

MEDIA LITERACY COMPETENCE AND GATEWATCHING PRACTICES AMONG SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN ABUJA

Joshua Olatunji, OLADAPO

Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria

joladapo@noun.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4676-6784>

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Mutiu Adekunle, GANIYU

Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria

mganiyu@noun.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4887-7540>

&

Nathan Oguche EMMANUEL

Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria

nemmanuel@noun.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8352-8510>

Abstract

The rapid democratisation of information has transformed social media users from passive consumers into active "gatewatchers" who curate and redistribute news. However, a critical paradox persists where technical proficiency does not always equate to the cognitive competence required to effectively vet information. This study investigates the relationship between media literacy competence and gatewatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 350 active social media users among undergraduate and postgraduate students of University of Abuja and National Open University of Nigeria using purposive sampling and a structured questionnaire. Findings reveal a generally high level of self-reported media literacy level, particularly in finding news across platforms and verifying accuracy before sharing. Despite these high self-perceptions, a knowledge-practice gap is evident: respondents scored significantly lower in the actual use of fact-checking platforms and recognizing media bias. Gatewatching practices among the sample were found to be moderate and mostly discussion-oriented, such as participating in news threads and adding commentary to reposted content. The study established a positive association between literacy levels and active engagement; 76.3% of high-literacy users frequently perform gatewatching functions compared to those with lower literacy levels. The study concludes that while media literacy serves as a vital catalyst for digital participation, there is an urgent need for higher education curricula to shift from teaching basic functional skills to fostering deep critical thinking and practical verification training.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, Gatewatching, Media Literacy, News Curation, Social Media

Introduction

The democratisation of information has advanced far more quickly than the public's ability to critically evaluate digital content, placing social media users in an increasingly vulnerable position as both consumers and unintended distributors of misinformation. Although digital platforms provide unprecedented levels of accessibility, interactivity, and diversity of information, they have also become major channels for the rapid circulation of false rumours and misleading narratives (Wang et al., 2020). This creates a significant paradox within the contemporary media environment. On one hand, the decentralised structure of social networks allows information to move quickly and freely across audiences; on the other, it weakens the institutional filtering systems that traditionally verified information before publication. As a result, the flow of news is no longer controlled solely by established media organisations, forcing a broader transformation in how information is curated, prioritised, and distributed to the public.

Within this evolving digital ecosystem, the conventional role of the traditional gatekeeper has gradually been replaced by a combination of algorithms and audience participation. According to Pałka-Suchojad (2021), technological convergence has fundamentally reshaped media power relations by transforming audiences from passive receivers into active participants who engage in what is described as “secondary gatekeeping” through network diffusion. Rather than relying on a single media institution for information, users now engage in a process of “way-finding”, actively navigating fragmented online environments to locate, interpret, comment on, and share stories across multiple platforms (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017, p. 3). This shift closely reflects Bruns' (2003) concept of gatewatching, where the visibility and circulation of stories are increasingly determined by network activity and audience engagement rather than institutional hierarchy.

At the same time, algorithmic features such as “trending topics/ for you” can amplify the visibility of smaller publishers and alternative voices, thereby contributing to a more democratised information landscape (Yang & Peng, 2022, p. 4). However, these systems still depend heavily on user interaction to sustain visibility and virality. In essence, audiences now play a substantial role in determining which stories gain prominence online. Yet this expanded agency also introduces serious risks, particularly when users lack the critical skills needed to evaluate the reliability and credibility of the information they share.

For secondary gatekeeping/ gatewatching to function responsibly, a strong level of media literacy is essential. Merten (2021, p. 3) observes that social media users increasingly operate as “personal curators”, shaping their information environments through practices such as sharing, following, blocking, or hiding content. These behaviours allow users to boost or limit the visibility of particular news stories within their digital networks. Nevertheless, the ability to use digital tools effectively should not be mistaken for the ability to assess information critically. As Jones-Jang et al. (2021) argue, the challenge of distinguishing factual information from misinformation has become especially urgent in highly polarised digital environments where emotional and partisan loyalties often outweigh evidence.

A user may understand how to engage with platform features and manipulate their news feed, yet still lack the analytical competence required to identify bias, misinformation, or algorithmic manipulation. Consequently, media literacy has moved beyond being a desirable skill to becoming a civic necessity in contemporary society. This need is even more pronounced in politically sensitive environments where information spreads rapidly and misleading narratives can have significant social and democratic consequences.

