

## Media Literacy: Relevance for Adolescents

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**ABSTRACT** The present study is an exploratory intervention-based case study. The objective of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a media literacy training program on knowledge and behavioural intentions of participants. 38 female participants were chosen on the basis of convenience sampling. Over a period of four months they were involved in an active learning program around issues in media psychology, and mental health implications of media use. Pre and post-intervention changes were assessed using the transtheoretical model of change and a mixed-method data analysis approach. Results showed that the intervention was successful in increasing awareness about the constructed nature of the media world and modifying behaviour and behavioural intentions with respect to media usage in 76 percent of the participants. The limitations of the study and its implications for policy level life skill intervention for adolescents have been discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

The world today more than ever is saturated with media and technology. School and college going population is increasingly spending more time with the media. According to an estimate, of the overall internet population in India, 433 million are 12+ year olds and 71 million are 5-11 years olds who access the Internet on the devices of family members (Parakh and Kumar 2019). While this has immense potential for positively affecting the life of users, this staggering access of media and digital technology in India by students is not constructively mediated through school or by parents (Das 2009). This raises important questions about the impact of media and digital technologies on young, impressionable minds. There is a growing recognition of the need for media education in India (Ryan 2018; Bhattacharjee 2019; Mishra 2019). However, in India the emphasis has only been on increasing functional knowledge of media and technological skills as a means of improving employability. No concerted efforts have been made towards the development of competencies related to critical engagement with and appreciation of the cultural world, which is medi-

ated. In the absence of this missing link, there is naive acceptance of the mediated spoken and written word both among school children and their adult counterparts. Sometimes this forms the fodder to hate crimes, religious riots, vigilantism and other such unfortunate events in the life of a democracy.

In the absence of media literacy, children and adolescents face risks associated with dysfunctional use of the internet, and also relational risks such as cyberbullying, cyber dating abuse, sexting, and grooming (Ortega-Barón et al. 2021). Both these types of risks are prevalent in India (Wright et al. 2015; Sharma et al. 2019) although an estimate of exact prevalence is not available. Media-related behaviours have an intricate relationship with mental health, and it is believed that the effect of media shows up largely in the same way as the effects of addictive drugs do, that is, by altering the development of the frontal cortex in adolescents and emerging adults. Media multitasking creates difficulties in sustaining attention (Baumgartner et al. 2014) and the completion of cognitive tasks requires greater effort (Moisala et al. 2016). There is a close association between social media usage and harmful consequences on self-esteem, body image, and well-being (Richards et al. 2015). Issues such as cyberbullying and 'Facebook Depression' are common among children and adolescent social media users. Kelly et al. (2019) studied adolescents aged 14 years and found social media use was related to higher depressive symptom scores, and

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higher use of social media was positively associated with harassment in the online world, self-esteem-related concerns, sleep disturbances and faulty body image. Also the magnitude of association was larger for girls as compared to boys. Bekalu et al. (2019) found that regular use of social media was associated with positive mental health, social well-being and better self-rated health. However, any emotional connection with social media had adverse effects on the same variables. The duration of use of social media also determines the extent of effect that it has on health. Singh et al. (2020) found that adolescents who used social media for more than two hours per day obtained higher scores on stress, depression and anxiety vis-a-vis their contemporaries who used less social media. Hunt et al. (2018) conducted an intervention study in which participants were required to limit Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat use to 10 minutes, per platform, per day for three weeks. A control group continued to use social media as usual. Results of the study revealed significant reductions in loneliness and depression in the intervention group as compared to the control group. These researches, therefore suggested that limiting social media use to approximately 30 minutes per day may lead to significant improvement in well-being.

