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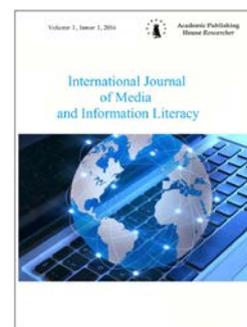
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## Basic Approaches to Media Education in Russia: Sociocultural and Methodological Aspects

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### Abstract

The article presents a brief review of basic approaches to media education in Russia from the genesis to present-day conditions of Russian media pedagogy. The historical analysis of media education in Russia has shown that Russian media education tradition relies on several dominant theoretical approaches such as the semiotic, culturological, aesthetic, ethical, sociocultural and critical thinking development conceptions. The study of artistic value of media production, a close link between the aesthetic approach with spiritual and moral education of the rising generation, reliance on children's creative skills have provided the basis for many media education models realized in contemporary Russia. Contemporaneous researches focus on studying media culture, various media effects and forms of media addiction, Internet safety and digital competences. Media culture as a vast layer of human culture is also in the focus of media researches. The solution to these problems depends both on teaching the younger generation basic computer skills for digital safety and on elaborating strategies for developing children's media competence, spiritual and moral values, critical thinking and analytical skills, social skills in the world of media culture. Potential research prospects of media education involve further development of scientific media education centers and schools promoting the investigation of urgent media pedagogy issues.

**Keywords:** media education, film education, media text, media literacy, media culture, mass media, media production, media languages, lifelong learning, media addiction.

### 1. Introduction

Historically, the ideological approach to media education became dominant in Russia after 1917. It combined in different periods with the protective, practical and aesthetic approaches. The present-day media education is based on the practical, aesthetic, culturological, critical and sociocultural theories.

The influence of the so-called "protectionist" approach in media education was especially strong in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The advocates of this approach in Russia such as S. Lunacharskaya, V. Dikanskaya et al. believed that it was necessary to protect the rising generation from "adult" movies. After 1917, the list of such films included bourgeois and "ideologically opposed" movies. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this approach attracted further adherents such as A. Stroyeva, M. Zhabsky, et al., who insisted on protecting children against harmful and kitschy media production by means of "guided development of personality media culture, aesthetic immunity within the art education" (Zhabsky, 1998: 62).

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The main objective of the ideological (“Marxist”) approach in media education was “to inspire the audience either to change the system of mass communication (if the political power was in the hands of non-Marxist leaders) or, on the contrary, to make the audience believe that the existing media system was the best (if the political power belonged to Marxist leaders). In the latter case, the media culture of other, for example, western European countries was increasingly criticized” (Fedorov, 2001: 26). The basic strategy for media education of the Soviet period was characterized by criticizing “politically opposed” media production or banning movies for purely ideological and political reasons.

The further evolution of media education in Russia was closely connected with the theories of developing viewers’ critical thinking and the semiotic approach. The objective of these approaches was to teach children and youth to move easily through the flow of information and to minimize the risk of being manipulated by mass media.

The semiotic approach in Russian media education was developed due to the researches made by Y. Lotman, M. Bakhtin and V. Bibler (Lotman, 1992: 131; Bibler, 1991: 271). The key aspects of the approach concerned the study of multi-layered, image-bearing structure of media texts that were treated as a dialogue between the author and the audience, including the analysis of verbalized meanings, underlying meanings and symbolic nature of media culture, the social-communicative function of a text. Hence, the objective of media education consisted in developing the audience’s abilities to perceive and analyze media texts.

Some elements of the culturological approach in Russian media education can be traced in the “thaw” period and the period of the aesthetics-based film education: G. Politchko, A. Spitchkin, N. Legotina, A. Sharikov, A. Fedorov, et al. The culturological approach in media education is still one of the leading theories both in Russian and foreign media education movements.

The aesthetic approach in media education (alongside with the practical and ideological approaches) dominated for a long time in Russian media pedagogy. Various aspects of aesthetic education based on arts have been described in works written by A. Burov, G. Petrova, B. Likhachev, B. Nemensky, et al. For instance, Y. Fokht-Babushkin considered that “students’ familiarization with art must become a well-organized complex system of curricular, extracurricular and out-of-school activities” (Fokht-Babushkin, 1982: 32). Such system of upbringing children based on studying literature, theatre, music, art, cinematograph and other forms of art enabled to treat film/media education as a real component of students’ aesthetic perception of the world.

Studies of cinematograph artistic diversity, development of students’ creative potential by means of screen culture served as a basis for Russian film education researches made by O. Baranov, I. Weissfeld, Y. Rabinovitch, S. Penzin, Y. Usov, et al. The aesthetic education based on film art took place in film clubs, children’s cinemas, film societies, etc. Frequently, film studies were integrated with literature.

In the tradition of Russian media education the aesthetic development of the oncoming generation has always been closely connected to the moral and ethical education. The core objective of the aesthetic approach to media education is using media to teach moral values to audiences by asking them to analyze the artistic and ethical aspects of media production. This approach was developed by G. Politchko, N. Legotina, Y. Usov, A. Fedorov et al.

Gradually the Russian media education turned to the sociocultural approach based on the synthesis of the culturological and sociological theories. This approach has been developed by L. Bazhenova, E. Bondarenko, A. Fedorov, A. Sharikov, et al. The main objective of this approach is to reflect on the social role of mass media and to teach different audiences to understand media languages. This is especially important in the modern world.

## **2. Materials and methods**

The main sources for writing this article were books, journal publications, articles of Russian media experts and researchers. We essentially used methods of theoretical research such as classification, comparison, analogy, abstraction and concretization, theoretical analysis and synthesis. The study used the basic methods of cognition: systemic and the comparative method. The use of these methods allows the authors to reproduce assessment approach to the problem under study.

### 3. Discussion

The present-day media education in Russia is based on the synthesis of the aesthetic, culturological, critical, practical and sociocultural approaches but the dominant theories are the critical, culturological and sociocultural conceptions.

The first attempt to present a complete characteristic of basic media education models in Russia was made by A. Fedorov and I. Chelysheva (Fedorov, Chelysheva, 2002). Besides A. Fedorov made a comparative analysis of Russian and foreign theories and models of media education (Fedorov, 2007, 2009; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2016; 2017; Fedorov, Levitskaya, Camarero, 2016). His researches present a classification of different media education models: educational-informational models, educational-ethical models, practical-utilitarian and sociocultural models. In addition, it has been stated in his works that Russian and foreign media education models are based on several theoretical platforms. For instance, the model developed by A. Spitchkin, Y. Usov, and A. Fedorov is based on the culturological approach to media education, whereas the model created by A. Sharikov is based on the sociocultural approach to media education. It can be explained by the aims of different media education models.

The rapid expansion of information in the modern world, the advent of the global information society significantly broadened the scope of the sociocultural and educational discourse. It led to interactive communication of audiences with media and penetration of media into all spheres of human life. Nowadays the educational and informational impact of modern media on audiences can rival with the influence of traditional pedagogy. In this regard, we agree with V. Vozchikov who wrote: “media culture is a dominant culture of the information society existing due to the traditional and electronic means of mass communication that reconstruct the sociocultural world view with the help of verbal, symbolic and visual images; a universal culture that absorbed the functional diversity of mass, folk, elite cultures and their modifications, a metamessage culture ontologically enrooted in human life” (Vozchikov, 2007: 62). That is why an integrated use of social and educational functions of media culture is of particular importance these days.

For example, one should mention the vital importance of the educational function of media culture that consists in imparting information and knowledge to the younger generation. That enables them to evaluate data and take bearings in the complex flow of information. The role of media as transmitters of life modes, exemplary behaviors, moral values, cultures and social norms persists.

Currently, the potential of media culture is extensively used in education and communication: distant forms of learning are rapidly developing and guarantee the learners getting any level of education; the network of virtual picture galleries, exhibitions, museums, libraries is also increasing; internet communication has become quite common. In the meantime, today’s readers, viewers, users of media production turn into media consumers and the media environment has become a unique sphere of consumption and commercialization.

Modern mass media increasingly practice “confusion” of genres thus erasing the borderline between real events and invented facts. Such media texts become more frequent both in this country and abroad.

The above-mentioned tendencies to a large extent cause various media risks and harm inflicted upon the younger generation. These include media manipulation (lobby the interests of the public opinion, biased or distorted information, etc.), media violence and cruelty, media addiction and the like.

Media experts express concern that many media consumers have mosaic perception, creative exploration of the world is replaced by imitation, the borderline between reality and screen virtual space is blurred. These entail a shift of spiritual and moral conceptions of the world of culture.

The consumption values – both commercial and informational – are becoming more essential for people. Under these conditions, preservation of the cultural identity of the rising generation, preservation of their subjectivity are coming to the forefront of national concerns. Besides, genuine understanding of culture is intrinsically linked to cross-cultural communication, a cultural dialogue that enables a person to define sociocultural and value priorities in the world of media.

While the information environment can be both a means of information and disinformation, today’s younger generation needs critical skills to perceive and analyze media production (movies, TV programs, internet sites, computer games, etc.). One may agree with E. Bondarenko who states that “inaccuracy, emotional vividness of information received by students from the media, image-

bearing nature of mass media languages, underlying meaning, a low level of professionalism and common culture of most media texts are the factors that cause the danger of the so-called “parallel school” and its impact on their worldview” (Bondarenko, 2013).

Teachers and psychologists are greatly concerned about the urgent problem of media violence and aggression on the TV screen and on the Internet in relation to the oncoming generation. The researchers of this problem (Soldatova, 2013; Mikhaleva, 2014, 2016; et al.) note that during the recent years the younger internet users have increasingly found themselves confronted by such digital risks as cyber-trolling and cyber-bullying. Trolling is a violation of the implicit rules of Internet social spaces and is often done to inflame or provoke conflict. It is widely circulated in social networking. Another negative phenomenon of present-day online communication is cyberbullying – a sort of virtual terror – use of communication technologies for the intention of harming (intimidating, controlling, manipulating, putting down, falsely discrediting, or humiliating) another person, widespread among teenagers.