Within the Nigerian context, the relationship between gatewatching and media literacy is particularly important, especially in Abuja. As the political and administrative centre of Nigeria, Abuja serves as a constant hub of political activity, policy discussions, and nationally significant events. Suleiman (2017) notes that the city's position at the centre of presidential leadership and governmental decision-making makes it a major source of news production and political discourse. In such an information-rich environment, public university students represent a particularly significant demographic. As highly active and digitally connected social media users, they often participate extensively in political discussions, news sharing, and online debate. Their role in selecting, amplifying, and circulating information means that their online behaviours can directly shape broader public conversations and influence the quality of democratic discourse.

Despite their high levels of digital engagement, however, there remains limited scholarly attention on whether these students possess the cognitive skills necessary to critically evaluate the political and social information they encounter online. Existing studies have largely concentrated on platform structures, technological access, and patterns of audience participation rather than the actual literacy competence of the individuals performing these gatewatching roles. Although previous research acknowledges that users engage actively in personal curation (Merten, 2021) and secondary gatekeeping (Pałka-Suchojad, 2021), far less attention has been paid to how media literacy influences the quality and consequences of these activities.

This gap in the literature is particularly concerning because users who engage in gatewatching without adequate media literacy may unintentionally contribute to the spread of misinformation while believing they are simply participating in news dissemination. Such practices have the potential to weaken informed public discourse and undermine democratic integrity. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between media

literacy competence and gatewatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja.

Research Questions

To examine the relationship between media literacy competence and gatewatching practices, the following research questions are posed:

1. What is the level of media literacy competence among social media users in public universities in Abuja?
2. What types of gatewatching practices do social media users in public universities in Abuja engage in?
3. How does media literacy competence influence gatewatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja?

Gatewatching and Media Literacy in the Digital News Environment: A Conceptual Discourse

The rise of digital media has dramatically changed how news and information circulate in society. Control over information is no longer concentrated in the hands of traditional media institutions alone; instead, it now operates within a complex system shaped by online users, digital platforms, and algorithmic processes. In earlier media systems, journalists largely functioned as the primary gatekeepers in what Robinson (2006) and Peresso (2023) describe as a univocal and scarcity-driven communication environment. The emergence of Web 2.0, however, disrupted this structure, particularly during major global events when legacy news organizations increasingly relied on citizen journalism and user-generated content to report unfolding developments (Robinson, 2006). As publication barriers became significantly lower, ordinary users gained the

ability to create and distribute information instantly and at scale (Salih, 2025; Neuberger et al., 2023).

Bruns (2011) explains this transformation through the concept of “gatewatching,” a process in which users actively monitor, select, and redistribute information rather than merely consume it. More recently, though, this user-driven model has evolved into a hybrid system where algorithms also play a central role in shaping visibility and engagement. According to Wallace as cited in Almakaty (2025, p. 5), these algorithms now function as “invisible gatekeepers,” subtly influencing what audiences encounter online. Unlike traditional gatekeeping, which controlled information before publication, contemporary digital gatekeeping operates after content has already been published. Information visibility is now determined through a combination of user interactions, platform algorithms, and commercial priorities.

As a result, audiences are no longer passive recipients of news. They participate actively in selecting, amplifying, and circulating stories across digital networks. Yet this participation is heavily mediated by platform logic that often prioritizes engagement metrics over journalistic value or public interest (Almakaty, 2025). The democratization of information has therefore created a highly participatory media environment, but also a deeply complicated one in which authority over news production and distribution is shared between human actors and technological systems. While this shift expands opportunities for public participation, it simultaneously introduces new vulnerabilities into the information ecosystem.

One of the most significant consequences of this hybrid gatewatching environment is the increased spread of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and emotionally manipulative content. Although digital platforms have broadened access to information, they have also intensified polarisation and enabled disinformation to travel rapidly across online spaces (Neuberger et al.,

2023; Almakaty, 2025). In such an environment, media literacy becomes essential rather than optional.

Aufderheide (1993) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages across different forms of communication. This competence goes far beyond simply engaging with content online. The fact that users can comment on, repost, or share information does not necessarily mean they can critically assess the credibility of sources or recognize the algorithmic structures shaping their digital experiences. Media literacy provides individuals with the analytical and ethical capacity to move beyond passive consumption toward critical engagement with information.

