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THE EFFECT OF MEDIA LITERACY ON JOURNALISM STUDENTS' TRUST LEVEL IN SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS

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Abstract

In today's digital era, media literacy and trust in social media news have become central research topics due to their profound impacts on individuals. This study aims to examine the relationship between media literacy levels and trust in social media news among Generation Z, considered digital natives. Conducted with Journalism Department students at the Faculty of Communication, Uşak University, the study obtained 311 usable responses. Both the students' media literacy levels and their trust in social media news were found to be high. No statistically significant difference was observed between the students' descriptive characteristics (such as age, gender, and social media usage) and their media literacy or trust levels in social media news ($p>0.05$). However, a positive, significant, and moderate correlation ($r=0.382$, $p<0.05$) was determined between media literacy and trust in social media news. Regression analysis revealed that media literacy explained 14.6% of the variance in students' trust in social media news ($p<0.01$). While the data suggest that higher media literacy levels may be associated with greater trust in social media news, this finding should be interpreted cautiously. One possible explanation is that young people, perceiving traditional media in Turkey to have lower press freedom and biased reporting, may rely more on social media for news. Further research is needed to clarify the nature of this relationship.

Keywords: Journalism, Media Literacy, Social Media, Digital Literacy, Press Freedom

Gazetecilik Öğrencilerinin Sosyal Medya Haberlerine Güven Düzeyi Üzerinde Medya Okuryazarlığının Etkisi

Öz

Günümüz dijital çağında medya okuryazarlığı ve sosyal medya haberlerine duyulan güven, bireyler üzerindeki güçlü etkileri nedeniyle öne çıkan araştırma konularının başında gelmektedir. Bu çalışma, dijital yerliler olarak kabul edilen Z Kuşağı'nın medya

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okuryazarlığı düzeyleri ile sosyal medya haberlerine yönelik güven düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Uşak Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Gazetecilik Bölümü öğrencileriyle yürütülen araştırmada 311 geçerli yanıt elde edilmiştir. Öğrencilerin hem medya okuryazarlığı hem de sosyal medya haberlerine duydukları güven düzeylerinin yüksek olduğu belirlenmiştir. Yaş, cinsiyet ve sosyal medya kullanma süresi gibi tanımlayıcı özelliklerle medya okuryazarlığı ve sosyal medya haberlerine güven düzeyleri arasında istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı bir fark saptanmamıştır ($p>0,05$). Öte yandan, medya okuryazarlığı ile sosyal medya haberlerine duyulan güven arasında pozitif yönde, anlamlı ve orta düzeyde bir ilişki ($r=0,382$, $p<0,05$) olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Regresyon analizi, medya okuryazarlığının öğrencilerin sosyal medya haberlerine duydukları güveni %14,6 oranında açıkladığını göstermiştir ($p<0,01$). Yüksek medya okuryazarlığı düzeylerinin daha fazla güvenle ilişkilendirilmesi, dikkat çekici bir sonuç olmakla birlikte ihtiyatla yorumlanmalıdır. Bu durum, Türkiye’de geleneksel medyadaki düşük basın özgürlüğü ve taraflı yayıncılık algısı nedeniyle gençlerin sosyal medyaya daha fazla yönelmesiyle açıklanabilir; ancak bu ilişkinin niteliğini netleştirmek için ileri araştırmalara ihtiyaç vardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gazetecilik, Medya Okuryazarlığı, Sosyal Medya, Dijital Okuryazarlık, Basın Özgürlüğü

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, the subjects of media literacy and trust in social media news have become pivotal areas of research, owing to their considerable influence on individuals. Both concepts have the capacity to influence media consumption habits and the manner in which individuals access information within society. However, the reasons why some digitally proficient users continue to place their trust in social media news despite ongoing concerns regarding misinformation, manipulative content and deficiencies in fact-checking mechanisms remain unclear. Addressing this issue is imperative, as individuals who are unable to critically evaluate online information may unknowingly disseminate false content and jeopardise the development of informed public discourse.

Against this backdrop, the primary aim of this study is to investigate whether higher levels of media literacy are associated with greater trust in social media news among Generation Z, specifically Journalism Department students. This focus is essential because these individuals, considered digital natives, constantly interact with social platforms and may inadvertently rely on unverified content. Media literacy—viewed here as a skill set—enables individuals to access accurate

information, detect misleading material, and act responsibly in information-sharing processes. Yet even as social media platforms have revolutionized communication by delivering news to massive audiences in real time, the trustworthiness of such content remains questionable.