Another major challenge facing children and youth in the digital world is media addiction that does not only mean video games addiction or Internet addiction but also selfie addiction and social networking addiction.

These and other negative aspects of modern mass media alongside with the positive sides of the information space such as free access to information sources, educational opportunities, communication, cultural exchange attract the attention of Russian researchers interested in the issues of children’s media safety. Some Russian secondary schools hold lessons devoted to media safety and teach students how to safely behave on the Internet, in social media, how to use online programs, etc.

The problem of safe and risky behavior of Russian children on the Internet was deeply investigated by G. Soldatova, M. Geer and V. Shlyapnikov within the research project “Russian Kids Online: Younger, Faster, Riskier” (Soldatova et al., 2013). The key findings of the survey proved that the Russian Federation can be compared with the countries that formed the “high online activity and high risk” group, together with Northern and Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Denmark, Sweden). The authors also highlighted the importance of digital literacy improvements for Russian schoolchildren since competent and responsible internet use will allow children to avoid many online threats and protect them against potential harm of any kind.

However, in our opinion, a complex solution to the problem depends mostly not only on timely informing and instructing children, teenagers and their parents of potential media risks but also on formulating effective strategies for developing children’s media competence, spiritual and moral determinants of people involved in media environment. It is no coincidence that in recent years one notices a growing interest in the educational and developing opportunities of media pedagogy.

We believe that one should agree with the opinion of S. Korkonosenko that nowadays “modern approach to media education is taking the shape of a long-term public awareness raising campaign aimed at continuous development of the culture of public perception and critical evaluation of mass media – the information culture based on democratic and humanist ideals, respect for diversity” (Korkonosenko, 2004). This predetermines a constantly growing interest of Russian and foreign researchers in media education which is increasingly treated not only as a pedagogical movement but also as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Recently, there has been conducted a research in Russia on information and media literacy issues “Conceptual Relationship of Information Literacy and Media Literacy in Knowledge Societies” supported by UNESCO’s Communication and Information Sector. The findings of the research included some recommendations for tackling these crucial issues: 1) promoting m-learning and maximizing mobile technologies; 2) cultivating 21st century competencies with objectives such as responding to the specific needs of the new socio-technological environment, narrowing the “digital use divide”, fostering media pluralism and contesting restrictions on freedom of speech; 3) establishing collaborative networks and strategic partnerships; 4) education reform and teacher training; 5) contextualizing initiatives for specific cultural settings; and 6) considering the power of individuals (particularly the Net Generation) in the civil society when suggesting that more research should be conducted in this respect (Gendina, 2013: 6). In this regard, Russian scholars and researchers are interested in further analysis of accumulated experience of both Russian and foreign media experts.

Moreover, current media education issues do not include only the theoretical and methodological aspects of media studies in schools and universities. Media education should also comprise developing older people's Internet use and digital competences that is especially important in terms of lifelong learning. In this respect, we cannot but mention the project for adults within the program "Management in social environment" completed by E. Lazutkina. We share the author's opinion that "media education promotes citizens to recognize the potential of media for presentation or misrepresentation of their culture and traditions. Media education should be introduced into national curricula wherever possible as well as into post-secondary, informal and lifelong self-education" (Lazutkina, 2014: 14). The research also emphasizes the critical significance of teaching adults to use ICT with confidence and apply them effectively in daily life since media education is part of basic right of every citizen of any country for freedom of expression and information accessing.

#### **4. Results**

Russian media education tradition is based on several dominant theoretical approaches such as the semiotic, culturological, aesthetic, ethical, sociocultural and critical thinking development approaches to media education. Unlike the foreign media education models, the aesthetic approach developed by O. Baranov, I. Weissfeld, Y. Rabinovitch, S. Penzin, Y. Usov is still used in present-day Russian media education. The study of artistic value of media production, a close link between the aesthetic approach with spiritual and moral education of the rising generation, reliance on children's creative skills have provided the basis for many media education models realized in contemporary Russia.

Modern approaches to media education to a large extent depend on the processes taking place in the global information space caused by the revolutionary development of telecommunication systems and information communication technologies, wider opportunities for interactive communication, radical mass media penetration in all spheres of social life. Human interaction with the media including perception and creative self-expression using communication technologies has become normal practice.

Media culture as a vast layer of common culture is also in the focus of media experts' researches as it represents sociocultural events occurring in the world through mass media. Modern major sociocultural tendencies in media space comprise increasingly broadening sphere of consumption and commercialization, multigenre media texts, blurring of boundaries between real-life and virtual events.

Moreover, in contemporary conditions media culture has become an essential means of developing students' creative potential and a means of their exploring the sociocultural environment. In this context, it is important to remember about the nature of media culture that is part of common culture and is inseparable from mass media. It also contains social and cultural phenomena of media sphere, various channels transmitting sociocultural information (television, press, radio, cinematograph, and internet) and at the same time determines the human interaction with the media including human perception and creative self-expression through communication media.

The crucial issues concerning potential risks and threats awaiting children and youth in the digital world usually include such most frequently mentioned dangers as media manipulation, scenes of violence and aggression on the screen, cyber-trolling and cyber-bulling, different forms of media addiction (online gaming, selfie, online gambling, social networks, etc.). The solution to these challenging problems depends both on teaching the younger generation basic computer skills for digital safety and on elaborating strategies for developing children's media competence, spiritual and moral values, critical thinking and analytical skills, social skills in the world of media culture.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Media education has become one of the ways of teaching children to properly reflect on media information. Its long-run objective is to develop children's media and information competence that will enable them to critically access and analyze modern mass media and evaluate their content. That is why there is an urgent need to review not only the positive and negative media effects on children's personal development and socialization but also the effective strategies for media education that would enhance children's media competence, critical thinking, cognitive interests, and creative skills.

Further research prospects of media education in Russia are connected with the development of scientific media education centers and schools that continue the investigation of urgent theoretical and practical media pedagogy issues. Their activities promote media education and media studies in Russian schools and universities. The core objectives of these centers focus on creating and implementing media literacy programs for teachers, students, adults including joint collaborative partnerships with various organizations and social groups (educational and research institutions, libraries, funds, etc.) interested in promoting media and information literacy in the society.

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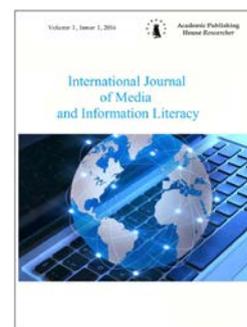
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## Leviathan and Sunstroke: Opinions of the Russian Film Critics

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### Abstract

Modern media criticism as a whole based on the hermeneutic approach to the analysis of the media and media products relying on such key concepts as media agencies, media / media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences, because they all have a direct bearing on the ideological market and structural and substantive aspects of the analysis of media and media texts. It is interesting to see how these approaches are implemented in concrete works of Russian film criticism concerning, for example, the two most controversial films of the last seasons: *Sunstroke* (2014) by Nikita Mikhalkov and *Leviathan* (2014) by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

The key questions of *Sunstroke* are: What kind of Russia we lost? How and why it happened? And the key questions of *Leviathan* are: What kind of Russia we gained? And why is this? The author of this article analyzed around 60 reviews of Russian critics' community (mainly of the leading, most active and visible). They were (very) roughly divided into two groups: texts from the authors of liberal wing, and texts from the authors of the conservative wing.

The main conclusion: *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*, in fact, has become an indicator of the political stratification of Russian film criticism: in many cases, films were analyzed, first of all, not as a works of art, but as social and ideological messages. However, this is not surprising, because of the bundle of Russian film critics' community. However, the Russian mass audience as a whole is much more conservative than media criticism community. And, of course which is more focused on entertainment component of media culture (and the lack of interest of the vast audience in serious problems eloquently showed modest box-offices of *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*).

**Keywords:** film criticism, media criticism, Russia, cinema, movie, film, Leviathan, Sunstroke.

### 1. Introduction

Modern media criticism as a whole based on the hermeneutic approach to the analysis of the media and media products (Bazalgette, 1995; Fedorov, 2010; 2012; Eco, 2005: 209; Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81) relying on such key concepts as media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences, because they all have a direct bearing on the ideological market and structural and substantive aspects of the analysis of media and media texts (Eco, 2005: 209).

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I think interesting to see how these approaches are implemented in concrete works of Russian film criticism concerning, for example, the two most controversial films of the last seasons: *Sunstroke* (2014) by Nikita Mikhalkov and *Leviathan* (2014) by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

The key questions of *Sunstroke* are: What kind of Russia we lost? How, and why it happened? And the key questions of *Leviathan* are: What kind of Russia we gained? And why is this?

## 2. Materials and methods

The main sources for writing this article became the materials of the journal and Internet publications. The study used the basic methods: the problem and situational, systemic and the comparative method. The use of these methods allows to reproduce assessment approach to the problem of the film studies. Comparative method defines the difference in views on actual Russian film criticism situation. I analyzed around 60 reviews of Russian critics' community (mainly of the leading, most active and visible). They were (very) roughly divided into two groups: texts from the authors of liberal wing, and texts from the authors of the conservative wing.

## 3. Discussion

*Opinions of critics' community about ideology in the sociocultural context (how the media text reflects, reinforces, inspire, or generates the values, behaviors, attitudes, concerns, myths). The dominant concepts are: media agency, media representation, media audience)*

Most rigid Russian film critics of in the liberal wing noted with pleasure the *Leviathan's* total pessimism view of contemporary Russia (Matizen, 2015; Tyrkin, 2015). But some liberal film critics believed that, despite all pessimism, *Leviathan* gave the audience positive catharsis (Pavluchik, 2015; Dolin, 2014). A significant part of film critics positively celebrated the *Leviathan's* clear anticlerical pathos (Gireiev, 2015).