Through media literacy, users become better equipped to question how news is framed, identify both human and algorithmic biases, and recognize whose interests are embedded within particular narratives. It encourages more thoughtful participation in digital spaces by transforming the uncritical forwarding of content into a process of responsible evaluation and curation. In this sense, gatewatching and media literacy are closely interconnected within the contemporary news environment. Gatewatching gives audiences unprecedented influence over the circulation and visibility of information, while media literacy provides the critical skills necessary to exercise that influence responsibly in an era increasingly shaped by algorithms and platform-driven communication.

Empirical Evidence on Media Literacy and Gatewatching Practices

Empirical research increasingly demonstrates that media literacy competencies influence users' engagement with digital information, shaping not only their cognitive interpretation of content but also their participatory behaviours. Media literacy, encompasses the ability to access, evaluate, analyze, and create media content responsibly. Studies such as Salleh et al. (2024) and

Powers (2017) confirm that higher levels of literacy correlate with enhanced critical engagement, including fact-checking, identifying bias, and exercising caution toward misinformation. These findings empirically establish that media literacy equips users with the cognitive and evaluative tools necessary for responsible information consumption.

However, literacy alone does not automatically translate to active dissemination behaviours. While these studies primarily examine information consumption, they underscore those participatory aspects of gatewatching such as sharing, curating, and amplifying news remain underexplored. This gap is addressed by research focusing on social media practices. Vicari et al. (2020) illustrate that users actively shape information visibility across digital networks. Their findings confirm that ordinary users perform gatewatching functions by selecting, promoting, and distributing content before intervention by traditional news organizations. Although these studies do not directly measure media literacy, they provide behavioural benchmarks that contextualize the downstream effects of literacy on participatory news practices.

Subsequent empirical efforts have linked literacy directly to participatory behaviours. Wendt et al. (2023) developed standardized instruments to measure participatory–moral literacy, capturing users’ motivation, ethical engagement, and online behaviour, providing methodological tools to operationalize media literacy in survey research. Xiao and Yang (2024) further demonstrate that media literacy predicts corrective and verification-oriented actions, such as curating content and critically evaluating information behaviours conceptually analogous to gatewatching. Similarly, Su et al. (2022) show that media literacy mitigates misperceptions and promotes selective engagement with information, indicating its role as a corrective mechanism in information flows.

Finally, Wibowo and Wibowo (2024) provide evidence that media literacy moderates the impact of information-seeking behaviour on misinformation sharing. Their findings indicate that higher literacy reduces the likelihood of sharing false content, reinforcing the role of literacy in participatory news practices such as selective sharing, curation, and amplification core features of gatewatching. Collectively, these studies validate a conceptual pathway in which media literacy enhances users' ability to critically engage with media content and, crucially, translate these competencies into active gatewatching behaviours. They underscore that literacy is not merely a cognitive skill but a participatory resource, enabling social media users to manage the flow of information responsibly, mitigate misinformation, and shape public discourse.

Despite growing research on media literacy and digital engagement, important gaps remain. Firstly, many studies measure media literacy through self-reported competence rather than observing actual behaviours. Second, research emphasizes media consumption while largely overlooking participatory practices such as content curation, verification, and selective sharing core components of gatewatching. Third, most empirical work is conducted in Western or Asian contexts, leaving developing media environments, such as Nigeria where social media serves as a primary news source and misinformation spreads rapidly through peer networks underexplored.

These gaps are consequential because contemporary audiences do more than interpret information; they actively shape what becomes visible and credible in the digital public sphere. Evaluating media literacy solely as interpretive ability fails to capture users' capacity to manage the flow of information, a function central to gatewatching. In this context, media can be seen as the skillset enabling users to critically access, evaluate, and produce content, while gatewatching practices represent observable behaviours such as selective sharing, fact-checking, and content curation. Addressing these gaps requires empirical research that links media literacy competencies

to participatory news behaviours within a specific socio-cultural context. By examining this relationship among public university students in Abuja, the present study moves beyond perception-based measures and passive consumption, focusing instead on observable actions. This approach provides a more grounded understanding of how media literacy translates into responsible engagement and gatewatching in contemporary digital news environments.

Method of Study

This study employs a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between media literacy competence and gatewatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja. The design allows the collection of quantitative data at a single point in time and facilitates comparison of behavioural patterns across institutions without manipulating variables.