Additionally, by concentrating on why and how young adults choose to trust certain social media sources over others, this study aspires to strengthen the existing literature. Understanding how students encounter, evaluate, and interpret digital news will shed light on the core problem—namely, the tension between high media literacy skills and the apparent readiness to accept information found on social platforms as credible. Therefore, the findings will help clarify the responsibilities of young adults to verify digital content and may inform educational strategies that further improve media literacy competencies in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

1. Media and Media Literacy

The concept of "media" came into existence due to the swift advancement in information and communication technologies. Stemming from the Latin terms "media" and "medium," the word media encompasses notions like conduit, mediator, intermediary, and surrounding. Media, being the plural form of medium, is also described as a cyclical communication system that creates a temporary interaction with individuals, engages them, and channels their attention elsewhere (Rasulov, Makhkamova & Nishanbekov, 2023). In democracies, media, referred to as the "third eye" or the "fourth power" following the legislature, executive, and judiciary (Mora, 2008), serves the public's right to know. Hence, the media contributes to raising social responsibility awareness and sustaining societal development by providing access to hard-to-reach information, thereby enabling the public conscience to make relatively more rational evaluations on various topics and incidents (Bonner, 2009). These statements can be considered an indicator of the media's power to direct social change and development.

When it comes to media, one of the primary subjects that need to be addressed in conjunction is media literacy. The foundations of media literacy as a discipline were first laid in England by Len Masterman and in Canada by Barry Duncan's work. Therefore, Masterman and Duncan are recognized by many educators worldwide as the founders of media literacy (Jolls & Wilson, 2014). Conceptually, media literacy is defined as "a necessary practice to help inform and empower individuals in a world filled with an increasing variety of media and messages" (Cho, Cannon, Lopez & Li, 2022).

Media literacy, characterized by the capacity to interact critically with media content, serves as an inclusive term that merges various forms of literacy, including information literacy, news literacy, and digital media literacy (Qian, Shen & Zhang, 2023). Information literacy is defined as the essential skills required to recognize the need for information and the ability to efficiently locate, assess, and apply said information (Atikuzzaman & Ahmed, 2023). News literacy is considered a branch of media literacy that deals with understanding the production, consumption, and context of news (Tully, Vraga & Bode, 2020), while digital media literacy is identified as the requisite knowledge and skills for critical navigation within online media spaces (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007).

Media literacy contributes to societies' conscious consumption and production of media content. People possessing a high degree of media literacy are more likely to remain resilient and well-informed with ease in the era of information. Especially for Generation Z, referred to as the spring of previous generations, the concept of media literacy holds even more significance. This is because young people are more likely to be continually exposed to information through the internet, social media, television, and other media tools. Therefore, developing media literacy skills among youth is critically important for successful and informed communication in the information age. Moreover, whether young people trust the various types of content and news shared on social platforms is closely related to whether they are critical media literates. Thus, within the scope of this study, the

focus has been primarily on "digital media literacy". The study explores how Generation Z's media literacy impacts their trust in news shared on social media. It also investigates how these factors relate to the demographic characteristics of journalism students, providing insight into the nuanced relationship between media literacy levels and the trust they place in social media as a news source.

1.1. Social Media Platforms and Media Literacy

In the contemporary digital era, social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, X (previously known as Twitter), YouTube, and more, are crucial in influencing different facets of life, encompassing communication, entertainment, and commerce. These platforms enable users to connect, share ideas, and engage on a global scale. Social media is characterized as a digital platform where people use real-world connections and common interests to establish social bonds. It is a virtual environment where users can exchange information, thoughts, experiences, and interests in various forms, creating a dynamic digital community (Akram & Kumar, 2017; İnce & Koçak, 2017).

As in the rest of the world, there has been an increase in social media usage in Turkey parallel to internet usage. According to the "Digital 2023 Turkey" report by We Are Social, 83.4% of the population uses the internet, and 73.1% are active social media users. The reported internet usage time for individuals aged 16-64 is 7 hours and 24 minutes, while social media usage time is 2 hours and 54 minutes. The report, which lists the main reasons for social media usage, reveals that "reading news" ranks first at 51%. Additionally, it is reported that the top five most used social media platforms in Turkey are "Instagram," "WhatsApp," "Facebook," "X," and finally "Telegram."

Social media platforms, which have become a lifestyle and even central to many individuals' lives, are especially popular among Generation Z, also known as digital natives. However, the literature notes a limited number of studies on how much trust young people place in the content and news on social media as a significant tool for social interaction (Göksel & Akgül, 2021). This remark is

significant for indicating relationships between the credibility of content distributed on social media networks and the extent of digital literacy.