The increasing cases of cyber bullying and aggression, netilantism, teenage suicides, low self-esteem, body image issues, depression and so on increasingly call for attention to the need for media education. Media literacy has demonstrated efficacy in the prevention of violence (Webb et al. 2010), extremism (Clinch 2011), and eating disorders. It is in this backdrop that an intervention in the area of developing media and mental health capabilities among students is the need of the hour. It is necessary for the health and well-being of Indian students in the short run, and for the thoughtful participation of the young population in the life of the Indian democracy in the long run as already demonstrated through such media literacy interventions in other countries (Mihailidis 2014).

Participation of children in media brings about greater equity, justness and community involvement (Lansdown 2011). Media education thus is a primary prevention initiative that is required at community-level. The UNESCO Grunwald Declaration on Media Education emphasises the need

for equipping children and adolescents with adequate know-how to be able to navigate the sometimes deceptive media-saturated world. Thus all the literature reviewed above converges on the need for media literacy.

### Objective

The objective of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a media literacy training program on knowledge and behavioural intentions of a sample of female students.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The sample of participants consisted of thirty-eight female students from a preexisting social group, that is, an undergraduate class of students from the University of Delhi. The mean age of the participants was 20 years. The students were selected through convenience sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the intervention was carried out.

### Design

The design of the study was experiential and made use of a mixed-method data analysis approach. The study was conducted within an instructional design framework, which combined teacher-led lectures on important aspects of media literacy with opportunities for active learning on the part of student-learners. This method is extremely popular in the field of media literacy (Singh et al. 2020) as well as in primary prevention programs with a focus on child and adolescent media mental health care (Ojeda and Del Rey 2022).

### Procedure

The study interventions were carried out over a period of four months. For five days of every week throughout the four months student participants engaged in discussions and lectures on a plethora of issues in Media Psychology like relationship between media and society, constructiveness of the media world, ethics in media, regulation of media, role of audiences in the media world, advertising and its mechanics, persuasion

and social influence tactics used in media, fantasy versus reality, violence in media, virtual reality, interactive social media, gaming, issues of internet addiction and so on. As a part of the learning process, participants also engaged in four distinct activities. First, with respect to 'news framing' student participants were required to engage with any news item from popular dailies and deconstruct the chosen piece regarding the ways in which it made use of "framing". Small groups of students made presentations about their understanding of media reporting of the #MeToo movement, the representation of the Tablighi Jamaat congregation versus the media representation of Jagannath Rath Yatra event, both held during COVID-19 times in India, the discourses underlying women's safety and the need for protection of women, media constructions of males and females involved in 'crime', and also the media constructions of people belonging to the northeastern states of India. In the second activity participants were exposed to video based awareness material in the form of the Netflix movie *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski 2020) and a group discussion took place among the student participants after viewing of the film. As a part of the third activity participants took part in an expert resource person based intervention in the form of an interactive audiovisual workshop (Pathare 2020) on the 'role of media suicide reporting in the prevention of suicide'. After each of these three intervention activities the participants were required to reflect upon and write about their learnings and impact on them. Pre-intervention and post-intervention data was collected in the form of the written reflection/journal record of the participants, and quantitative data was recorded in the form of the number of hours spent by participants on social media.

### Scoring

Quantitative data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire using a Google Form, which enquired whether engaging with social media resulted in disturbances in respondents' work, sleep and mood. The participants were required to track these parameters and their social media usage during the course of the entire study. Research data was analysed in the form of frequency or percentage change in pattern of usage

of social media. Also, qualitative responses of the participants were subjected to a detailed coding process to understand change in behavioural intentions. In keeping with the 'transtheoretical model' of behaviour change widely used in medical health behaviour research, the behavioural intentions of students were coded according to the following scheme, that is, participants who mentioned that they had not even thought about behavioural change post-intervention were filed in the "pre contemplation" group, while those who mentioned that they have thought about the situation but not engaged in any behavioural change yet were categorised as the "contemplation" group. Participants who shared plans of action were classified as being in the "preparation" category, while those who claimed that they had implemented behavioural changes were put in the "action" category, and lastly, those who stated that they had maintained the changed behaviour for more than one month were categorised in the "maintenance" group. A similar pattern of scoring was also used by Geraee et al. (2015) in their media literacy intervention study.