The target population consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University of Abuja and National Open University of Nigeria who actively use social media. Since the exact number of active users is unknown, the population is treated as undefined. Cochran's formula for large populations is applied to estimate an adequate sample:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 p(1 - p)}{e^2}$$

Using a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), maximum variability ($p = 0.5$), and a 5% margin of error ($e = 0.05$), the sample was calculated as:

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.5)(1 - 0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$
$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = 384.16 \approx 385$$

A purposive sampling technique was used to reach social media users across the two institutions. Initial respondents are recruited through social media networks, emails and physical outreach on campus and study centres. These participants then refer other eligible students who actively use social media. This approach allows the study to access a broad range of users despite the absence of a complete list of active social media users. Data are collected using a structured questionnaire that measures media literacy competencies and gatewatching behaviours on five-point Likert scales. Content validity is ensured through expert review. The survey is administered electronically via Google Forms, and participation is voluntary. Informed consent is obtained from all respondents, and no identifying information is collected.

Result

The calculated sample size for the study was 385, a total of 350 valid responses were retrieved and used for analysis, representing a response rate of 90.9%. The shortfall is attributed to non-response questionnaires; however, the obtained sample size is considered adequate for statistical analysis. According to Krejcie and Morgan as cited in Chuan & Penyelidikan (2006), a sample size close to the recommended threshold remains sufficient for generalisation in survey research.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the respondents across gender, age, university affiliation, and average daily time spent on social media.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 350)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Female	194	55.4
	Male	156	44.6

Age	Male	156	44.6
	Under 18	86	24.6
	19–29	215	61.4
	30–39	42	12.0
	40 and above	7	2.0
University	University of Abuja	187	53.4
	National Open University of Nigeria	163	46.6
Average time on social media daily	Less than 1 hour	35	10.0
	1–3 hours	135	38.6
	4–6 hours	131	37.4
	Over 6 hours	49	14.0
Total respondents	–	350	100

The demographic profile of respondents (N = 350) shows a slightly higher proportion of female students (55.4%) compared to males (44.6%). The majority of respondents (61.4%) are aged 19–29 years, reflecting the typical age range of university students, while only 2% are above 40. Respondents are fairly evenly distributed across the two universities, with 53.4% from University of Abuja and 46.6% from the National Open University of Nigeria, indicating balanced institutional representation. Regarding social media usage, most respondents spend between 1–6 hours daily on social media, with 38.6% spending 1–3 hours and 37.4% spending 4–6 hours, suggesting that social media is a significant part of their daily routines. Only 10% use social media for less than an hour, while 14% spend more than 6 hours. The demographic distribution indicates a young, socially engaged, and

reasonably balanced sample, which provides a suitable context for analyzing media literacy and gatewatching behaviors.

Research Question 1: *What is the level of media literacy competence among social media users in public universities in Abuja?*

Table 2: Media Literacy Competence Among Respondents

Item	SA	%	A	%	U	%	D	%	SD	%	Weig hted Mean	Leve l
<i>Ability to find specific news across platforms</i>	107	30.6	208	59.4	14	4.0	14	4.0	7	2.0	4.13	High
<i>Evaluate credibility before sharing</i>	86	24.6	222	63.4	21	6.0	7	2.0	14	4.0	4.05	High
<i>Awareness of algorithm influence</i>	107	30.6	194	55.4	7	2.0	28	8.0	14	4.0	4.02	High
<i>Distinguish between content types</i>	100	28.6	194	55.4	28	8.0	21	6.0	7	2.0	3.96	High
<i>Consider ethical implications</i>	107	30.6	194	55.4	14	4.0	28	8.0	7	2.0	4.01	High
<i>Verify news with multiple sources</i>	114	32.6	194	55.4	7	2.0	28	8.0	7	2.0	4.06	High
<i>Media bias influences sharing decisions</i>	100	28.6	173	49.4	28	8.0	35	10.0	14	4.0	3.79	Moderate
<i>Verify accuracy before sharing</i>	128	36.6	187	53.4	7	2.0	21	6.0	7	2.0	4.15	High

<i>Use fact-checking platforms</i>	107	30.6	166	47.4	14	4.0	56	16.0	7	2.0	3.77	Moderate
<i>Use digital tools for news curation</i>	121	34.6	166	47.4	21	6.0	35	10.0	7	2.0	3.96	High

The analysis of media literacy competence level among social media users in public universities in Abuja reveals generally **high competence level** across most indicators. Respondents scored highest on verifying accuracy before sharing (mean = 4.15) and finding specific news across platforms (mean = 4.13), suggesting strong self-reported ability to navigate and assess news content. Awareness of algorithm influence, ethical considerations, and distinguishing content types also scored above 4.0, indicating a strong understanding of media mechanics.