However, thoughtful expert opinion leads to a much more profound interpretation of *Leviathan* in the social and cultural context (Shemyakin, 2015; Solntseva, 2015; Stishova 2014). For example: "Attempts back to the late Medieval and restore the inviolable union of church and state secularism (in the name of social and political stability) inevitably revive the anticlerical of thinking part of the social organism" (Razlogov, 2014).

And from there it spreads the bridge to the main topic of *Leviathan*: personal responsibility of each of us for "what Russia we gained" (Ivanov, 2015; Plakhov, 2015).

But it would be a significant exaggeration to say that the *Leviathan* has received full and unconditional support of the Russian film criticism liberal wing. On the one hand, some critics saw (rightly, for my opinion) the *Leviathan's* overlaps (Malukova, 2014). On the other hand, the authors of *Leviathan* received the reproaches in the aesthetic varnishing of reality and the straightness of the critical promise (Zelvenskii, 2015; Maslova, 2015). M. Bezruk accused the *Leviathan* of speculation and opportunism (Bezruk, 2015). And even, perhaps, the most famous among liberal media critics' community (and not only) – Dmitry Bykov, blames the *Leviathan* in the secondary and the inner emptiness (Bykov, 2015).

Russian film criticism of the conservative wing, unlike the Liberals, could not forgive the *Leviathan* anticlerical attacks: (Yampolskaya, 2015). Sophisticated connoisseurs of world cinema does not miss an opportunity to sneer at the author's ambitions of A. Zvyagintsev (Trofimenkov, 2015). Moreover, as liberals, conservative critics, also criticized the film's political opportunism (Moskvina, 2015).

Naturally, that liberal film critics (who have long been hostile to director Nikina Mikhalkov) expressed a negative opinion about *Sunstroke*. Among the most common words used in reviews as guilty: propaganda, banality, nationalist, anti-Darwinist, monarchist, etc. (Bezruk, 2014; Gladilshchikov, 2014; Plakhov 2014; Solntseva, 2014).

One of the leading arguments against the *Sunstroke* author's concept became a liberal reproach to Nikita Mikhalkov that he supported "red communists" in his films of the 1970s, and now he supports "whites and monarchy", but always – "God-given" power (Bykov, 2014; Kichin, 2014; Matezen, 2014; Pavluchik 2014). However, some film critics wrote that they are bored to assess the ideology and philosophy of the authors of *Sunstroke*, since they do not see any artistic merit in this movie (Zelvensky, 2014).

As a result, it seems, the only discordant note has become in the consolidated opinion of the liberal film criticism: A. Dolin's replica: "Words "Three hours of emptiness" and "What for?" talk

about the inability to elemental analysis, sorry. The essence of the *Sunstroke* is simple and transparent, it is stated in two words: Russian *Titanic*. Fleeting love story on a ship and shipwreck in the final, which means deluge, end of the world, and the punishment for sin. The one-piece structure and distinct idea, which is difficult to argue" (Dolin, 2014).

Admirers of N. Mikhalkov's movies from the ranks of the conservative film criticism use the complimentary words and phrases in relation to the *Sunstroke*: perfect, great, bog cinema event, talent, artist, etc. (Danilova, 2014; Moskvina, 2014; Omecinskaya 2014; Surikov, 2014; Vladimirov, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2014).

Further, in response to many of the cited above reproach liberals, film criticism of the conservative wing confidently argue that *Sunstroke* is not propaganda, but a complex and multi-valued work of art (Rutkovsky, 2014; Tolkunova, 2014).

*Opinions of film critics' community about the market conditions that contributed to the process of creating a media text (the dominant concepts: media agency, media technology, media audience, media / media texts category)*

In general, film criticism of the liberal wing (simultaneously arguing with the conservative part of the audience) agree that *Leviathan* due to socio-critical orientation was in the center of the political debate in media (Belikov, 2015; Bogomolov, 2015; Malukov, 2015; Pavluchik, 2015; Plakhov, 2015).

Some critics have tried to uncover the reasons why the film was non-adequately received by the West: "West Europe did not understand the main thing: that the *Leviathan* is not just a story about a creepy private injustice, but also a political statement about the nature of modern Russia" (Gladilshikov, 2015).

As for the most consistent opponents of *Leviathan*, they angered state financial support for the film, which have so radically critical position to donor (Yampolskaya, 2015).

Film criticism of the liberal wing noted with satisfaction the low box office of very expensive *Sunstroke* (budget: \$ 21 million, box-office: \$ 1.7 million, <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/586308/box/>) against much less budget of *Leviathan* (budget: \$ 3,7 million, box-office: \$ 2.5 million, <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/705356/>) (Bezruk, 2014).

Curiously, the film criticism of the conservative wing is not as primitive as it seems, for example, Y. Bogomolov (Bogomolov, 2014). They ironically notice that their liberal colleagues have the real "herd instinct" against the *Sunstroke* (Omecinskaya 2014).

*Opinions film critics' community about the characters of media texts, their values, ideas, behavior, appearance, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures, degree of stereotyping (the dominant concepts: media representation, media / media text category, media technology, media audience).*

Film criticism of the liberal wing did not stint on the praise for the entire ensemble cast in *Leviathan* (Dolin, 2014; Kuvshinov 2014; Malukov, 2015; Plakhov 2014). For some reason they do not notice a distinct secondary actors' images created in the *Leviathan*: the works of the actress E. Liadova (she recently played a similar role in the movie *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away*), actor A. Serebryakov (he played a lot of these fierce and nervous men over the past 20 years) and actor R. Madyanov (in his collection also a lot of similar nasty characters).

But some film critics accurately noticed that almost all the characters in *Leviathan* flawed, and not all may evoke viewers' sympathy (Razlogov 2014; Kudryavtsev, 2015) and pay attention to the ambivalence of these characters, even the most, seems to be negative (Ivanov, 2015).

Film criticism of the conservative wing immediately recovered the secondary image of the *Leviathan's* characters (Razlogova, 2014). The film also received accusations of improbability: in the nature of the character, and in their everyday life (Trofimenkov, 2015; Yampolskaya, 2015).

Although I can say that the film critics of the all "wings" are often jointly note that almost without exception, the *Leviathan's* characters do not cause any sympathy (Moskvina, 2015).

Yes, liberal criticism relates enthusiastically to the cast of *Leviathan*, but their relation to the actors and the characters of *Sunstroke* was ironical and negative (Bezruk 2014; Kichin, 2014; Matizen, 2014).

Of course, the views of the film criticism conservative wing about the characters and the actors of *Sunstroke* was differ from liberal. Acting rated as brilliant, successful, wonderful, excellent, etc. (Haknazarov, 2014; Moskvina, 2014; Omecinskaya, 2014; Rutkovsky, 2014; Tolkunova, 2014).

E. Yampolskaya makes in the course of analysis of *Sunstroke*'s characters the conclusion: we must to rise above the fray of red and white, because no heroes in the civil wars, all people are the victims (Yampolskaya, 2015).

*Opinions of film critics' community on the structure and narrative techniques in a media text (the dominant concepts: category of media / media texts, media technology, media language, media representation)*

The main figure responsible for the structure and narrative techniques in the film is director, and Russian film critics of the liberal wing, as a rule, do not skimp on compliments (talented, courageous, powerful, virtuoso, polyphonic, wonderful, uncompromising, etc.) (Dolin, 2014; Plakhov, 2014; Stishova, 2014).

But in spite of such praises, some liberal film critics (and not so little) more subdued evaluating artistic result achieved in the *Leviathan* (thrift, straightness, superficiality, slurred, scarcity, falsity, emotional coldness, dramatic inconsistencies, etc.) (Bezruk, 2015; Bykov, 2015; Gireiev, 2015; Razlogov, 2014; Timofeevsky, 2015; Zelvensky, 2015).

Perhaps it is someone will seem paradoxical, but film critics of the conservative wing were as close as possible to their most critically-minded liberal fellow in the evaluation of the artistic level of *Leviathan* (conservative critics use the words such as straightness, boredom, dramatic discrepancies, stamp, serial, etc.) (Kulanin, 2015; Loshakova, 2015; Moskvina, 2015; Rutkovsky, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2015).

So, liberal media criticism quite clearly divided into two camps in relation to the artistic level of *Leviathan*: the unconditional fans and those who are considered *Leviathan* a step backwards compared with previous works A. Zvyagintsev (*The Return*, *Exile*, and *Elena*). But not very many disagreements are among the liberals on the *Sunstroke*: in general, all the opinions are negative (heaviness, strained, weak, secondary, slowness, boredom, illustrative, tasteless, vulgar, dishonesty, false, anti-liberal propaganda, obsessive self-citations, etc) (Bezruk 2014; Bykov, 2014; Gireiev, 2014; Maslova, 2014; Zabaluev, 2014; Zelvensky, 2014).

Some liberal film critics very negatively responded to the erotic scenes in the *Sunstroke*. Critics considered this scene almost vulgar parody (Ivanov, 2014; Matizen 2014; Tyrkin, 2014). However, A. Dolin and V. Kichin several alleviate this critical blows, noting the artistry of the analyzed media text (Dolin, 2014; Kichin, 2014).

And of course, some of the liberal film critics' community did not escape the temptation to blame of Nikita Mikhalkov. They accused him of losing the creative form (Kudryavtsev, 2014; Stishova, 2014).

Naturally, film critics of the conservative wing very positive appreciated the artistic level of *Sunstroke*, arguing that Mikhalkov did not lost his skill and talent (Haknazarov, 2014; Omecinskaya, 2014; Rutkovsky, 2014; Surikov, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2015).

#### 4. Results

So, the result of the analysis, manifested in the fact that the approach of the Russian film critics clearly delineated political and ideological criteria. Film critics of conservative and liberal distributed in most cases into two irreconcilable camps. Such a distinction is quite typical for today's Russian journalism. This is typical, of course, not only film studies, but in general, in media criticism. On the one side there are a film/media critics' community groups advocating Western-style liberal values, on the other hand - their colleagues who hold conservative positions and special way of Russia's status.

