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RETHINKING THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE: COMPARING THE DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY OF GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Digital media literacy is comprised of skills including technical and creation of content, source verification, evaluation and critical judgement of the digital content. Gen Z and Millennials are considered the important cohorts when it comes to comparing the digital skills. Due to familiarity of Gen Z with digital technologies, they are considered to be highly digital competent and have technical adaptability skills. However, this assumption neglects the difference between critical and operational skills. This paper examines and compares the digital literacies of both generations (Gen Z and Millennials), highlighting that both cohorts have varied skills of digital media literacy. Potter's approach to cognitive literacy is used in the current paper to study digital media literacy as a multidimensional skill, rather than a single unique concept. To compare the digital media literacies of Gen Z and Millennials, this study used a quantitative research design, whereby a survey was conducted with 200 respondents from NUML, Islamabad and Rawalpindi campus, out of which 117 were Gen Z and 83 were Millennials. The results were analyzed via SPSS and T-test was done for group comparison and significant difference was observed in overall digital media literacies of Gen Z and Millennials, with Millennials scoring high in Mean comparison. These results indicated that although Millennials scored higher in critical judgment, source verification and credibility assessment, however, Gen Z scored better in terms of technical and creation of content skills. The findings of paper emphasized the importance of digital media literacy as a multidimensional and differentiated construct identifying the complimentary skills of both generational cohorts.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have altered the people's way of accessing information, communication, learning behaviors and social interactions. Social media platforms have taken precedence over the traditional platforms and these platforms have equipped people with engaging content that allows them to follow post and comment on social media posts and interact with diverse online informational sources. However, this proficiency of operating digital platforms does not guarantee critical thinking, ability to assess the source reliability of digital content or recognize deceptive or misleading claims (López-González et. al., 2023). Thus, digital media literacy needs to be measured as a multidimensional skillset, including both cognitive as well as technical aspects.

Digital media literacy was conceptualized as a consolidated term including technical, cognitive as well as socio-emotional skillset that are mandatory to thrive in digital contexts (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Similarly, (Ng, 2012) was of the view that practical, intellectual and socio-economic perspectives of digital media literacy extend beyond the utilization of applications or browsing through the web pages. It also requires comprehending the information, measuring its reliability, and responsible engagement in the digital milieu.

The variation in digital media literacy skills is often associated with age and generational cohorts. It is generally perceived by some scholars that Gen Z is more "digitally competent" due to their knowledge and understanding of contemprary social media platforms and other digital technologies (Maisurooh, Jamil & Manshur, 2024). This kind of competency may aid in operational efficiency, faster and accurate navigation, and creation of digital content. But this digital competency may not necessarily lead to progressive critical information evaluation skills. Helsper and Eynon, 2010) challenged this convention regarding Gen Z's digital competency by emphasizing the need to recognize that digital literacy and digital engagement patterns cannot be defined by age. Millennials, on the other hand, possess different digital skills and abilities, specifically in terms of information evaluation, investigating claims, and message interpretation. Although occupational, educational and life experiences may shape these skills, however these skills should not be presumed to be present in all Millennials. Studies has shown that the digital media literacy of same age cohorts may also vary because age also interrelates with some other factors that impact the digital skills (Hargittai, 2002; Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

The current paper aims to compare the difference in digital media literacies of Gen Z and Millennials, though acknowledging their varied strengths and skillsets. This means that the differences in digital literacies of both generations do not necessarily mean that one cohort is more digitally skilled than the other. This paper, therefore analyzed digital media literacy as a multidimensional aspect.

Objectives:

1. To compare the digital literacies of Gen Z and Millennials.
2. To analyze the differences in digital skills of Gen Z and Millennials.
3. To examine the overall difference in digital media literacy (DML) of Gen Z and Millennials while understanding the distinct strengths of both cohorts.