Digitally, literacy is characterized as "the method through which individuals enhance their perspectives and abilities concerning digital devices, access and appraise these resources, examine them, and generate fresh information, mirroring this entire procedure in their social existence." (Martin, 2005). This process, requiring competencies in the correct use of various technologies, underscores the need for individuals to possess digital literacy skills. Indeed, the inadequacy of current control mechanisms for verifying the accuracy of information on the internet not only highlights the importance of digital literacy in addressing this shortfall but also brings into question the perceived level of trust towards social media platforms.

Fact-checking websites play a crucial role in enhancing media literacy awareness and proficiency among university students representing Generation Z. Çömlekçi (2022) highlights that these organizations go beyond verifying information, actively contributing to media and information literacy education. Prominent fact-checking initiatives such as MediaWise (USA), Africa Check (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya), Teyit.org (Turkey), Faktabaari (Finland), Demagog (Poland), Myth Detector (Georgia), and Faktisk.no (Norway) engage in educational programs to improve critical thinking and source evaluation skills. Additionally, international networks like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) provide guidance and coordination in this field, further strengthening media literacy efforts worldwide.

1.2. Young Generations and Trust in Social Media

The concept of trust, which is complex to define and understand in a sociological context, becomes even more challenging to describe concerning e-trust towards social platforms. According to Smith (1997), trust in social media is defined as "users knowing that social media environments are under the assurance of being based on trust and the responsibilities are fulfilled with loyalty." As Çömlekçi & Başol (2019) pointed out, gaining awareness about whether the various and

numerous news, visuals, and contents spread through social media are reliable plays a critical role in combating manipulations and informational disinformation.

The concern over trust in social media as a key digital communication platform has escalated due to the fast and vast dissemination of information. The prevalence of unverified information, misinformation, and manipulative content on platforms favoured by the youth, such as Instagram, X, YouTube, and WhatsApp, poses a challenge to maintaining trust in these mediums. It underscores the importance of scrutinizing information sources, embracing diverse viewpoints, and seeking out data through trustworthy channels during social media engagement.

Considering that individuals who are more active on social media platforms are mostly from the younger generation, the issue at hand becomes even more significant. Various aspects, such as what news or content young people find trustworthy, the role of celebrities or well-known figures in building trust, and whether they believe more in the content shared by their peer groups or official institutions, are generally closely linked to the level of digital media literacy.

The scholarly landscape reveals a keen interest in the trust young generations place in social media content and news. A notable experimental study by Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl & Pingree (2015), involving 364 university students in the United States, found that social media recommendations could significantly increase trust in media organizations and foster a greater inclination towards consuming more news from these sources in the future. The study further highlighted that the impact was more pronounced when news shared by peers, viewed as opinion leaders, was involved.

A study conducted in Spain by Pérez-Escoda, Pedrero-Esteba, Rubio-Romero & Jiménez-Narros (2021) found that while young people commonly use social networks to get current news and information, there was a surprising lack of trust towards these networks. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most consumed content types have been identified as political news, entertainment, humour, and music. However, it was observed that there was a lack of trust in

politicians, the media, and journalists. Thus, the research highlighted that digital media literacy has become more indispensable than ever, yet the challenge of media literacy must be reevaluated in light of the increasing scepticism.

Research by Roselina, Asmiyanto & Andriany (2021) in Indonesia examined the health information-seeking behaviours of Generation Z during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that "Instagram," "Line," "Twitter," and "YouTube" were among the most used social media platforms for accessing such information. Additionally, 44.5% of the young respondents reported doubting the reliability of information and news content obtained through social channels, feeling a need to re-verify the acquired information. Hence, it could be inferred that combating the infodemic might be more challenging than fighting the virus itself during such a global pandemic, with institutional verification mechanisms playing a crucial role.

A study by Yıldırım & Mazıcı (2021) revealed that individuals from Generations X, Y, and Z approached the reality on Twitter with scepticism and lacked trust in the users, information, and news on this platform. Moreover, it was reported that participants were not concerned with verifying information. Research by Varlık & Sümer (2022) found a positive and significant relationship between the level of trust in news served through social media and the inclination towards political participation. Furthermore, it was found that the influence of social media on political engagement behaviors diminished moving from Generation Z to Generation X.

