to .92.

We developed an original Civic Participation Questionnaire during the study. It consisted of 20 items comprising various civic participation activities: participation in elections (e.g., I participated in the last municipal elections), participation in public debate (e.g., I have publicly expressed my views/opinion on issues of public interest), civic activities (e.g., I have participated in legal demonstrations or pickets), participating in an NGO (e.g., I have volunteered for a non-governmental organization), belonging to a political organization (e.g., I am a volunteer in a political organization), social responsibility (e.g., I have boycotted products of a particular manufacturer for ethical reasons or in protest of globalization). A dichotomous scale (1 – yes, 0 – no) was used. Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .76. We developed the original instrument to focus on people's pro-social behaviour and their experiences with civic participation. The previous instruments we found to be not suitable for the purposes of our study, because they focused either too heavily on civic attitudes, with little attention to civic behaviour [39], or on people's future motivation to engage in pro-social activity [36]. The final list of 20 items in our questionnaire was compiled based on literature studies [e.g., 40] drawing on different types of civic participation. We ensured that items referring to online and offline pro-social activity were included in our original scale.

Procedure. In spring 2017 data were collected by using Google forms. Respondents were invited to participate in the study by using social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and also e-mails. We distributed the link for the questionnaire both from institutional and personal accounts, and we urged our respondents to share the questionnaire link with their networks. All in all, we arrived at a combination of convenience sample and snowball sample. Respondents were informed about the topic of the study and informed about anonymity. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Data Analysis. Correlation analysis and hierarchical regression analysis was performed. The results were considered at the level of significance $p < .05$, $p < .01$ and $p < .001$.

5 Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to determine the role of media literacy in predicting civic participation. The assumptions of linearity, normally distributed errors, and uncorrelated errors were checked and met. Means, standard deviations and correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha and correlations of civic participation and media literacy subscales

Variable	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Age		22.22	3.35	.15*	.08	.04	.001	.22**
2. Functional consumption	.84	3.98	.61	–	.71**	.56**	.51**	.28**
3. Critical consumption	.89	3.90	.82		–	.54**	.58**	.22**
4. Functional presumption	.92	4.12	.74			–	.59**	.32**
5. Critical presumption	.92	3.48	.79				–	.31**
6. Civic participation	.76	6.29	3.38					–

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Age and education were included in the first step of hierarchical regression analysis. In the second step of hierarchical regression, we included all four dimensions of media literacy: function consumption, critical consumption, functional presumption, and critical presumption. In the first step of regression analysis, all controlling variables explained 10% of the variance ($F(2,403) = 22.88, p < .001$), with education ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) as the most significant predictor. When all media literacy aspects were added, they improved the prediction, and 20% of the variance was explained ($F(6,399) = 17.07, p < .001$). Young people with a higher educational level showed higher civic participation levels. Critical presumption ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) and functional presumption ($\beta = .15, p < .05$) appeared as significant predictors of civic participation. All standardized coefficients and R square change are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Stepwise regression analysis for media literacy variables predicting civic participation

	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 change	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
<i>Step 1</i>	.10	.10	.10	22.88***			
Age					.06	.06	.06
Education					1.73	.35	.28***
<i>Step 2</i>	.20	.19	.10	17.07***			
Age					.09	.05	.09
Education					1.34	.34	.22***
Functional consumption					.52	.37	.09
Critical consumption					-.46	.37	-.08
Functional presumption					.70	.28	.15*
Critical presumption					.84	.26	.20**

Note. *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

6 Discussion and Conclusions

In the current study we examined the relationships between media literacy practices and civic participation among young adults in Latvia (age 18–30), drawing on a sample of 406 respondents. We distinguished between functional and critical dimensions of media consumption and prosumption [11]. Our most important finding is the following: young people who are more skilled media “*prosumers*” [21], are also more engaged in civic activity. As it appears from the regression analysis, both the functional prosumption, and critical prosumption dimensions of media literacy play an important role in explaining civic activity. This suggests that those who participate in pro-social activity, are more able to use various technologies to create and share digital artifacts with others on various media platforms, and at the same time, also more able to engage in meaningful discussions and negotiations. Previous research suggests that the links between civic participation and media use as a whole are weak [6], however, what we have found indicates that when examining individual dimensions of media literacy, the results seem to be more complex.

Our findings may be considered not only in an academic sense, but in more practical ways by reviewing and restructuring the school and university curricula that include teaching media literacy. It means guiding young people’s general interest and enthusiasm about digital media towards learning how to use the Internet for civic participation. We would support the argument that the very concept of participation should be taken much more broadly by educators, following the definition of “*maximalist*” democratic participation [3] that shifts towards diverse pro-social practices spanning over different areas of young people’s lives. As our findings indicate, education, as well, is indeed crucial for empowering students to become more active and engaged citizens. Thus, in order to increase the civic participation levels among young people, more attention during the study process should be paid to the prosumption dimensions of media literacy, focusing more on the ability to produce and criticize media content, and less on the consumption skills of media. Current young generations are to be supported in active and critical involvement in the participatory culture [19] practices, the creation and sharing of original media content, negotiation and exploration of various socio-cultural values and ideologies. Here we agree with previous studies that argue that students feel more engaged when they are able to participate in developing and defending their own standpoints [30]. Therefore, in the study process, young people should be encouraged to become more active media prosumers by sharing self-authored content, creating web-pages, starting blogs, and remixing content that they find online in their own artistic creations. Drawing on previous literature, we also argue for educational content that teaches how to respect the diversity of values and ideologies to be included in school programs, as well. From us, educators, it requires us to acknowledge that citizen identity is dynamic, and there is hardly one single compelling model of what it means to be an “*ideal*” citizen.

In terms of future research, there is definitely a need to study the presumption practices of young people more closely, especially paying attention to the domain of critical presumption, for instance, the ways that young people represent their own socio-cultural values and personal stances and beliefs through original content making or through practices of adding new meaning to pre-existing media content. The conceptualizations of civic activity and civic participation should be reviewed further, in order to expand our understanding of what it means to be an active citizen in the 21st century.

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