Hypothesis:

H1: DML skills of Gen Z are different from Millennials

H2: Digital media literacy of Millennials is higher than Gen Z

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Media Literacy (DML):

Digital media literacy is not only about utilizing and accessing the digital technologies. The various types of digital media literacies required to operate in digital spaces were identified by (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004) such as the capability to read, create and replicate content, to engage with non-linear digital

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spaces as well as to interpret and analyze the content. Similarly, (Ng, 2012) highlighted the interplay among cognitive, technical and socio-emotional skills and said that these skills are not separate, rather hey are treated as interconnected skills

Technical skills inculcate using and navigating digital platforms, applications, and some other digital features. It also includes familiarity with downloading or uploading the content. Whereas, creation skills encompass creating and posting digital information, such as images, videos and posts. Additionally, the evaluation skills involve assessing the data or information critically in terms of credibility, comparing content sources, identifying information biasness, recognizing the claims that are unidentified, and determining the facts and opinions in information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

According to (Hargittai, et al., 2019), all these skills are related, yet interchangeable. An individual could be competent in creation and distribution of digital information; however, he/she might not be good at verifying the content accuracy. Similarly, a user may be less acquainted regarding specific platform features, yet more apt in determining sources and decoding messages. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that a user is entirely digital media literate, as he/she may vary in their overall digital skills.

Based on the framework of DigComp (Vuorikari et al., 2022), data and information literacy, information communication, digital content creation, collaboration, and problem solving are all identified specifically the dimensions of digital competence (Vuorikari et al., 2022). This framework allows for analyzing digital media literacy as an entire concept as well as specifically examining each dimension of it.

Generational Cohorts and DML:

According to Maisurooh, Jamil and Manshur (2024), Gen Z individuals might become familiar with the operating digital tools due to their regular exposure and experience of navigating smartphone, social media and mobile applications, and other communication and digital tools. However, this frequent exposure cannot assure greater competence in all aspects of digital literacy.

Helsper and Eynon (2010) argued that the "digital natives" concept needs to ne explored further as the complex phenomenon of digital engagement cannot be attributed to age alone. Hargittai (2002) also showed that users of digital content vary in their digital competence, despite having access to digital technologies. These researches indicate that technical skills or knowledge is considered as one component of DML, not an entire domain. Therefore, it is obvious that Gen Z demonstrate proficiency in one component of DML i.e. technical and operational skills, without scoring high in critical skills. This is significant in the digital environments whereby digital engagement is limited to creation, distribution and sharing of content (Kowalczyk, 2022).

Apart from operational skills, critical evaluation skills are also important as they enable users to identify the source credibility, detect the potential bias, distinguish misleading and evidence-based claims and compare the challenging claims. Potter (2004) highlighted the role of knowledge structures and cognition in DML and suggested that users of digital media should critically evaluate and interpret the digital content, instead of passively receiving or regenerating the content.

Ng (2012) also found that cognitive skills are one of the significant aspects of DML. This leads to differentiation between being able to operate digital platforms and evaluating the content. Critical evaluation, thus requires background knowledge, experience, education, analytical tendencies, and deliberate verification practices (Ng, 2012).

According to Hargittai and Dobransky (2017), the Millennials possess greater critical-evaluation competency, as they are more likely to investigate the information, verify and compare ideas and sources, and consider the authenticity of claims. However, all millennials are not alike in terms of

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demonstrating this skill, and their competencies might vary depending on internet exposure, education and few other factors.

Van Deursen and van Dijk (2011) highlighted that these differences in DML skills of both generations are creating a digital divide focusing on the digital inequalities extending beyond the technological access. This kind of digital divide focuses on varying capacities of individuals in terms of effectively using digital resources, assess digital information, and obtaining benefits from them. Van Deursen and van Dijk (2011) emphasized the importance of internet skills for understating this digital divide, while (Deursen et al., 2011) investigated the association of digital skills with factors like education, age and internet exposure.

Livingstone and Helsper (2007) also highlighted variation in the digital inclusion, emphasizing that digital capabilities and opportunities of each individual vary, so we cannot split individuals into the categories of digitally equipped or unequipped users.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This paper is based on Cognitive Approach to Media Literacy theory by Potter and Digital Divide perspective. Potter's cognitive theory focuses on structures of knowledge and active interpretation of digital media messages. This is particularly important for verification of sources, recognition of potential biases and critical evaluation. Thus, effective digital media literacy is not only about technical proficiency, instead it's also about understanding and assessing the digital information which users encounter on digital platforms (Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011).