A study by Gürel & Eyüboğlu (2023) highlighted that Generation Z was not entirely sure about the authenticity of political content encountered on social media. This situation led young people into a digital spiral of silence and indicated that the concept of a surveillance society exerted significant pressure on the youth. Research results by Arslan & Sağlam (2022) also pointed to a meaningful impact of social media and reference groups on the voting behaviour of Generation Z voters. Therefore, the ability of Generation Z to evaluate whether the information shared on social platforms by political parties contains manipulation or disinformation is

crucial. The role of digital media literacy level in making such assessments is undeniable. Hence, equipping young adults with high digital literacy and critical reading skills is of great importance. Additionally, planning and implementing initiatives at both micro (families, close circles) and macro (society, NGOs, educational institutions, governments) levels related to this issue are necessary.

2. Methodology

2.1. Aim, original value, and method of the study

This section outlines the research goal to investigate the interplay between media literacy and trust in social media news among Generation Z university students. In summary, this study has two main objectives. The first of these is to investigate whether media literacy has an effect on the trust levels of Generation Z in social media news. The second objective is to investigate whether there is a statistically significant difference between the descriptive characteristics of the students and the variables of trust in social media news and media literacy. It notes a gap in existing research regarding these variables from a Generation Z perspective, underscoring the study's potential contribution. The methodology involves a quantitative approach through a cross-sectional survey, a strategy for assessing current attitudes and thoughts within a population or sample, as detailed by Creswell (2014). This method facilitates a comprehensive grasp of the subjects' viewpoints at a particular moment.

2.2. Study population and sample

This section outlines the study's demographic focus, emphasizing its attention to Journalism students at Uşak University. Since the research topic was thought to be more closely related to the course curriculum of the Journalism Department students, only students studying in this department were included in the sample. Of the 352 students comprising the population, 311 participated in what is referred to as "*census sampling*" reflecting an 88.4% representation. Uşak University was selected due to its diverse student profile, evening education options, and high ranking among Turkish universities, offering a rich context to explore

media literacy and trust in social media news among Generation Z students (YÖK Atlas, 2023).

2.3. Data collection instruments used in the study

This part of the study describes the methodology for data collection, employing a face-to-face survey conducted between November 13, 2023, and December 4, 2023. Two distinct scales were used to gauge media literacy and trust in social media news, complemented by five statements to capture participants' descriptive characteristics, grounded in existing literature review.

2.3.1. Media literacy scale

This section introduces the "*Media Literacy Scale*" by Karaman & Karataş (2009), a 5-point Likert scale with 17 statements across three sub-dimensions: knowledge acquisition, analytical and responsive capabilities, and discernment of implicit messages. The scale's overall reliability, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha, is 0.840, indicating high internal consistency. Rises in scale scores indicate enhanced levels of media literacy among participants. In this research, the scale showed robust reliability, evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha coefficients varying between 0.779 and 0.913 across its subdimensions (Table 3).

2.3.2. Trust in social media news scale

The "*Trust in Social Media News Scale*" created by Çömlekçi & Başol (2019) is a 5-point Likert scale featuring 10 statements across three dimensions: trust in institutional and individual social media posts, and verification practices. With an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.705, it measures trust levels in social media content. This study reports enhanced reliability for the scale, with coefficients between 0.813 and 0.855, indicating a reliable measure of participants' trust in social media news (Table 3).

2.3.3. Descriptive information form

The "*Descriptive Information Form*" is a tool used in the study to gather data on the participants' demographics and habits, including age, gender and social media

usage, and frequency of social media activity. Information on social media preferences was sourced from the We Are Social Platform's Turkey report (February 2023), identifying Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), and TikTok as the top platforms among the 16-64 age group in Turkey, which informed the study's context on social media trends.

2.4. Analyses used in the study

The data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS V.26, employing descriptive statistics for comprehensive insights. Prior to hypothesis testing, the assumptions for simple linear regression were thoroughly checked. First, normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values for both the Media Literacy and Trust in Social Media News scales, indicating a normal distribution (Harrington, 2009). Linearity was verified by examining scatter plots of the residuals, confirming that the relationship between variables could be reasonably modeled by a straight line. Multicollinearity was evaluated via Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), with all values remaining below 5, suggesting negligible collinearity. Additionally, outlier checks, including Cook's Distance, revealed no cases exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.5, implying no influential outliers. Having confirmed these requirements, Pearson Correlation and Simple Linear Regression analyses were used to investigate relationships and effects between variables, while t-tests were applied to assess differences. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$ (95% confidence interval), ensuring a robust statistical evaluation of the results.

2.5. Hypotheses and model of the research

The hypotheses and research model formed through the variables examined and analysed within the scope of the study are provided below:

RQ1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between the average level of media literacy and the average level of trust in social media news?