### RESULTS

It was found that all the participants of the study extensively used social media on a daily basis ranging between 3 to 17 hours per day. Instagram was the most commonly used social media platform followed by WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Spotify, and LinkedIn. Secondly, all participants reported using the various social media platforms in a habitual, nearly automatic way prior to the media literacy intervention. After four months of media literacy training all the participants reported substantial gains in their understanding of the machinations of the media world. Results also showed that at the end of four months 76.32 percent of the participants in the study demonstrated change in their knowledge and behavioural intentions. 13.16 percent of people had not only made changes but also been able to maintain these changes over a period of one month after intervention. 39.47 percent of the participants were in the third stage of behavioural change or "action" and reported reducing screen time, refraining from clicking on 'click baits', deleting certain social media applications, reading up on the terms and conditions of different social media

platforms, enabling features of the mobile device, which provide alarms about usage patterns, ensuring online safety and so on.

The 23.68 percent of the participants who reported no change either in the amount of time they spent using social media post-intervention or in the way they engage with social media were all found to be in the contemplation stage of the change model (Wright et al. 2009).

### DISCUSSION

The present study was interventional in nature, and was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of a media literacy training program in improving the knowledge and behavioural intentions of a group of adolescents who are regular consumers of media messages. The study was carried out within the general framework of media literacy well accepted across the world namely that media messages are constructed and organised to gain profit and/or power, secondly that the grammar of the medium has the power to create reality which is over and beyond what the manifest text itself suggests, thirdly, that media messages are received, interpreted and negotiated differently by different groups of people, and lastly that media messages are steeped in dominant cultural values, and hence hegemonic in nature. The interventions in this study were carried out over a period of four months within the broad “transtheoretical model” of change framework which acknowledges and privileges the processual nature of change over the discrete, linear view of change as an outcome only.

The results of this intervention study were promising in terms of demonstrating the effectiveness of media literacy training in bringing about changes in the knowledge and behavioural intentions of adolescent-participants. All the participants who at baseline level had not reflected upon the adverse effects of prolonged hours of media usage on their thinking process and on their mental health, or had not initiated any change despite being aware of the risks and dangers of the media world had post-intervention made some progress in terms of behavioural change as adjudged using the ‘change model’ (Velicer et al. 1998). All the participants could see their own media related behaviour in a fresh way, and started questioning old habits after gaining a differ-

ent perspective on the same. 76.32 percent of the participants of the study demonstrated change in their knowledge and behavioural intentions and 23.68 percent of the participants who reported no change were found to be in the contemplation stage. At the beginning of this study most participants were subtly aware about their “excessive” use of media and the harm it was having on their life. However, their usage was as if it were automatic. As one participant recorded in her journal, *“I generally see myself get restless if I am unable to check my messages, my inbox or my feed (if the application is on my phone). I am often anticipating what messages I may have received when I am away. This has affected my sleep as being on the internet I sometimes forget to sleep on time as time just seems to disappear. I may be watching one video and by the time I realise what I am doing, I may have watched four of them”*. None of the participants, however, had taken any concrete steps to change their behaviour prior to the intervention training. As beneficiaries of the higher education system some participants were aware of issues such as paid news, media propaganda, the menace of internet rumour, fake news and the violence it may sometimes lead to. However, participants did not possess the wherewithal to identify fake news or paid news from authentic news nor did they have the intellectual resources to unpack the dominant discourses underlying media messages. At the end of the program they were equipped with this capability. One participant thus wrote, *“I had no idea about, for example, how the algorithms work, how we slowly become robots to the AI (artificial intelligence) and how conveniently we are manipulated. The film made me think about my life and what harm I was doing to myself both mentally and physically. I also felt an urgent need to share it with my friends and family. Personally, I felt very disturbed and decided to reduce my screen time.”*

