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DEVELOPING SELF-REGULATION AND CRITICAL THINKING IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS THROUGH MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION: A DEVELOPMENTAL AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This conceptual study examines how media literacy education may support the development of self-regulated learning and critical thinking during emerging adulthood. Drawing on developmental psychology, metacognitive theory, self-regulated learning, and scholarship on digital information evaluation, the article develops an integrated instructional framework for university students. A narrative, theory-informed synthesis is used to identify mechanisms linking goal setting, attention control, evidence appraisal, reflective judgment, and feedback. The resulting framework proposes five instructional phases-orientation, inquiry, verification, reasoned communication, and reflection-and suggests observable indicators and an evaluation design for future research. The paper does not report original experimental data. Its contribution is a psychologically grounded model that distinguishes information-verification skills from the motivational and metacognitive processes required to apply them consistently.

Keywords: developmental psychology; educational psychology; emerging adulthood; self-regulated learning; critical thinking; metacognition; media and information literacy; university students.



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1. Introduction

The rapid circulation of news, social media posts, algorithmically curated messages, and AI-generated content has changed the environment in which university students learn and form judgments. Access to abundant information does not necessarily translate into the capacity to assess its credibility. Students must regulate their attention, evaluate evidence, decide whether further verification is needed, and explain the reasoning behind their conclusions. These tasks constitute educational challenges, but they are also developmental ones because they call upon cognitive monitoring, autonomy, identity-related judgment, and social responsibility.

The period commonly described as emerging adulthood is often associated with exploration of identity, values, and future roles. Arnett (2000) conceptualized this period, approximately the late teens through the twenties, while emphasizing differences across social and cultural settings. For many university students, greater autonomy in information choices coincides with continued development of academic self-management. Thus, university-based media literacy instruction should address not only what information is reliable but also how students make, monitor, and revise judgments.

The objective of this article is to develop a theoretically grounded educational framework linking media literacy to self-regulation and critical thinking among university students. Specifically, it (a) identifies psychological mechanisms relevant to information evaluation, (b) synthesizes suitable educational strategies, and (c) proposes a feasible framework and indicators for subsequent empirical testing.



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2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Flavell (1979) described metacognition in terms of knowledge about cognition and monitoring of cognitive activity. In online information environments, metacognitive monitoring may be expressed by noticing uncertainty, checking whether a claim is supported, and recognizing when an initial interpretation should be reconsidered. A student who asks “How do I know this?” is engaging in a different cognitive process from one who merely recalls an attractive headline.

Zimmerman (2002) conceptualized self-regulated learning as an active process involving forethought, performance-related regulation, and self-reflection. Applied to media-based assignments, forethought includes setting a verification goal and choosing a search strategy; performance regulation includes attention control, comparison of sources, and documentation of evidence; self-reflection involves judging the accuracy of a conclusion and adjusting future strategies. Instruction must therefore move beyond warnings about misinformation to teach repeatable monitoring routines.

Critical thinking is treated here as the reasoned appraisal of claims and alternatives, with attention to evidence quality, assumptions, and openness to correction. It is connected to, but not identical with, media literacy. A student may be familiar with digital platforms yet lack the disposition to verify an emotionally compelling statement. Conversely, a student who values careful reasoning may still need explicit instruction in practical online verification strategies. A combined approach is therefore appropriate.

UNESCO’s revised model curriculum brings together information, media, and digital competencies, including engagement with misinformation, digital citizenship, and artificial intelligence (UNESCO, 2021). Evidence from instructional research also suggests that digital evaluation is teachable: in an



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intervention study, McGrew (2020) reported improvement on three of four online reasoning tasks following lessons on evaluating digital content. Such findings support educational intervention, but they do not establish that every media literacy program will improve general psychological self-regulation. That broader claim requires direct measurement and suitable comparison groups.

3. Materials and Methods

This paper uses a narrative, theory-informed conceptual synthesis. The analytic corpus consists of foundational works on developmental psychology, metacognition, self-regulated learning, a published instructional intervention on civic online reasoning, and the UNESCO model curriculum. The sources were selected for their direct relevance to the proposed psychological mechanisms and educational applications; the procedure is not a systematic review, a meta-analysis, or an experimental study.