RQ2. Does the average level of media literacy differ significantly by gender?

RQ3. Does the average level of media literacy differ significantly by age?

- RQ4.** Does the average level of media literacy differ significantly by the average daily internet usage time?
- RQ5.** Does the average level of trust in social media news differ significantly by gender?
- RQ6.** Does the average level of trust in social media news differ significantly by age?
- RQ7.** Does the average level of trust in social media news differ significantly by average daily internet usage time?
- RQ8.** Does media literacy have a statistically significant effect on trust in social media news?

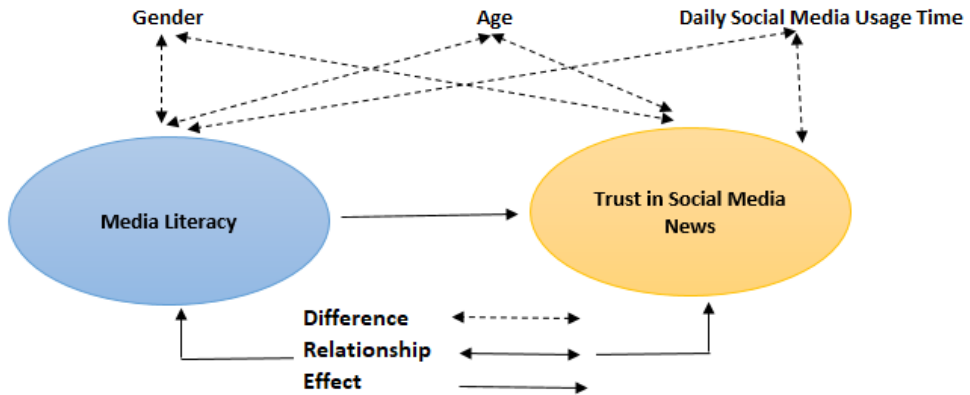


Figure 1: Research Model

2.6. Ethical approval

The research was conducted in strict accordance with the Helsinki Declaration's scientific and ethical standards. Ethical approval was granted by the Uşak University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, under decision number 2023-201 dated November 9, 2023, ensuring the study adhered to all ethical guidelines.

3. Results

Upon examining Table 1, which includes the descriptive characteristics of the participants; it is observed that 55.3% are female, 58.5% are aged 22 and over, 74.3% watch television for a maximum of one hour daily, and 59.8% use the internet for a maximum of seven hours daily. Additionally, the participants, with an average age of 21.98 ± 1.91 , have an average daily television watching time of 0.97 ± 1.25 hours, and an average daily social media usage time of 7.10 ± 3.19 hours.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of the Students (n: 311)

| Variables | | f | % |
|---|-----------|-----|------|
| Gender | Female | 172 | 55.3 |
| | Male | 139 | 44.7 |
| Age (\bar{x} : $21,98 \pm 1,91$) | ≤ 21 | 129 | 41.5 |
| | ≥ 22 | 182 | 58.5 |
| Daily Television Viewing Time (\bar{x} : $0,97 \pm 1,25$) | ≤ 1 | 231 | 74.3 |
| | ≥ 2 | 80 | 25.7 |
| Daily Social Media Usage Time (\bar{x} : $7,10 \pm 3,19$) | ≤ 7 | 186 | 59.8 |
| | ≥ 8 | 125 | 40.2 |

\bar{x} : Mean; \pm : Standard Deviation

The descriptive statistics related to the frequency of participants' use of social platforms are presented in Table 2. Only five social media platforms are included in the relevant table, referencing the We Are Social Platform's February 2023 Turkey report. According to the report, the top five most preferred social media platforms in Turkey for the 16-64 age group are Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok in that order. In this study, however, it was determined that the most frequently used social platform by students is WhatsApp (4.56 ± 0.76), followed by Instagram (4.44 ± 0.86), X (3.12 ± 1.44), TikTok (2.23 ± 1.48), and lastly Facebook (1.72 ± 1.09). Based on the obtained averages, it is understood that students use

WhatsApp and Instagram very frequently, X (Twitter) usage is moderate, TikTok usage is low, and Facebook usage is very low.