Lower scores were observed in the use of fact-checking platforms (mean = 3.77) and the influence of media bias on sharing decisions (mean = 3.79), suggesting potential gaps between knowledge and practice in critical verification behaviors. The findings indicate a **high level of media literacy competence**, though specific areas such as the practical use of fact-checking tools warrant further attention and capacity building.

Research Question 2: *What types of gatewatching practices do social media users in public universities in Abuja engage in?*

Table 3: Gatewatching Practices Among Respondents

<i>Gatewatching Practice</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Weighted Mean</i>	<i>Level</i>
<i>Add commentary to reposted news</i>	28	8.0	21	61.5	3	10.0	4	12.0	28	8.0	3.77	Moderate

<i>Participate in news threads</i>	56	16.	20	57.	1	4.0	5	16.	21	6.	3.77	Moderate
		0	1	4	4		8	6		0		
<i>Use hashtags for news visibility</i>	56	16.	17	49.	2	8.0	6	18.	28	8.	3.63	Moderate
		0	3	4	8		5	6		0		
<i>Follow journalists/eyewitnesses</i>	49	14.	18	53.	4	12.	5	14.	21	6.	3.65	Moderate
		0	7	4	2	0	1	6		0		
<i>Share breaking news</i>	63	18.	14	41.	2	8.0	9	26.	21	6.	3.39	Low-Moderate
		0	5	4	8		3	6		0		
<i>Correct or debunk misinformation</i>	35	10.	19	55.	3	10.	7	20.	14	4.	3.43	Low-Moderate
		0	4	4	5	0	2	6		0		

Analysis of gatowatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja indicates that respondents are moderately active in discussion-oriented activities, such as adding commentary to reposted news (mean = 3.77) and participating in news threads (mean = 3.77). The use of hashtags for visibility (mean = 3.63) and following journalists or eyewitnesses (mean = 3.65) also reflect moderate engagement in networked news practices. Activities such as sharing breaking news (mean = 3.39) and correcting or debunking misinformation (mean = 3.43) are comparatively lower, suggesting that users are more likely to interact with content than to initiate or verify it. The findings suggest that gatowatching among these users leans toward participatory and discussion-based engagement, while proactive verification and content-sharing practices remain less frequent.

Research Question 3: *How does media literacy competence influence gatowatching practices among social media users in public universities in Abuja?*

Table 4: Cross-tabulation of Media Literacy and Gatewatching Practices

<i>Media Literacy Level</i>	<i>Frequent Gatewatching</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Occasional Gatewatching</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Rare Gatewatching</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>High Literacy (N=190)</i>	145	76.3	35	18.4	10	5.3	190
<i>Moderate Literacy (N=125)</i>	62	49.6	48	38.4	15	12.0	125
<i>Low Literacy (N=35)</i>	18	51.4	12	34.3	5	14.3	35
<i>Total (N=350)</i>	225	64.3	95	27.1	30	8.6	350

The cross-tabulation indicates a **positive association between media literacy competence and frequent gatewatching**. Among high literacy users (N = 190), **76.3% engage frequently**, while only 5.3% rarely participate. In contrast, moderate literacy users are more evenly distributed: 49.6% frequent, 38.4% occasional, and 12% rare. Low literacy users show slightly lower frequent engagement (51.4%), with higher proportions in occasional and rare categories.

Discussion of Findings

Media literacy goes beyond the prescriptive knowledge about media, it recognizes the importance of the diversity of senses that can be developed in relation to contents without fixed and univocal meanings. Findings from this study indicated that social media users in public universities in Abuja exhibited a generally high level of media literacy competence. This was evident in their strong self-reported ability to verify the accuracy of information before sharing and to locate specific news across multiple platforms. This aligns with the study by Janeth and

Andiyansari (2023), which found a strong and positive relationship between digital literacy and social media use, indicating that increased literacy enhances users' interaction with digital platforms. Furthermore, respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness of algorithmic influence and ethical considerations in content sharing as well as the ability to distinguish between different types of media content. This outcome was consistent with Chin (2022) study which posited that frequent engagement with digital media environments enhanced users' evaluative and navigational competencies.