#### 5. Conclusion

So, *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*, in fact, has become an indicator of the political stratification of Russian film criticism: in many cases, films were analyzed, first of all, not as a works of art, but as social and ideological messages. However, this is not surprising, because of the bundle of Russian

film critics' community. However, the Russian mass audience as a whole is much more conservative than media criticism community. And, of course which is more focused on entertainment component of media culture (and the lack of interest of the vast audience in serious problems eloquently showed modest box-offices of *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*)...

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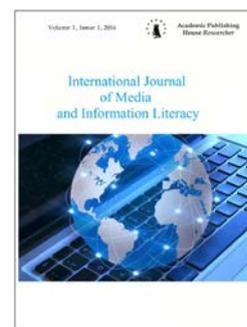
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## Comparative Analysis of the Indicators' Levels of Students' Media Competence Development in the Control and Experimental Groups

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### Abstract

Based on media education activities' techniques, the authors taught a media education course during the full academic year. The research objective was to trace the changes between the levels of students' media competence in a control and in an experimental group. The determination of the media competence's levels was based on the classification of the indicators of the development of an individual's media competence developed by our research team. Media competence implies the accumulation of motives, knowledge, abilities, and skills (indicators: motivational, contact, information, perceptual, interpretative / evaluative, practice-operational / activity, creative), facilitating the use, critical analysis, evaluation and communication of media texts in various forms and genres, the analysis of complex processes of media functioning. In line with this interpretation of the media competence, the students were asked to answer 5 units of questions and do the assignments.

90 students (average age of students: 20–21 years old) participated in the experiment: 45 students (14 male and 31 female) of the control group, who did not attend the media education course, and 45 students (14 male and 31 female) of the experimental group, who attended media educational classes. Our research showed that at the beginning of an academic year there was no significant difference in the levels of media competence development between the students of the control and experimental groups. The ratio of young men and women in the control and experimental groups, in our opinion, is typical for Russian pedagogical universities, where for many decades male students have consistently been a minority (from 10 % to 30 % of a class).

The classification of the media competence's development indicators developed by us turned out to be an effective tool for comparative analysis between the control and experimental groups. This analysis has proved the effectiveness of the model developed by us and the methodology for fostering students' media literacy (the level of media competence of the students who took and passed a one-year course in media education was four times higher than the level of similar indicators in the control group).

**Keywords:** media literacy, media education, media competence, students, survey, university.

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## 1. Introduction

We understand media literacy as the result of media education. In general, predominant among media educational concepts are the cognitive, educational, and creative approaches to the use of mass media potential. However, at the implementation level most media educational approaches integrate the three components. These are:

- acquiring knowledge about media history, structure, language, and theory —the cognitive component;
- development of the ability to perceive media texts, to “read” their language; activation of imagination and visual memory; development of particular kinds of thinking (including critical, logical, creative, visual, and intuitive); informed interpretation of ideas (ethical or philosophical problems and democratic principles), and images — the educational component;
- acquiring practical creative skills of working with media materials — creative component.

In each particular model these basic components are realized differently, depending on the conceptual preferences of the media educator.

The learning activities used in media education are also different: *descriptive* (re-create the media text, reconstruct the personages and events); *personal* (describe the attitudes, recollections, and emotions caused by the media text); *analytical* (analyze the media text structure, language characteristics, and viewpoints); *classificatory* (define the place of the text within the historical context); *explanatory* (commenting about the media text or its parts); or *evaluative* (judging about the merits of the text basing upon personal, ethical or formal criteria). As a result, the learners not only are exposed to the pleasurable effects of media culture, but they also acquire experience in media text interpretation (analyzing the author’s objectives, discussing — either orally or in writing — the particulars of plot and characters, ethical positions of personages or the author, etc.) and learn to connect it with personal experience of their own or others (e.g. putting themselves in the place of this or that personage, evaluating facts and opinions, finding out causes and effects, motives and consequences of particular actions, or the reality of events).

Moreover, while working with media texts young people have many opportunities to develop their own creative habits and skills. For example, they may write reviews or mini-scripts; they are exposed to representations of their cultural heritage — and through these to the personal, historical, national, planetary and other perspectives on those events. While studying the main media cultural genres and forms, scanning the development of a particular theme within different genres or historical epochs, becoming familiar with the styles, techniques, and creative activities of the great masters, etc., they acquire much relevant knowledge and learn methods and criteria of media text evaluation. All of that contributes to the development of the student’s aesthetic awareness, artistic taste, and creative individuality and influences the formation of civic consciousness.

As for “media illiteracy,” we see its main danger in the possibility of a person becoming an easy object for all sorts of manipulation on the part of the media... or becoming a media addict, consuming all media products without discrimination

## 2. Materials and methods

Based on media education activities’ techniques developed by us earlier (see [Fedorov, 2004: 43-51](#)), we taught a media education course in the Department of Education (Anton Chekhov Taganrog Institute) during the full academic year. The research objective was to trace the changes between the levels of students’ media competence in a control and in an experimental group.

The determination of the media competence’s levels was based on the classification of the indicators of the development of an individual’s media competence developed by our research team. Media competence implies the accumulation of motives, knowledge, abilities, and skills (indicators: motivational, contact, information, perceptual, interpretative / evaluative, practice-operational/activity, creative), facilitating the use, critical analysis, evaluation and communication of media texts in various forms and genres, the analysis of complex processes of media functioning. In line with this interpretation of the media competence, the students were asked to answer 5 units of questions and do the assignments.

Unit 1. A closed-ended questionnaire to identify the levels of the motivational indicator of the media competence’s development (genre, thematic, psychological, therapeutic, emotional,

epistemological, moral, intellectual, creative and aesthetic motives of audience's contacts with media texts);

Unit 2. A closed-ended questionnaire to identify the levels of the contact indicator (the frequency of contacts with different types of media);

Unit 3. A closed-type test to detect levels of information index (knowledge of terminology, history and theory of media culture) of the audience's media competence;

Unit 4. A pool of assignments to assess the levels of interpretive / evaluation index;

Unit 5. A group of creative tasks to reveal the levels of the creative indicator of the media competence's development.

90 students of the Department of Social Pedagogy of the Anton Chekhov Taganrog Institute (average age of students: 20–21 years old) participated in the experiment: 45 students (14 male and 31 female) of the control group, who did not attend the media education course, and 45 students (14 male and 31 female) of the experimental group, who attended media educational classes. Our research showed that at the beginning of an academic year there was no significant difference in the levels of media competence development between the students of the control and experimental groups. The ratio of young men and women in the control and experimental groups, in our opinion, is typical for Russian pedagogical universities, where for many decades male students have consistently been a minority (from 10% to 30% of a class).

### 3. Discussion

There is a number of widespread terms often used as synonyms both in Russia and other countries: "information literacy", "information culture", "information knowledge" "information competency", "media literacy", "multimedia literacy", "computer literacy", "media culture", "media awareness", "media competence", etc. (Bazalgette, Buckingham, 2013; Kubey, 1997; Potter, 2001; Silverblatt, 2001; Yildiz, Keengwe, 2016 and others).

For example, N. Gendina, having analyzed various definitions related to information culture, points to the following terminological inconsistency: in the modern world, "nonunified terms such as 'computer literacy', 'information literacy' or 'information culture', often without clear definitions, increasingly replace such semantically close notions denoting human information knowledge and abilities as 'library and bibliography culture', 'reading culture', 'library and bibliography knowledge', and 'library and bibliography literacy' " (Gendina, 2005: 21).

Regarding media literacy as a major component of information literacy, it would be worth referring to a survey conducted among international experts in this field (Fedorov, 2005). Many of them agree that media literacy is a result of media education. Yet there are certain discrepancies and confusion between such terms as "media education", "media literacy", and "media studies".

S. Ozhegov defines **culture** as (1) the sum total of economic, social, and spiritual achievements of human beings; (2) the state or quality of being **cultured**, i.e., being at a high level of cultural development or corresponding to it; (3) the raising of plants or animals; (4) a high level of something, the development or improvement of an ability (Ozhegov, 1989: 314). Hence it follows that **media culture** (e.g., **audiovisual culture**) is the sum total of material and intellectual values in the sphere of media and a historically defined system of their reproduction and functioning in society. In relation to the audience, it may be a system of personality development levels of a person capable of media text perception, analysis, and appraisal, media creativity, and integration of new media knowledge.

According to N. Konovalova, **personality media culture** is the dialogue way of interaction with the information society, including the evaluation, technology, and creativity components, and resulting in the development of interaction subjects (Konovalova, 2004: 9).

**Information culture** may also be regarded as a system of personality development levels, a "component of human culture and the sum total of sustained skills and ongoing application of information technologies (IT) in one's professional activity and everyday practice" (Inyakin, Gorsky, 2000: 8).

N. Gendina believes that "**personality information culture** is part of human culture, the sum total of information world outlook and system of knowledge and skills ensuring independent purposeful activity to meet individual information needs by using both traditional and new information technologies. This component is a major factor of successful professional and nonprofessional work and social protection of an individual in the information society" (Gendina,

2005: 21). Y. Inyakin and V. Gorsky point out that the model of shaping information culture includes personality culture components (knowledge, values and goal system, experience of cognitive and creative activity and communication) in relation to IT components (databases, Internet, TV, applications, e-mail, PowerPoint, etc.) (Inyakin, Gorsky, 2000: 10).

In our opinion, the notion of **information culture** is broader than **media culture**, because the former pertains to complex relationships between personality and any information, including media and the latter relates to contacts between the individual and media.

Comparison of traditional dictionary definitions of the terms “literacy” and “competence” also reveals their similarity and proximity. For example, S. Ozhegov defines the term “**competent**” as (1) knowledgeable and authoritative in a certain area; and (2) possessing competence, and the term “**competence**” as (1) the matters one is knowledgeable of; and (2) one’s powers or authorities (Ozhegov, 1989: 289). The same dictionary defines a **literate** person as (1) able to read and write, also able to write correctly, without mistakes; and (2) possessing necessary knowledge or information in a certain area (Ozhegov, 1989: 147).