Table 2: Frequency of Students' Use of Social Media (n: 311)

| Social Channels | $\bar{x} \pm$ | Min.-Max. | Level |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| WhatsApp | 4.56 \pm 0.76 | 1-5 | Very high |
| Instagram | 4.44 \pm 0.86 | 1-5 | Very high |
| X (Twitter) | 3.12 \pm 1.44 | 1-5 | Centre |
| Tik Tok | 2.23 \pm 1.48 | 1-5 | Low |
| Facebook | 1.72 \pm 1.09 | 1-5 | Very Low |

* *1.00-1.80 Very Low; 1.81-2.60 Low; 2.61-3.40 Medium; 3.41-4.20 High; 4.21-5.00 Very High; Min: Minimum; Max: Maximum

When examining Table 3, which includes the descriptive statistics for the scales and their sub-dimensions, it is observed that participants have high average scores for both "Media Literacy" (4.08 \pm 0.83) and "Trust in Social Media News" (3.43 \pm 0.95). All the sub-dimensions of the "Media Literacy" scale, namely "Having Knowledge" (4.07 \pm 0.84), "Being Able to Analyze and Respond" (4.02 \pm 0.85), and "Seeing Implicit Messages" (3.99 \pm 0.83), are also understood to be at a high level.

Furthermore, when looking at Table 3, for the "Trust in Social Media News" scale, it is found that the sub-dimensions "Trust in Institutional Social Media Shares" (3.29 \pm 1.04) and "Trust in Individual Social Media Shares" (3.05 \pm 1.03) are at a medium level; while the "Verification" (3.81 \pm 0.97) sub-dimension is at a high level.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Related to Scales and Subscales (n: 311)

| Scales and Subscales | $\bar{x} \pm$ | Min.- Max. | Level | Kurtosis | Skewness | Cronbach Alpha |
|---|-----------------|---------------|--------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| <i>Having Information</i> | 4.07 \pm 0.84 | 1-5 | High | 1.39 | -1.06 | 0.855 |
| <i>To be able to analyse and react</i> | 4.02 \pm 0.85 | 1-5 | High | 0.12 | -0.72 | 0.779 |
| <i>Seeing Implicit Messages</i> | 3.99 \pm 0.83 | 1-5 | High | 0.42 | -0.74 | 0.812 |
| Media Literacy Scale | 4.08 \pm 0.83 | 1-5 | High | 1.73 | -1.13 | 0.913 |
| <i>Trust in Corporate Social Media Posts</i> | 3.29 \pm 1.04 | 1-5 | Medium | -0.62 | -0.15 | 0.843 |
| <i>Trust in Individual Social Media Posts</i> | 3.05 \pm 1.03 | 1-5 | Medium | -0.54 | 0.19 | 0.813 |
| <i>Confirmation</i> | 3.81 \pm 0.97 | 1-5 | High | -0.34 | -0.50 | 0.855 |
| Social Media News Trust Scale | 3.43 \pm 0.95 | 1-5 | High | -0.55 | -0.03 | 0.851 |

* *1.00-1.80 Very Low; 1.81-2.60 Low; 2.61-3.40 Medium; 3.41-4.20 High; 4.21-5.00 Very High

Upon reviewing Table 4, which presents the differences between the variables and the descriptive characteristics of the participants, it is observed that there is no statistically significant relationship ($p > 0.05$) between the participants' genders, ages, average daily social media usage times, and the variables "Media Literacy" and "Trust in Social Media News". From this, it can be understood that RQ₂, RQ₃, RQ₄, RQ₅, RQ₆, and RQ₇ are not supported.

Table 4: Differences Between Variables and Participants' Descriptive Characteristics

| Variables | Gender | N | \bar{x} | t | p |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----|-----------|--------|-------|
| Media Literacy | Female | 172 | 4.08 | -0.114 | 0.910 |
| | Male | 139 | 4.09 | | |
| Trust in Social Media News | Female | 172 | 3.53 | 1.928 | 0.055 |
| | Male | 139 | 3.32 | | |
| Variables | Age | N | \bar{x} | t | p |
| Media Literacy | ≤ 21 | 129 | 4.11 | 0.643 | 0.521 |

| | ≥ 22 | 182 | 4.05 | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|-----------|-------|-------|
| Trust in Social Media News | ≤ 21 | 129 | 3.50 | 0.998 | 0.319 |
| | ≥ 22 | 182 | 3.39 | | |
| Variables | Daily Social Media Usage Time | N | \bar{x} | t | p |
| Media Literacy | ≤ 7 | 186 | 4.09 | 0.355 | 0.722 |
| | ≥ 8 | 125 | 4.06 | | |
| Trust in Social Media News | ≤ 7 | 186 | 3.49 | 1.352 | 0.177 |
| | ≥ 8 | 125 | 3.34 | | |

When examining Table 5, which contains the results of the correlation analysis between the scales and their sub-dimensions, it is observed that there is a moderate-level (r : 0.382), positive, and significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between "Media Literacy" and "Trust in Institutional Social Media Shares". From this, it can be concluded that RQ_1 is supported. High-level, positive, and significant ($p < 0.05$) relationships have also been identified between the "Media Literacy" scale and its sub-dimensions "Having Knowledge" (r : 0.799), "Being Able to Analyze and Respond" (r : 0.519), and "Seeing Implicit Messages" (r : 0.755). Furthermore, high-level, positive, and significant ($p < 0.05$) relationships have been determined between the "Trust in Institutional Social Media Shares" scale and its sub-dimensions "Trust in Institutional Social Media Shares" (r : 0.724), "Trust in Individual Social Media Shares" (r : 0.526), and "Verification" (r : 0.734).