The analysis proceeded through four steps: identification of constructs; comparison of their conceptual relationships; translation of constructs into teachable university activities; and specification of observable indicators and a prospective evaluation strategy. Proposals derived through this process are explicitly labeled as a conceptual framework rather than validated causal effects. No participants were recruited and no questionnaire or achievement results were generated for the present paper.

4. Findings: A Proposed Developmental–Educational Framework

The conceptual synthesis identifies four mutually supportive psychological processes: (1) goal-directed regulation of information seeking; (2) metacognitive monitoring of uncertainty and evidence; (3) critical evaluation of competing claims; and (4) reflective adjustment of learning strategies. These processes are



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situated within an educational environment that provides structured tasks, dialogic feedback, and opportunities to explain decisions.

The proposed teaching sequence consists of five phases. During orientation, the educator introduces an authentic information problem and students define criteria for a credible answer. During inquiry, they formulate search questions and collect competing claims. During verification, they investigate authorship, evidence, dates, and independent corroboration, including looking beyond the original webpage when appropriate. During reasoned communication, learners formulate conclusions proportionate to the available evidence. During reflection, they identify misleading cues, review changes in their views, and plan adjustments for subsequent tasks.

Table 1. Proposed psychological mechanisms, classroom activities and indicators

Psychological target	Instructional activity	Observable indicator
Goal setting and planning	State a verification question and evidence criteria	Explicit goal and evaluation plan
Metacognitive monitoring	Mark uncertain claims and document missing evidence	Recognition of uncertainty and justification
Critical appraisal	Compare an original post with independent sources	Accuracy and quality of source evaluation
Self-regulation of attention	Use a structured verification checklist	Completion of verification steps
Reflective judgment	Explain why an initial conclusion changed	Evidence-based revision of judgment

These indicators can be scored using performance rubrics rather than relying exclusively on self-report. For example, a student may rate personal confidence highly while failing to substantiate the trustworthiness of a source. A balanced



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assessment should therefore examine both demonstrated verification performance and the reflective explanations accompanying it.

5. Discussion

The proposed framework highlights a central distinction: digital competence is not merely possession of technical skills but the regulated use of those skills under conditions of uncertainty. The self-regulation perspective explains why a student may know a verification technique but not use it when distracted or when a claim confirms a prior opinion. The metacognitive perspective directs attention to the student's awareness of what is known, what remains uncertain, and which strategies could reduce that uncertainty.

Developmental sensitivity is important. University students are not a homogeneous age group, and the extent of autonomy, prior educational opportunity, digital experience, and language competence may vary considerably. Instruction should avoid assuming that all learners display identical developmental needs. A staged design with modeling, guided practice, peer explanation, and progressively independent verification is more defensible than a one-size-fits-all approach.

For higher education institutions, the model may be embedded in psychology, research methods, journalism, academic writing, and general education courses. Students can investigate an authentic news claim, document evidence in a verification log, exchange justified interpretations with peers, and then write a short reflective account. Assessment criteria should reward the transparency of reasoning and willingness to correct an error, not merely agreement with the instructor's preferred conclusion.

A future empirical study could use a pretest–posttest comparison design, with one group receiving structured media literacy instruction and another following the



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usual curriculum. Measures might include performance-based source-evaluation tasks, a validated self-regulated learning instrument suited to the population, and a rubric for reflective judgment. Baseline equivalence, assessment reliability, ethical consent, and the possibility of transfer beyond practiced tasks should be addressed before claims of effectiveness are made.

Limitations of the present paper are substantive. Its framework is derived from selected conceptual and empirical publications rather than a comprehensive systematic review. The relationships among its components have not been tested in a sample of Uzbek university students. Accordingly, the framework represents an empirically testable proposition, not evidence that a particular intervention already improves psychological outcomes in the local population.

6. Conclusion

Media literacy education offers a promising context for cultivating self-regulated learning and critical thinking during emerging adulthood when teaching explicitly connects verification techniques with goal setting, cognitive monitoring, justification, and reflection. This article proposes a five-phase instructional framework and corresponding observable indicators. Its principal theoretical contribution is to position digital information evaluation within developmental and educational psychology. Future research should test the framework using culturally appropriate measures, transparent comparison designs, and evidence of sustained transfer to new information problems.

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