However, a closer examination of the findings reveals a critical paradox between self-reported knowledge and practical application. While general competence was high, respondents scored notably lower on the practical use of fact-checking platforms and recognizing how media bias influences their sharing decisions. This discrepancy supports the conceptual distinction between Internet skill literacy and information literacy established by Kim and Yang (2016). It suggests that while users possess the functional skills to navigate platforms, these skills do not always translate into cognitive competence when faced with real-time news. This knowledge-behavior gap can be further explained by the news-finds-me perception and the third-person effect (Tian & Willnat, 2025). Users often overestimate their own immunity to misinformation compared to others, fostering a passive reliance on social algorithms that bypasses rigorous, practical verification. Furthermore, as Munusamy et al. (2024) note, psychological factors such as cognitive biases and emotional appeals often intersect with online information sharing, causing users to disseminate unverified news regardless of their baseline technical proficiency. This aligns with Zanuddin and Shin (2020), who demonstrate that functional and critical competencies do not equally translate into meaningful engagement with misinformation.

Regarding the second research question, the findings reveal that respondents are moderately engaged in gatewatching practices, with greater involvement in discussion-oriented activities such as adding commentary and participating in news threads. This suggests that social media users are more inclined toward interactive engagement with news rather than passive consumption. The moderate use of hashtags and following of journalists further indicates participation in networked information flows. This pattern aligns with the findings of Park et al. (2023), who report a strong relationship between online activities and media literacy, suggesting that users' engagement practices are closely tied to their media competencies. However, activities such as proactive verification and sharing breaking news were comparatively lower. This limitation may be attributed to the prevalence of incidental news exposure. As Xiao and Su (2023) highlight, when users merely stumble upon news rather than actively seeking it, their engagement with the content often bypasses critical evaluation, explaining why users lean toward discussion rather than rigorous gatewatching tasks.

The third research question sought to investigate how media literacy competence influences gatewatching practices. The findings revealed a positive association between media literacy competence and engagement in gatewatching practices. A clear majority of respondents with high media literacy engage frequently in gatewatching, indicating that higher competence is linked to more active involvement. This crucial finding aligns with broader scholarship on digital civic behavior. As demonstrated by Kahne and Bowyer (2019), media literacy does not merely serve a protective function against misinformation; it acts as a catalyst for active digital engagement, empowering users to transition from passive consumers to active curators. This positive influence is further illuminated when viewing gatewatching as a form of digital curation. As Gadot and Tsybulsky (2025) conceptualize in their recent taxonomy, digital curation activities

are inherently tied to critical thinking processes. Therefore, the active gatewatching observed among highly literate respondents in this study represents more than just technical content sharing; it reflects the application of critical cognitive competencies to filter and evaluate the digital news environment, reinforcing the role of media literacy as a key driver of informed and participatory digital engagement.

Conclusion

By examining the relationship between media literacy and gatewatching practices among university students in Abuja, this study establishes that while these users exhibit high self-reported media literacy (method where individuals rate their own abilities to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content), their actual engagement in gatewatching remains only moderate. A critical gap remains between technical proficiency and cognitive evaluation. Although respondents frequently engage with and share news, they often lack the practical verification habits such as using fact-checking tools necessary for effective and responsible curation. Ultimately, while media literacy acts as a key driver for digital participation, these findings highlight a need for media education to move beyond basic platform skills toward fostering the deep critical thinking and rigorous verification required for effective gatewatching in a decentralized news environment.

Recommendations

Drawing from the empirical findings and the identified gaps in the discussion, this study advances the following recommendations:

- Public universities should adopt integrated information literacy curricula that move beyond basic digital skills to emphasize critical evaluation of sources, bias detection, and analytical engagement with media content.

- Institutions should implement practical fact-checking training, particularly through hands-on workshops that equip students with the skills to use digital verification tools and effectively identify misinformation.
- Digital literacy interventions should incorporate awareness of cognitive biases, such as the news-finds-me perception and third-person effect, in order to reduce overconfidence and promote more reflective media consumption.
- Students should be encouraged toward active gawatching practices, shifting from passive interaction to proactive behaviors such as correcting and contextualizing misinformation within their networks.
- Finally, future studies should adopt behavior-based research approaches to address the knowledge–practice gap, using observational or performance-based methods to assess how media literacy skills are applied in real-world contexts.

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