Table 5: Relationships Between Scales and Sub-Dimensions

| Scales, Subscales and Descriptive Variables | a | b | a1 | a2 | a3 | b1 | b2 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Media Literacy Scale (a) | | | | | | | |
| Trust in Social Media News Scale (b) | 0.382** | | | | | | |
| Having Knowledge (a1) | 0.799** | 0.336** | | | | | |
| Analysing and Reacting (a2) | 0.519** | 0.335** | 0.534** | | | | |
| Seeing Implicit Messages (a3) | 0.755** | 0.361** | 0.525** | 0.585** | | | |
| Trust in Corporate Social Media Posts (b1) | 0.324** | 0.724** | 0.298** | 0.202** | 0.326** | | |
| Trust in Individual Social Media Posts (b2) | 0.236** | 0.526** | 0.185** | 0.191** | 0.235** | 0.584** | |
| Confirmation (b3) | 0.346** | 0.734** | 0.340** | 0.416** | 0.314** | 0.306** | 0.316** |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

When the simple linear regression analysis results in Table 6 are examined, it is seen that the media literacy independent variable has a 14.6% effect on the dependent variable of trust in social media news. Based on this, it can be stated that a one-unit increase in the media literacy levels of journalism students will cause a 0.437-unit increase in their trust in social media news. The t , β and R^2 values representing the significance of the regression coefficient also confirm this finding (t : 7.273; β : 0.382; R^2 : 0.146). From this, it can be concluded that RQ₈ is supported.

Table 6: *Effect of Media Literacy on Social Media News Trust*

| Variables | B | Standardized Error | β | t | p |
|-----------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Constant | 1.648 | 0.250 | 0.382 | 6.582 | 0.000 |
| Media Literacy | 0.437 | 0.060 | | 7.273 | 0.000 |
| R= 0.382 | | R²= 0.146 | F= 52.901 (p<0.000) | | |

Dependent Variable: Social Media News Trust

The regression equation and its explanations, derived from the regression analysis results in Table 6, are as follows.

$$Y=1.648+0.437X$$

Y: Social Media News Trust (Dependent Variable)

X: Media Literacy (Independent Variable)

1.648: Constant term (Intercept)

0.437: Regression coefficient for Media Literacy

The regression model is statistically significant ($F=52.901$, $p<0.000$). Additionally, $R^2=0.146$, meaning that Media Literacy explains 14.6% of the variance in Social Media News Trust.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research, focusing on the correlation between media literacy levels and trust in social media news among students from the Journalism Department concerning descriptive variables, involved 311 student participants. It was found that a majority of these students are female, with an average age of around 22 years. Additionally, it came to light that the average daily social media consumption of students exceeds 7 hours.

The fact that the average time students spend on social media is quite high is not surprising, as internet and social media usage rates are particularly high among Generation Z, also known as digital natives. The social platforms most frequently used by Journalism Department students, in order, are WhatsApp, Instagram, X, TikTok, and Facebook. The high usage of WhatsApp and Instagram aligns with global trends, whereas the relatively lower engagement with Facebook suggests a

generational shift in platform preferences. According to the We Are Social Platform's February 2023 Turkey Report, the most used platforms are Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and TikTok. Therefore, it has been concluded that the results obtained in the study differ from the ranking in this report.

Findings also indicate that Journalism Department students have high levels of media literacy, particularly in the sub-dimensions of "knowing," "being able to analyze and respond," and "seeing implicit messages." Given their education and training, it is expected that journalism students possess strong critical thinking and evaluation skills regarding media content. These findings align with previous studies in Turkey, where university students demonstrated high media literacy attitudes across various dimensions (Gürkan, Atabay & Gezgin, 2022).

However, one of the most unexpected findings of this study is the positive and significant relationship between media literacy and trust in social media news. Traditionally, it is assumed that individuals with higher media literacy would approach social media news with greater skepticism due to the abundance of misinformation and lack of editorial oversight on digital platforms (Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Instead, the results suggest that as media literacy levels increase, trust in social media news also increases, which contradicts widely held assumptions. Several possible explanations could account for this paradox.