Digital divide perspective explicates that although both Gen Z and Millennials might have equal access to the digital platforms, yet they might not possess similar DML skills and thus a digital divide exists in terms of their varied digital media literacies. These disparities could be attributes to difference in education, experience, learning opportunities and engagement patterns.

Both these theories view DML as a multidimensional concept. Millennials might possess strong critical-evaluation skills; however, the Gen Z might be more skilled in technical aspects and content creation. These difference in DML of both groups may co-exist, however it cannot be claimed that one generation is superior over the other.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To compare the DML of Gen Z and Millennials, a quantitative approach was used, as the objective of study was to measure digital media literacy of respondents numerically and compare overall scores of DML among both generations. The rationale for choosing cross-sectional design was to capture the data at one specific time frame, thus presenting a snapshot of respondents' DML in an appropriate manner.

Target Population:

Students and staff from National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad and Rawalpindi were chosen as the target population of current paper.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique:

The total sample of current study was 200, and respondents were selected via convenience sampling method (non-probability sampling). This sampling method was chosen because the researcher found students and staff of NUML easily accessible and approachable for survey.

Data Collection Instrument:

Structured questionnaire was used for to collect data from Gen Z and Millennials and it was divided into two sections. The first section was based on demographic information of respondents such as age, gender, education etc. Second section included 15 items used to measure digital media literacy of Gen Z and Millennials on social media. These items included statements

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regarding practical, technical, operational, content creation, source credibility, information evaluation and information seeking, identification of biasness, and critical evaluation of online information and respondents rated these items on a 5-point Likert scale.

Reliability:

Cronbach alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the 15-item DML scale. The instrument yielded an overall alpha coefficient of 0.83, and value of 0.89 for digital media literacy scale. This means that internal consistency was achieved among all items.

Operational Definitions:

Digital media literacy was the dependent variable, whereas Gen Z and Millennials were the independent variables of the study.

1. Independent Variable

Gen Z and Millennials are defined as the independent categorical variables, whereby Gen Z included individuals from 18 to 29 years and Millennials included individuals from the age group of 30 to 45 for current study.

2. Dependent Variable

Digital media literacy was operationalized based on 15-item scale and it included practical, technical, operational, content creation, source credibility, information evaluation and information seeking, identification of biasness, and critical evaluation of online information skills.

Data Analysis:

Data was analyzed using inferential statistics and T-test was done on SPSS to cpomapre the difference in mean scores of gen Z and Millennials

4. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of the sample were calculated and results yielded that out of 200 respondents, 117 were belonging from Gen Z, while 83 respondents were included among Millennials. Thus, more data was obtained from Gen Z than Millennials.

Hypotheses Testing:

H1: DML skills of Gen Z are different from Millennials

Table 4.1: DML Skills of Gen Z and Millennials

DML Skill	Gen Z (Mean Value)	Millennials (Mean Value)
Technical	3.85	3.25
Content creation	3.90	3.47
Critical assessment	3.45	4.02
Information verification	3.36	3.96

N=200

Table 4.1 shows the mean scores of DML skills among Gen Z and Millennials. According to descriptive mean values, the Gen Z scored higher in technical (3.85) and content creation skills (3.90). The findings indicate that Gen Z are more competent in using the features of digital media, operating digital platforms, and creation of digital content. Contrarily, Millennials scored higher in critical assessment (4.02) and information verification skills (3.96). This indicates that the Millennials are more competent in assessing the

credibility and authenticity of digital conetn, information verification, and information bias recognition.

Overall, the results indicate that Gen Z showed higher DML score in technical and content

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creation aspect, while Millennials showed higher DML score in critical evaluation and information verification. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted that DML skills of Gen Z and Millennials are different.