Encyclopedic dictionaries define **literacy** as (1) in a broad sense - the possession of speaking and writing skills in accordance with standard language requirements; (2) in a narrow sense – the ability to read only or to read and write simple texts; and (3) the possession of knowledge in a certain area (Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1984: 335). The term **competence** (*compete(re)* (to) achieve, meet, be fitting) is defined as (1) the powers given by a law, statute or another enactment to a concrete office or an official; and (2) knowledge or experience in a certain area (Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1984: 613). There are many other definitions of literacy and competence (competency), but in general, they only differ stylistically.

Regardless of the similarity of definitions of “competence” and “literacy”, we are inclined to agree with N. Gendina that in popular understanding, “the word ‘literacy’ has a connotation of simplicity and primitiveness, reflecting the lowest, elementary, level of education” (Gendina, 2005: 21). At the same time, the term “**competence**” seems to be more pinpoint and specific in relation to human knowledge and abilities than the broad and polysemantic word “**culture**”.

Such terms as “information literacy”, “media literacy”, “information culture of personality” or “media culture” have been frequently used in publications of the past years (Fedorov, 2001; 2005, etc.), but the above terminological analysis leads us to the conclusion that the terms “**information competence**” and “**media competence**” are more accurate in denoting the individual’s abilities to use, critically analyze, evaluate, and communicate media messages of various types, forms, and categories and to analyze complex information processes and media functioning in society. Thus, **media competence** can be regarded as a component of the more general term **information competence**.

Naturally, it is assumed that human information competence can and should be improved in the process of life-long learning. This is true for school and university students, economically active population and retired citizens (e.g., the information literacy development program for retired citizens at the Media Education Center of the South Urals University in Chelyabinsk).

We have developed a classification of information literacy/competence indicators inspired by the approaches of R. Kubey, J. Potter, and W. Weber and based on the six basic dimensions of media education, outlined by leading British media educators (Bowker, 1991; Hart, 1997: 202; Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1997: 285, etc.): **media agency** (studying media agencies’ work, functions, and goals), **media categories** (studying media/media text typology – forms and genres), **media technologies** (media text creation methods and technologies), **media languages** (i.e., verbal, audiovisual, and editing aspects of media texts), **media representations** (ways of presenting and rethinking reality in media texts, authors’ concepts, etc.), and **media audiences** (audience and media perception typologies).

Besides, we outlined the high, medium, and low levels of development for each information literacy/competence indicator. Undoubtedly, this kind of typology is rather tentative. Yet it gives an idea of a differentiated approach to information literacy/competence development when the high level of the communication or creativity indicators may be accompanied by the low level of the appreciation indicator. As for the perception, some people may have one articulated indicator (e.g., “initial identification”) while other strands may be undeveloped, “dormant”. One thing is clear: high-level information literacy/competence is impossible without the developed media perception and ability to analyze and evaluate media texts. Neither the high frequency of communication with

media nor developed media text creation skills in itself can make an individual information competent.

#### 4. Results

Table 1 shows that 11 % of students in the control group only exhibit a high level of the motivational indicator, that is, a wide range of genre, thematic, emotional, epistemological, hedonistic, intellectual, psychological, creative, aesthetic motives (including: the choice of a diverse genre and thematic range of media texts including not entertaining genres; aspiration for a philosophical/intellectual, aesthetic dispute/dialogue with a media text's authors, criticism, identification, compassion; aspiration for aesthetic impressions, the acquisition of new information, to confirm their own competence in various spheres of life and media culture, to search for materials for educational, scientific, research purposes, etc.). This indicator in the experimental group of students (who took the media education course) is twice as high. As well as the number of students who are on the average level of development of the motivational indicator of media literacy (13 %). Herewith, both in the control and in the experimental groups, the gender difference was clearly manifested - the number of girls with a high level of motivational index of the media literacy development significantly exceeds the number of young men. And, on the contrary, among the young men, there were significantly more respondents who revealed a low level of the motivational indicator (that is, the choice of only entertaining genres and themes of media texts; strive for compensation, psychological relaxation, thrill, the desire for recreation, entertainment and the lack of aesthetic, intellectual, creative motives for contacts with media texts).

**Table 1.** Classification of the identified levels of the motivational descriptor of the students' media competence

№	Levels of motivational descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	0.0	16.1	11.1	14.3	29.0	24.4
2	average	21.4	35.5	31.1	35.7	48.4	44.4
3	below average	78.6	48.4	57.8	50.0	22.6	31.2

Thus, the results of comparing the media motivation of the students of the control and experimental groups to some extent testify to the effectiveness of the media education course, which the students of an experimental group attended during the school year.

Analysis of Table 2 shows that there is not much difference between the students of the control and experimental groups in relation to reading the press on the whole. About half of both groups displayed the average level of the contact indicator (reading the press several times a week). At the same time, there are no significant gender differences in this regard either. However, from the very beginning, we have not considered the contact indicator as the reference one, the basic one for the overall balance of the media competence's indicators. Undoubtedly, a person who does not deal with the media at all cannot become media competent. But the highest level of television viewing, listening to radio, surfing the Internet or reading the press obviously cannot be equaled to a high level of media competence.

**Table 2.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (media: press)

No	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.4	3.3	6.7
2	average	50.0	54.8	53.3	42.8	58.0	53.3
3	below average	50.0	45.2	46.7	42.8	38.7	40.0

Table 3 data shows that there are certain differences in relation to listening to radio broadcasts between students of the control and experimental groups. Thus, in the experimental group, a high (daily) level of listening to the radio was presented by 64 % of respondents, and in the control group – only 44 %. Compared to the control group, there are almost twice as few respondents with a low (several times a month and less frequently) level of contacts with the radio in the experimental group.

On the one hand, these indicators can probably be regarded as one of the results of the media education course, but on the other hand, we should take into account a small sample of respondents factor.

**Table 3.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (media: radio)

No	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	42.8	45.2	44.4	42.8	74.2	64.4
2	average	21.5	25.8	24.4	35.7	9.6	17.9
3	below average	35.7	29.0	31.2	21.5	16.2	17.7

The consequence of a small sample is also probably the fact that there is no gender difference in "radio contacts" in the control group, whereas in the experimental group, among the students with the daily habit of listening to the radio programs, there are 20 % more young women than men.

Analysis of Table 4 gives an idea that, basically, there are no differences towards television viewing between students of the control and experimental groups. More than 66 % of both groups view TV every day, from 13 % to 20 % – several times a week. And only 13 % of the interviewed control and experimental groups watch TV several times a month and less often. There is no symptomatic gender difference.

We believe that the lack of progress in increasing the frequency of watching TV in the experimental group is not an experiment's drawback, since our initial aim was not to increase the contact indicator of the student's media literacy. As a further analysis of the results of the experiment showed, a somewhat higher level of "telewatching" in the control group did not in any way contribute to an increase in level of the media competence's analytical indicator.

**Table 4.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (media: television)

№	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	71.4	74.2	73.3	71.4	64.5	66.7
2	average	14.3	12.9	13.3	28.6	16.1	20.0
3	below average	14.3	12.9	13.4	0.0	19.4	13.3

NB: The following table shows frequency of students' contacts with the Internet apart from social networks/messengers/chatrooms. Thus, we were interested in their Internet use as a source of information, entertainment, research, etc. but not as a tool for communication. [Table 5](#) proves that the level of contacts of Russian students with the Internet websites still comes short of satisfactory: only 4 % to 9 % of students in the control and experimental groups go on the Internet daily, from 15 % to 23 % – weekly. But more than half of the students of the control and experimental groups visit Internet sites several times a month and less, and from 9 % to 24 % of students do not surf the Internet at all.

**Table 5.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (media: Internet (NB: apart from social networks/messengers/chatrooms))

№	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	00.0	6.4	4.4	14.3	6.4	12.1
2	average	42.7	38.8	40.1	28.4	32.4	28.0
3	below average	57.3	54.8	55.5	57.3	61.2	59.9

The difference in the indicators in the control and experimental groups is small, but the analysis of the table showed that there are gender differences in contacts with the Internet. Young people with their traditional craving for technical innovations are somewhat more active in Internet surfing than girls. This fact is consistent with the results of similar sociological studies conducted earlier by various organizations (for example, see: [Education and information culture, 2000](#)).

**Table 6.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (media: video/computer games)

No	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	14.3	6.5	8.9	7.1	3.2	4.4
2	average	42.8	6.5	17.8	35.7	19.3	24.4
3	below average	35.7	58.0	51.1	49.9	41.9	44.4

22.2 % of students of the control group (7.1 % of boys, 29.0 % of girls) and 26.7 % of students of the experimental group (7.1 % of boys, 35.5 % of girls) never play video/computer games.

Certainly, the frequency of student contacts with video/computer games cannot be a valid proof of their media competence. In our opinion, on the contrary: too frequent computer gaming takes away a person's time to contact other types of media. However, the analysis of Table 5 shows that the level of contacts between the students of the control and experimental groups is quite comparable, and only 4–9 % of respondents have a high level. But more than half of students play computer games less than a few times a month, and 22–26 % do not play them at all.

The gender difference in relation to computer games is very clear, since the number of young men who are fans of this type of entertainment is at least twice the number of girls, that again correlates with the findings of international sociological studies. Most of the popular computer games are based on the theme of violence (new edition of "Doom", "Uncharted-4" etc.), initially not appealing to female audience. Hence the dominant number of computer players are male.