This success of the intervention program is in consonance with previous researches which have empirically demonstrated worldwide the efficacy of media literacy. An intervention study conducted in Iran using the ‘Transtheoretical model of change’ (Geraee et al. 2015) showed that increasing participants’ awareness about daily media consumption, the adverse effects of media usage, and alternative ways of responding toward media led to a significant improvement in

participants' knowledge and behavioural intentions. Kupersmidt et al. (2010) have demonstrated the effectiveness of a single day media literacy workshop. Ashley et al. (2010) showed how awareness about the political economy of the media world increases scepticism among people about news stories, as people no longer remain naive consumers. Also, people exposed to media literacy programs are less likely to perceive controversial news stories as biased (Vraga et al. 2009). The beneficial effects of media literacy intervention with children have also been shown to percolate to their families so that it leads to greater political awareness and information seeking on the part of parents (McDevitt and Kiousis 2006). This has important implications for the life of a democracy.

Most practising psychologists would agree that inducing any permanent change in behaviour through intervention is hard to achieve, and it is not an all/none process but rather a continuous one of negotiation. Recognising that clients are differently positioned cognitively, motivationally, and effectively with respect to change and that they would potentially benefit from different types of interventions helps in developing program strategies, which are aligned with the needs of the learners. One participant who is a social media influencer aptly recorded her personal struggle while being part of the intervention in her journal in the following way, *"In the beginning I was conflicted as I could not give myself a break from it (social media). I noticed an increase in my social media usage, especially YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp. I could feel the heaviness in my eyes and my (eye) power also increased. I had migraines almost everyday and felt nauseous the whole time... I was feeling conflicted because I had to edit my video and throughout the process I could feel the anger building inside of me. I knew how harmful it was for me but I had no choice. I would get irritated whenever I saw any family member using their phones or when I would have to do something important on my phone or laptop. Later at night I was unable to talk to my friends happily because although I missed them and really wanted to talk to them, I wanted a break from all my devices"*. Such ambivalence and vacillations on the part of participants is aptly captured by stages in the 'change model'. The stages indicate how

much of the training information has been accepted by participants, what additional information, which behavioural strategies or what sort of counselling they must be further provided in order for them to move to the next stage of change. Clearly this participant required a different nature of emotional support than other participants who were able to follow through their decisions about social media usage unambivalently.

### CONCLUSION

Media literacy interventions are effective in creating awareness among young students regarding their media behaviour. Media education is an education for life, as it is a life skill. Mediated world is a reality that cannot be reversed. It would neither be possible nor desirable to regulate the media itself. Hence the best way forward is to equip children, adolescents and emerging adults with life skills which would equip them with the wherewithal to successfully navigate the mediated world.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the results of the study it is recommended that media literacy education be introduced in schools and colleges in India for young Indians. Secondly, given the ubiquitous presence of media, greater awareness and self regulation skills may be inculcated among adolescents. Awareness must be created about the harmful consequences of excessive use of media through psychoeducation. For younger children, greater involvement and monitoring by the parents is encouraged. Also, schools and colleges may impart life skills that may be necessary to thrive in the mediated world like being able to spot online frauds, cyber identity theft, cyberbullying, etc. Children should be taught how to differentiate between fantasy and reality portrayed in the media.

### LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has relied on qualitative, self-report data which may be a limitation. However, it is to be remembered that qualitative, intervention based studies are credible as well as popular in the area of media literacy education. Other limita-

tions of this study pertain to the small sample of participants, the absence of a control group. However, the results are very promising in demonstrating the effectiveness of media literacy programs in creating awareness and behavioural change in adolescents. Future research may establish a profile of media users in terms of light usage versus heavy usage and intervention strategies may also be tailored for users of specific social media like readers, gamers, social networkers and so on. Also, standardised assessment instruments and 'change' norms, which are currently not available in this area could be developed.

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