H2: Digital media literacy of Millennials is higher than Gen Z

Table 4.2: Independent T-test for DML of Gen Z and Millennials

Generational Cohort	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	p	Cohen's d
Gen Z	117	3.66	0.57	-2.24	248	< .001	-0.28
Millennials	83	3.97	0.52				

Independent T-test was conducted and results in Table 4.2 showed that there is a significant difference between overall DML skills of both generations (Gen Z and Millennials), t(248)= -2.24, p=< .001. The small and negative effect size (-0.28) suggest that Millennials have higher digital media literacy than Gen Z and hence the hypothesis is proved.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current paper aimed to examine the digital media literacy of Gen Z and Millennials (overall DML and DML specific competencies were compared). Based on results, it is concluded that a significant difference exists between the overall digital media literacy of both cohorts, with Millennials reporting relatively higher DML than Gen Z. Although Millennials overall DML was recorded higher, however the skill specific analysis demonstrated that Gen Z also possessed some of the DML skills such as technical, operational and content creation. On the other hand, Millennials performed better in terms of critical evaluation and information verification skills. These findings prove that DML is a multidimensional construct, identifying the complimentary skills of both generational cohorts. These is consistent with the findings of Eshet-Alkalai (2004) and Potter (2004) who studies the multidimensional nature of DML and found that technical skills are far more different from evaluation and cognitive skills. The study also relates to Hargittai (2002) who challenged the notion that digital competence is independent of age.

The higher DML score of Millennials contradict with most of the previous studies that largely associate Gen Z or younger generation with strong DML scores. For instance, Tomczyk et. al. (2023) conducted a study on adults and found that younger generation scored higher on digital literacy than the older generation. Moreover, the higher DML score of Gen Z in terms of technical and content creation skills are consistent with previous findings suggesting that regular interaction with social media platforms facilitate the familiarity with operational and content creations abilities. Creating posts, photo and video sharing, using the functions an application, and navigating the applications are important crucial aspects of digital literacy, however, knowledge of technical skills did not guarantee that Gen Z is also able to assess the reliability of online content. DML is thus represented as a multi-dimensional construct by including cognitive, practical and other evaluative skills.

Contrarily, the critical assessment competencies of Millennials indicate that they are more confident and proficient than Gen Z in bias recognition, information verification and source credibility assessment skills. This pattern could be explained via Potter's cognitive approach which focuses on structures of knowledge and active interpretation of digital media messages. Thus, digital competence is not only about accessing and using digital content, but it also includes evaluation and interpretation of that content. However, the differences in these digital competencies may also be attributed to differences in occupation,

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education, exposure and learning opportunities. Overall, the paper elaborated the intricate concept of digital media literacy, and the findings highlighted the need to further study digital media literacy as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Recommendations:

• Training should be provided to both cohorts regarding different dimension of DML and skill-specific DML training programs should be held. Gen Z should be given training regarding critical evaluation skills, while Millennials should be given support with respect to their technical skills.

• Innovative learning activities should be planned for Gen Z to strengthen their DML skills and enable them to verify sources and assess credibility via these activities.

• Practical workshops should be conducted to work on Millennials' technical skills and enhance their platform navigation skills, application usage, production and dissemination of content skills.

• Cross-group learning should be encouraged via collaborative activities that provide an opportunity for the participants to share their creative, practical, technical and evaluation strategies with each other without presuming the competence of one cohort over the other.

Limitations:

• There were only 200 respondents which may not adequately represent the DML skills across the generations. A larger sample could be used in future papers to understand the difference in DML of both generations.

• This study was conducted within NUML Rawalpindi and Islamabad campuses, therefore the results cannot be generalized to other educational institutes or workplaces in Pakistan.

• Convenience sampling was done because the participants were easily accessible to the researcher. This sampling method could lead to selection bias, and the representativeness of the sample becomes limited due to this technique.

• DML was assessed via questionnaire and it was based on participants' self-reported DML skills. Their answers might not accurately reflect their competence within the digital spaces. Thus, future studies should include practical assessments or interview methods.

• Education, occupation, work experience, exposure and usage frequency are also some of the factors influencing the DML skills, pother than generational differences. These factors should be considered in future studies to explain the difference in DML skills.

• The study was cross-sectional and thus, it limits the ability of the study to effectively analyze the DML trends or patterns over time and within generations.

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