**Table 7.** Classification of the identified levels of the contact descriptor of the students' media competence (on average for all of the above media)

No	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	25.7	26.5	26.2	14.3	0.0	4.4
2	average	36.7	33.3	34.3	64.3	93.5	84.4
3	below average	38.6	40.2	39.5	21.4	6.5	11.2

So, only about 26 % of the students in the control group and 4 % of the experimental group showed a high level of the contact indicator of media competence's development for several types of media in general. However, one should not forget that this result is due to a low level of contacts of the audience with the Internet and computer games (where more than half of the respondents in both groups demonstrated a weak level of contacts). But nearly 73 % of the interviewed students (71 % of the boys and 74 % of the girls) in the control group and 66 % of the interviewed students in the experimental group (71 % of the boys and 64 % of the girls) said that they watch television every day. That is, they have a high level of the contact indicator for this type of media. Quite high was the students' contact level in relation to listening to the radio programs (from 44 % to 64 % of the respondents have a high level of contact with this type of media). Thus, it can be concluded that from 50 % to 89 % of the students surveyed, showed an average or high level of the media

competence's contact indicator, the fact which by itself, as we have already noted, cannot be considered as the basic indicator for determining the media competence level of the respondents.

The detection of the levels of the information indicator of the media competence's development in the control and experimental groups was held through the assessment of the test results. Students were asked 30 questions, which were divided into blocks of 10 questions (see Appendix 1). One block consisted of questions related to the terminology of media/media culture, the second – to the history of media/media culture, the third – to the theory of media/media culture. Points equal to the number of correct answers. Thus, the maximum number of points that a student could score was 30.

We agreed to the following grade percentage range: 80-100 % correct answers (24–30 points) – high level; 50 % to 80 % (15–23 points) – average; less than 50 % of correct answers (below 14 points) – below average/low level.

We should admit that the testing had its flaws. On the one hand, the format of a test lends itself to “gaming” – ways to improve the score by guessing (intuitive or logical – by excluding the most dubious variants). On the other hand, testing is open to cheating attempts. Still, the results of the testing were compared with the results of interviews, that helped to make sure that they, on the whole, correctly reflected the exit stage knowledge of the students in both the control and the experimental groups.

**Table 8.** Classification of the identified levels of the information descriptor of the students' media competence

№	Levels of contact descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	7.1	16.1	13.3	92.9	96.8	95.6
2	average	28.6	58.0	48.9	7.1	3.2	4.4
3	below average	64.3	25.9	37.8	0.0	0.0	0.0

The table's data clearly demonstrates the progress of the experimental group over the academic year. 95 % of the students in the experimental group proved a high level of the media literacy's information indicator (from 80 % to 100 % of correct answers to questions related to terminology, stories and theory of media / media culture), while in the control group this level is only 13 %. There are no results below average (less than 50 % of correct answers) in the experimental group, whereas in the control group 37 % of the students' results were graded as poor.

Gender differences in the students' answers were manifested by the fact that girls on the whole showed more knowledge about the terminology, theory and history of media / media culture. As for those 13 % of students from the control group who showed a high level of media competence's information indicator, it can be assumed that this level is reached due to self-education and / or upbringing in the family.

The data in Table 9 show the way correct / incorrect answers of the students of the control and experimental groups were distributed for various types of information knowledge testing in the field of media / media culture.

It shows that the students experienced the greatest difficulty in answering the test questions concerning the history of the media / media culture (although in the control group the number of incorrect answers was on the whole about 50 %, while in the experimental group this number was slightly higher than 12 %).

**Table 9.** Test results of students in the control and experimental groups in the field "Information indicator of media competence"

<i>Knowledge in the fields</i>	<i>Number of</i>	<i>Control group (in %)</i>			<i>Experimental group (in %)</i>		
		<i>Male participants</i>	<i>Female participants</i>	<i>Total number</i>	<i>Male participants</i>	<i>Female participants</i>	<i>Total number</i>
Media/media culture key terms	Correct answers	55.9	74.2	68.1	97.1	97.4	97.3
	Incorrect answers	45.1	25.8	31.9	2.9	2.6	2.7
History of media	Correct answers	32.6	38.3	36.7	83.6	78.4	80.0
	Incorrect answers	67.4	61.7	63.3	16.4	21.6	20.0
Media theories	Correct answers	37.8	56.5	50.6	83.6	86.8	85.8
	Incorrect answers	62.2	43.5	49.4	16.4	13.2	14.2
Total	Correct answers	42.1	56.3	49.2	88.1	84.2	87.7
	Incorrect answers	57.9	43.7	50.8	11.9	15.8	12.3

Further, it seemed important to analyze the combination of the levels of the motivational and informational indicators of the development of the media competence in the control and experimental groups (see [Table 10](#)).

**Table 10.** The combination of the revealed levels of the motivational and informational indicators of the development of the media competence in the control and experimental groups

№	Combination of the motivational and informational indicators levels	<i>Control group (in %)</i>			<i>Experimental group (in %)</i>		
		<i>Male participants</i>	<i>Female participants</i>	<i>Total number</i>	<i>Male participants</i>	<i>Female participants</i>	<i>Total number</i>
1	Combination of levels below average	57,1	19,3	31,1	0,0	0,0	0,0
2	Combination of average levels	14,3	19,4	17,8	0,0	3,3	2,2
3	Combination of high levels	0,0	6,5	4,4	14,3	29,0	25,1
4	Discrepancy of levels	28,6	54,8	46,7	85,7	67,7	72,7

Analysis of the data in [Table 10](#) proves that the discrepancy between the levels of the motivational and informational indicators of the media competence's development is a common phenomenon, affecting approximately 50–70 % of the respondents. Thus, with more or less diverse motives for contacts with media texts, a student may not have a particular awareness of the media/media culture and vice versa. Meanwhile there is an often encountered case when the level of the information indicator is higher than the motivational one (especially in the experimental group that received a considerable amount of information about the media theories and history during the course).

Our study has also showed that there is no strong correlation between the frequency of students' contacts with the media and their motivational and/or information indicators of the media competence's development. The majority of respondents (73 % in the control group and 66 % in the experimental group) revealed, for example, a high level of the contact indicator of media competence in relation to TV, but only 4,44 % of the control group and 25 % in the experimental group indicated the combination of high levels of motivational and informational components of the development of media competence.

However there is a clear connection between the high level of the informational media competence development of the students and the fact whether they have attended a media literacy course. Only 13 % of the students in the control group revealed a high level of information indicators, as compared to about 95 % in the experimental group.

Table 11 shows that the students of the control group generally exhibit a low level of the interpretation / evaluation indicator of media competence's development (or unawareness of the media language, confusion in judgments, openness to external influences, disability to interpret the viewpoint of heroes' and authors' of a media text).

The low level of the interpretation/evaluation indicator in the experimental group is detected 3.5 times less often (20 %). When asked to analyze a media texts respondents from this group can only retell the plot of a story/film.

The average level of the interpretation/evaluation indicator is characterized by the ability to provide insight into the behaviour and psychological state of a media text's characters, the ability to explain the logic of the sequence of events, the ability to talk about individual components of the media image, however the interpretation of the author's position is missing (or it's rudimentary). Such level was revealed by about 26 % of the students in the control group (also without significant gender differences). In the students of the experimental group, the average level of the interpretation / evaluation indicator of the media competence development was twice as high (53 %).

**Table 11.** Classification of the revealed levels of the interpretation / evaluation indicator of the media competence's development in the control and experimental groups

№	Levels of interpretation / evaluation descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	7.2	3.2	4.4	7.2	35.5	26.7
2	average	21.4	29.1	24.2	42.8	58.1	53.3
3	below average	71.4	67.7	71.4	50.0	6.4	20.0

High level of interpretation/evaluation of media competence presumes that a media text analysis is based on the ability to mediate perception, close to "complex identification", ability to analyze and synthesize the space and time form of a media text; understanding, interpretation and evaluation of the author's concept in the context of the work's structure (thereat a reasoned consent or disagreement with the author's position is argued); evaluation of the social significance of a media text; the ability to correlate emotional perception with conceptual judgment, transfer this judgment to other genres and types of media culture, link media texts to their own experiences and other people's experiences. Thus, media text analysis based on high levels of "informational", "motivational" and "perceptual" indicators was manifested by only 4% of the students in the control group and 26% of the experimental group, with a significant gender dominance of female respondents.

Such a noticeable difference in the levels between the students of the control and experimental groups appeared in spite of the fact that many students in the control group had fairly high contact levels with media. Thus, the analysis of the data in Table 11 once again approves that the high frequency of contacts with the media does not in its own right results in a high level of ability to fully appreciate / analyze media texts. But the levels of information and motivational indicators are visibly reflected upon the levels of the interpretation / evaluation indicators of students' media competence.

On the contrary, a comparative analysis of the tables given above shows that low levels of motivational, information and evaluation indicators quite correlate with each other. Moreover, the same is true for motivational, information and evaluation indicators.

Thus, the low level of the evaluation indicator of the media competence's development in most cases is linked to the similar levels of the motivational and informational indicators and vice versa.

If we turn to a comparative analysis of the data in the experimental group, the following tendency is clearly visible: a high level of media competence's information indicator (95%) does not ensure the same high level of the evaluation indicator. Generally only 26.7% of the students in the experimental group were able to assert their high level of media competence's development at the evaluation indicator. About a half of the students (53.3 %) showed the average level. This fact convinces us that awareness in the field of terminology, theory and history of media / media culture does not by default translate to an increase in analytical abilities in relation to media texts. This is also indicated by the low level figures of the evaluation indicator. It is 20 % in the experimental group, whereas the low level of knowledge in the field of media in this group has not been elicited.

A significant correlation is demonstrated in motivational and evaluation indicators of the experimental group's media competence (31 % of students with below average level of motivational indicator relate to 20 % of students with a low evaluation indicator, for the average level the ratio is 44 % to 53 %, for the high one – it is 21 % to 26 %).

Since operational descriptor (high level – practical skills of independent creation of a variety of media texts; average level – practical skills to create a media text with the help of experts/teachers; below average level – lack of hands-on skills or reluctance to engage in media work) is an essential component of the media competence's creative indicator, we have not analyzed it separately. It should be noted that our observations of the students' creative activities showed that the operational indicator quite correlates to the creative indicator. Students who do not have practical skills in media work are unable to create media texts. Although hands-on skill by itself does not result in high level of a creative descriptor. In the same way as, for example, knowledge and practical skills of hundreds of film and acting schools' graduates may correlate to only half a dozen of people whose talent is truly acknowledged.