4.1. Selective Trust and Source Differentiation

One possible explanation is that media-literate individuals do not trust all social media news indiscriminately but rather have a refined ability to differentiate between credible and unreliable sources. Prior research indicates that highly media-literate individuals are more likely to follow institutional accounts, professional journalists, and fact-checking organizations, which may contribute to higher trust in the news they consume on social media (Çömlekçi & Başol, 2019; Turcotte et al., 2015). This suggests that media literacy does not necessarily lead to distrust but rather selective and informed trust.

4.2. Distrust in Traditional Media as a Mediating Factor

A second explanation relates to widespread distrust in traditional media. In countries where mainstream journalism is perceived as biased, censored, or politicized, young people may increasingly turn to social media as an alternative and independent source of news (Akser & Baybars, 2023; Över, 2021). Turkey's declining press freedom ranking (Reporters Without Borders, 2023) highlights the restrictive environment of conventional media, which may lead media-literate individuals to place greater trust in social media news out of necessity rather than preference. This aligns with research showing that in restricted press environments, media-savvy individuals often engage in "strategic trust"—trusting social media news not because they believe it is inherently reliable, but because mainstream alternatives are perceived as even less trustworthy (Farkas & Schou, 2020).

4.3. Participatory Journalism and News Engagement

Another factor that may explain this relationship is the role of participatory journalism and digital news engagement. Social media platforms allow users to engage in fact-checking, cross-referencing sources, and contributing to real-time discussions about news content. Media-literate individuals may develop higher trust in social media news not because they passively consume it, but because they actively engage with and verify content (Hermida, 2020). This participatory nature of social media fosters a sense of control over information accuracy, leading to an increased perception of credibility.

4.4. Platform-Specific Trust Levels

It is also important to consider trust variations across different social media platforms. Studies show that trust in social media news is not uniform across platforms—while platforms like Facebook and TikTok tend to have low levels of trust, institutional news on Twitter/X and YouTube is considered more reliable, especially among media-literate users (Molina et al., 2021; Roselina et al., 2021). Since this study does not differentiate between platforms in terms of trust, future

research should explore whether trust levels in social media news vary across platforms.

This unexpected relationship between media literacy and trust in social media news suggests that media literacy programs should emphasize not just critical thinking but also skepticism toward digital news sources. Simply teaching fact-checking skills may not be sufficient if individuals still place excessive trust in news that aligns with their cognitive biases or distrust of traditional media (Tully, Vraga & Bode, 2020). Future research should incorporate qualitative interviews and cross-disciplinary comparisons to determine why media-literate individuals develop greater trust in social media news.

This study challenges the conventional wisdom that higher media literacy leads to greater skepticism toward social media news. Instead, the findings suggest that media literacy fosters selective trust, shaped by distrust in traditional media, engagement with participatory journalism, and platform-specific credibility perceptions. Recognizing these nuances is crucial for developing effective media literacy curricula and improving digital literacy strategies in an era where social media is a dominant news source.

5. Recommendations

To enhance journalism students' media literacy, curricula and workshops should incorporate topics such as news evaluation, source verification, and social media content analysis. Developing critical thinking skills, particularly in assessing news shared on social media, should be prioritized through interactive activities. Additionally, practical experiences, including internships and projects, should be encouraged to provide students with firsthand exposure to professional news production. Guiding students toward reliable sources, such as credible news websites and academic publications, is essential for fostering a habit of using trustworthy information. Lastly, awareness initiatives should be implemented to help students better understand the benefits and risks of social media, strengthening their ability to verify information effectively.

The most significant limitation of this study is the generalizability of the results, as the research was conducted solely with Journalism Department students at the Faculty of Communication, Uşak University. The rationale behind selecting this specific sample is that journalism students are expected to have a higher level of media literacy compared to students from other disciplines, making them a particularly relevant group for examining the relationship between media literacy and trust in social media news. Since these students receive formal education in media analysis, news verification, and journalistic ethics, their perceptions and trust levels regarding digital news may provide unique insights into how media literacy interacts with social media credibility. However, this sample-specific focus also constitutes a limitation, as findings cannot be assumed to represent all university students or young adults in general. Additionally, conducting the study within a single institution (Uşak University) restricts the ability to account for potential variations among students from different universities, regions, or academic backgrounds. Future research should consider broader and more diverse samples to enhance the external validity of the findings.

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