**Table 12.** Classification of the revealed levels of the creative indicator of the media competence's development in the control and experimental groups

№	Levels of creative descriptor	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	14.3	22.6	20.0	7.2	74.2	53.3
2	average	14.3	19.4	17.8	71.4	19.4	35.6
3	below average	71.4	58.0	62.2	21.4	6.4	11.1

Analysis of the data in Table 12 shows that there is a clear correlation between the levels of operational and creative indicators of media competence's development. Having acquired the skills

of independent creation of media texts (which are critical for the operational indicator) the students of the experimental group exceeded the control group students by more than two times – both at high and average levels of the creative indicator. At the same time, 53 % of the students in the experimental group showed a high level of the creative indicator, that is, vivid creativity in various activities (perceptual, game, artistic, etc.) related to the media. In the control group, this percentage was only 20 %. In both cases, the number of girls with high creativity was more than the number of young men. Conversely, the number of young men with a low creative indicator of the development of media competence significantly outnumbered the similar level for girls.

Analysis of the data in [Table 13](#) shows that the discrepancy between the levels of creative and interpretive/evaluative indicators is demonstrated by almost half of the respondents. At the same time, there is often a case when the level of the creative indicator of the media competence development is higher than the evaluation level (this is especially noticeable in the experimental group, which had the opportunity to develop its operational and creative abilities on the media during the training course).

**Table 13.** The combination of the revealed levels of creative and interpretive / evaluation indicators of the media competence's development

№	The combination of the revealed levels of creative and interpretive / evaluation indicators	<i>Control group (in %)</i>			<i>Experimental group (in %)</i>		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	Combination of low levels	64.3	41.9	48.9	14.3	6.5	8.9
2	Combination of average levels	7.1	0.0	2.2	35.7	16.1	22.2
3	Combination of high levels	7.2	3.2	4.4	7.2	32.2	24.4
4	Discrepancy of levels	21.4	54.8	44.5	42.8	45.2	44.5

But in the control group we encounter the combination of low levels of creative and interpretive/evaluative indicators (64 % of young men and 48 % of young women). Gender differences were manifested primarily in the fact that coincidence of low levels of creative and interpretive/evaluative indicators was more common for young men from the control group, while in the experimental group, a greater number of coincidences of high levels of the above indicators were shown by female students. A limited sample of respondents does not allow us to draw far-reaching conclusions, but it is safe to say that female students in general were more likely to attend classes, so they had more operational skills developed. Having analyzed all the data, we compiled a summary table for the classification of the levels of the complex indicator of the media competence's development of students in the control and experimental groups.

In doing so, we agreed to consider that the students with a high complex level of media competence's development are those who showed a high level in three to four main indicators except a contact one. There are 12 people (26.7 %) in the experimental group, 11 of them are female. In the control group there are only two people, both female (4.4 %).

**Table 14.** Classification of the revealed levels of the complex indicator of the media competence's development in the control and experimental groups

No	Level of complex indicator	Control group (in %)			Experimental group (in %)		
		Male participants	Female participants	Total	Male participants	Female participants	Total
1	high	0,0	6,5	4,5	7,1	35,5	26,7
2	average	21,4	12,9	15,5	35,7	58,1	51,1
3	below average	78,6	80,6	80,0	57,2	6,4	22,2

A group with an average complex level of media competence's development encompassed those students who did not have a single low level of the indicator in the three most important positions (information, evaluation and creative indicators). These were approximately half of the experimental group (51 %: 35 % male respondents and 58 % female ones). In the control group, there were 15 % of such students.

Finally, to students with a below average complex level of media competence, we attributed those who had more than one low level indicators. In the control group, these were four times more such respondents than in the experimental group. Meanwhile, in the control group the low results of male and female respondents are quite comparable, but in the experimental one, young men with a low level of media competence predominate: 9 times more than female students (which, in our opinion, was due to a quantitatively small sample of respondents).

In general, the data in Table 14 prove the viability of our experimental media education course, and the effectiveness of its methodology and techniques.

Comparative analysis of the data reflected in this article shows that in the experimental group there is a clear overlap, and in the control group, the proximity of the evaluation and complex indicators' levels. In our opinion, it indicates that the evaluation indicator is the most significant indicator of the media competence's development as a whole.

#### *Case Study 1. Classification of the revealed levels of different indicators of the media competence's development in the experimental and control groups*

The drawback of many sociological studies, in our opinion, consists in the fact that, skillfully using the results of mass surveys, their authors do not always try to compare and contrast the knowledge / skills of a particular person which, in some areas, can be of a very high level, but in others – average or low.

That is why the main feature of our summative experiment was that in addition to the traditional study and analysis of *anonymous* preferences and knowledge of respondents, we have attempted a case study of the media competence levels of *specific* students / individuals. We have selected a few representatives from each group of respondents (with high, average and low levels of media competence indicators), whose creative and practical work was analyzed in order to reveal the relationships and dependencies between the levels of motivational, contact, information, analytical, creative (and partly operational) indicators of a particular person. First, tables 15 and 16 were compiled, giving a general idea of the classification of levels of different indicators in the experimental and control groups.

**Table 15.** Classification of the revealed levels of various media literacy indicators in the experimental group

№	Students	Media literacy indicators				
		Level of motivational indicator	Level of contact indicator	Level of information indicator	Level of analytical indicator	Level of creative indicator
1	Alexandra A.	a	a	h	h	a
2	Anna D.	a	a	h	a	a
3	Anna K.	l	a	h	a	h
4	Anna M.	h	a	h	a	a
5	Anna U.	l	a	h	a	h
6	Anna P.	a	a	h	h	h
7	Ekaterina V.	a	a	h	a	h
8	Elena V.	h	a	h	h	h
9	Elena G.	h	a	h	h	h
10	Elena E.	h	a	h	a	h
11	Elena Ch.	a	a	h	a	a
12	Inna V.	l	a	h	h	h
13	Inna L.	a	a	h	h	h
14	Irina K.	a	a	a	a	h
15	Irina Kr.	a	a	h	a	h
16	Irina M.	h	a	h	l	l
17	Irina N.	a	l	h	a	h
18	Irina Sh.	h	a	h	a	a
19	Karina I.	a	l	h	a	h
20	Karina Yu.	l	a	h	h	h
21	Lyubov A.	a	a	h	a	a
22	Maria B.	h	a	h	h	h
23	Maria G.	l	a	h	h	h
24	Maria K.	h	a	h	h	h
25	Natalya K.	h	a	h	h	h
26	Oksana M.	a	a	h	a	h
27	Olga G.	a	a	h	a	h
28	Tatyana B.	l	a	h	a	h
29	Tatyana L.	l	a	h	a	h
30	Tatyana P.	a	a	h	a	h
31	Tatyana T.	a	a	h	l	l
32	Alexander B.	l	a	a	l	l
33	Alexey D.	a	l	h	a	a
34	Alexey X.	l	l	h	l	a
35	Andrey O.	a	a	h	l	a
36	Valery G.	l	a	h	a	a
37	Valey K.	a	a	h	l	a
38	Vasily P.	a	a	h	a	a
39	Vyacheslav K.	l	h	h	l	a
40	Dmitry S.	h	a	h	a	a
41	Evgeny K.	a	a	h	h	h
42	Igor P.	h	l	h	a	a
43	Roman A.	l	a	h	a	l
44	Sergei D.	l	a	h	l	a
45	Sergei S.	l	h	h	l	l

Convention: h – high level of the media competency's indicator  
a – average level of the media competency's indicator  
l – low level of the media competency's indicator

**Table 16.** Classification of the revealed levels of various media literacy indicators in the control group

№	Students	Media literacy indicators				
		Level of motivational indicator	Level of contact indicator	Level of information indicator	Level of analytical indicator	Level of creative indicator
1	Alexandra P.	a	a	h	a	l
2	Anna K.	a	a	a	a	l
3	Anna O.	l	a	a	l	a
4	Valeriya K.	l	a	a	a	h
5	Victoria B.	h	a	a	l	l
6	Victoria U.	l	a	a	l	a
7	Ekaterina D.	a	a	a	a	h
8	Ekaterina K.	h	a	h	h	h
9	Elena B.	h	a	h	a	h
10	Elena L.	l	a	l	l	l
11	Elena N.	a	l	l	l	l
12	Elena S.	a	a	a	a	l
13	Elena Sh.	l	a	a	l	l
14	Elena T.	a	a	h	a	l
15	Irina M.	l	a	l	l	l
16	Irina S.	h	a	a	l	a
17	Lybov Ch.	l	a	l	l	l
18	Marina B.	a	a	h	a	h
19	Natalya P.	a	l	l	l	l
20	Natalya R.	l	l	l	l	l
21	Oksana R.	l	a	a	l	c
22	Oksana S.	a	a	a	a	l
23	Olga L.	l	a	l	l	l
24	Olga K.	l	a	a	l	a
25	Olga V.	l	a	a	l	l
26	Svetlana K.	l	a	a	l	l
27	Svetlana S.	h	a	a	a	h
28	Tatyana S.	a	a	a	l	l
29	Yuliana S.	l	a	l	l	l
30	Yulia S.	l	a	a	l	a
31	Yulia Z.	a	l	a	l	h
32	Alexander B.	l	a	l	l	l
33	Alexey B.	l	a	h	a	h
34	Alexey K.	a	l	l	l	l
35	Alexey P.	a	a	a	a	a
36	Andrey G.	l	h	a	a	l
37	Andrey S.	a	a	a	h	h
38	Anton N.	l	a	l	l	l
39	Bladislav X.	l	a	l	l	l
40	Dmitry K.	l	a	l	l	l
41	Kirill G.	l	l	l	l	l
42	Nikolay G.	l	a	a	l	l
43	Oleg P.	l	a	l	l	a
44	Pavel G.	l	a	l	l	l
45	Sergei N.	l	a	l	l	l

Convention: h – high level of the media competency's indicator  
a – average level of the media competency's indicator  
l – low level of the media competency's indicator

We have analyzed the responses of students from each level group. Group "h" – students with a high level of the indicator of media competence's development. For example, a student Maria K., who has only one indicator at an average level – the contact one. All the rest are high. In fact, Maria K. has a diverse range of media motivation, she has accumulated a solid baggage of knowledge in the field of terminology, theory and history of media education. But the main thing is that she is a creative person with a high level of perception and analytical thinking in relation to media texts. This applies to any kind of creative work during the media education course, for instance, her reviews, discussions, etc. A similar level (with a somewhat narrower spectrum of motivation) was demonstrated by the end of the year's training by Evgeny K. and Elena G. It should be noted that there were 4 % of such respondents in the control group, and six times more – 26 % in the experimental group.

Group "a" indicates the average level of the indicator of the media competence's development. For example, we can distinguish Irina K., who has only one high-level indicator – creative. All the rest are average. This diligent student does not have a particular inclination to study media culture. However, she is used to "learn" all the subjects from the curriculum, so she achieves some "average" level of knowledge due to perseverance. Nevertheless, the creative production has revealed her latent potential for non-standard solutions (for example, in collages). There were 15 % of "a" level responses in the control group, and 51 % in the experimental group.

Group "l" is a low level of the media competence's indicator.

Typical representatives are Dmitry K., Kirill G., and Sergei N. from the control group. The motivation of their media contacts is rather monotonous and is limited by entertainment. They are not interested in the theory and history of the media/media culture. Perceptive and analytical abilities in relation to media texts are undeveloped. Creative abilities are not manifested. As a rule, they often skip classes. They are not interested in the study program they're enrolled into. Studying for them is something like serving a four-year labor service with the ultimate goal (probably more important than their parents, than by themselves) in the form of a Bachelor degree. The real motives for their studies (most likely, determined by their parents) are reduced mainly to the three "not to" (for boys: "not to join the army", "not to hang out in the streets", "not to fall under bad influence", and for girls: "not to be worse than others", "not to idle around"). Sadly, there majority of the students in the control group (80 %), and four times less (22 %) in the experimental group demonstrated the "l" level.

### *Case Study 2: Analysis of students' creative assignments*

In order to further elucidate media preferences of students and to analyze the results of students' creative tasks on media texts' content analysis, we used the media education technology developed by A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001: 62-64). 38 students (31 female and 7 male students aged 20-21) participated in the experiment in Taganrog Institute. Each of them was to choose three of their favorite media texts for analysis, that is, totally, the students analyzed 114 media texts. In each of the media texts, the students had to identify and analyze the main characters (incl. gender, age, race, level of education, type of work / study, marital status, number of children, appearance, character traits, role and influence of these characters). The results obtained were summarized in Table 17.

Its data led us to the following conclusions:

1. Of all the variety of media texts, students prefer to choose as their favorite: 1) films and television series (55.3 %, while the number of male students who chose this option (85.7 %) significantly exceeds the female participants (48.4 %); 2) television programs (39.5 % with female respondents' dominance). Print and online press, computer games, and Internet websites have not accumulated more than 8 % of respondents altogether.

**Table 17.** Character analysis of media texts by students

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Female respondents' choice (%)</i>	<i>Male respondents' choice (%)</i>	<i>Total number of respondents (%)</i>
1.	<i>Media text type:</i>		
1.1.	48.4	85.7	55.3
1.2.	41.9	28.6	39.5
1.3.	6.4	0.0	5.3
1.4.	3.2	0.0	2.6
1.5.	0.0	0.0	0.0
2.	<i>Media text genre:</i>		
2.1.	25.8	28.6	26.3
2.2.	29.1	0.0	23.7
2.3.	12.9	0.0	10.5
2.4.	9.7	14.3	10.5
2.5.	6.4	28.6	10.5
2.6.	6.4	0.0	5.3
2.7.	6.4	0.0	5.3
2.8.	6.4	0.0	5.3
2.9.	0.0	28.6	5.3
2.10.	6.4	14.3	7.9
3.	<i>Character gender:</i>		
3.1.	58.1	85.7	63.2
3.2.	41.9	14.3	36.8
4.	<i>Age of the character:</i>		
4.1.	3.2	0.0	2.6
4.2.	3.2	0.0	2.6
4.3.	3.2	14.3	5.3
4.4.	32.3	42.8	34.2
4.5.	45.2	28.6	42.1
4.6.	9.7	14.3	10.5
4.7.	6.4	14.3	7.9
4.8.	0.0	0.0	0.0
5.	<i>Race and/or ethnicity of the character:</i>		
5.1.	83.8	85.7	84.2
5.2.	6.4	14.3	7.9
5.3.	3.2	0.0	2.6
5.4.	3.2	0.0	2.6
5.5.	0.0	0.0	0.0
5.6.	6.4	0.0	5.3
6.	<i>Education level of the character:</i>		
6.1.	64.5	57.2	63.2
6.2.	22.6	28.6	23.7
6.3.	3.2	14.3	5.4
6.4.	9.7	0.0	7.8
7.	<i>Type of job:</i>		
7.1.	67.7	57.1	65.8
7.2.	9.6	14.3	10.5
7.3.	6.4	28.5	10.5
7.4.	9.6	14.2	10.5
7.5.	3.2	0.0	2.6
7.6.	6.4	14.2	7.9

8.	<i>Marital status of the character:</i>			
8.1.	bachelor/bachelorette	51.6	71.4	55.2
8.2.	married	38.7	28.5	36.8
8.3.	divorced	6.4	0.0	5.2
8.4.	civil marriage	3.2	0.0	2.6
8.5.	widower/widow	3.2	0.0	2.6
8.6.	other	0.0	0.0	0.0
9.	<i>Number of children:</i>			
9.1.	0	67.7	85.7	71.1
9.2.	1	25.8	14.2	23.6
9.3.	2	6.4	0.0	5.2
9.4.	3 and more	3.2	0.0	2.6
10.	<i>Character's appearance:</i>			
10.1	conventional attractiveness	58.1	57.1	57.8
10.2	undistinguished appearance	29.1	42.8	31.5
10.3.	charming/glamorous	9.6	0.0	7.8
10.4.	non attractive by traditional standards	6.4	14.2	7.8
10.5	other	3.2	0.0	2.6
11.	<i>Body type/constitution of the character:</i>			
11.1.	average	41.9	42.8	42.1
11.2.	slim	38.7	14.2	34.2
11.3.	athletic	16.1	14.2	15.7
11.4.	corpulent	0.0	28.5	5.2
11.5.	overweight	6.4	0.0	5.2
11.6.	other	3.2	0.0	2.6
12	<i>Character traits:</i>			
12.1.	independence	70.9	57.1	68.4
12.2.	dependence	3.2	0.0	2.6
12.3.	intellect	51.6	42.8	50.0
12.4.	ineptitude	3.2	0.0	2.6
12.5.	directness	41.9	57.1	36.8
12.6.	resourcefulness	9.6	14.2	10.7
12.7.	ambition	35.4	57.1	42.1
12.8.	inaction	3.2	0.0	2.6
12.9.	wittiness	35.4	28.5	34.2
12.10.	irony. sarcasm	9.6	0.0	7.8
12.11	object of irony/jokes	6.4	14.2	7.8
12.12.	care	35.4	14.2	31.5
12.13.	nonchalance	12.9	0.0	10.5
12.14.	loyalty	35.4	14.2	31.5
12.15.	treason	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.16.	optimism	67.7	71.4	68.4
12.17.	pessimism	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.18.	truthfulness	32.2	28.5	31.5
12.19.	deceitfulness	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.20.	naivety	9.1	0.0	7.8
12.21.	cynicism	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.22.	kindness	35.4	14.2	31.5
12.23.	cruelty	3.2	14.2	5.2
12.24.	vigour	16.1	28.5	18.4
12.25.	weakness	6.4	14.2	7.8
12.26.	courage	16.1	28.5	18.4

12.27.	cowardice	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.28.	hardworking	32.2	14.2	29.8
12.29.	laziness	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.30.	pragmatism	6.4	14.2	7.8
12.31.	inconsistency	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.32.	principled stance	6.4	14.2	7.8
12.33.	expedience	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.34.	determination	12.9	14.2	13.1
12.35.	lack of purpose	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.36.	sensibility	41.9	28.5	40.5
12.37.	coldness	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.38.	tenderness	19.3	28.5	21.5
12.39.	rudeness	3.2	14.2	5.2
12.40.	coquetry	19.3	14.2	18.4
12.41.	intimidation	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.42.	sensuality	16.1	28.5	18.4
12.43.	frigidness	0.0	0.0	0.0
12.44.	other	9.6	0.0	7.8
13.	<i>Role of the character in the plot:</i>			
13.1.	positive	51.6	57.1	52.6
13.2.	romantic	22.5	14.2	21.0
13.3.	comic	9.6	14.2	10.5
13.4.	negative	3.2	14.2	5.2
13.5.	other (for example. a TV show host)	26.1	14.2	24.3
14.	Character's influence on the development of the plot:			
14.1.	positive influence	74.1	71.4	73.6
14.2.	no/weak impact	16.1	14.2	15.7
14.3.	both positive and negative	6.4	14.2	7.8
14.4.	negative impact	3.2	28.5	7.8

## 5. Conclusions

The classification of the media competence's development indicators developed by us turned out to be an effective tool for comparative analysis between the control and experimental groups. This analysis has proved the effectiveness of the model developed by us and the methodology for fostering students' media literacy (the level of media competence of the students who took and passed a one-year course in media education was four times higher than the level of similar indicators in the control group).

The most preferred genres of media texts were: 1) comedy (26.3 %); 2) melodrama (23.7 %, and this is purely female preference); 3) reality shows and talk shows (10.5 % each); 4) science fiction (with the majority of male respondents). None of the other media genres could collect more than 6 % of the total vote. As expected, entertainment genres are dominating among the favorites. Genres that are considered "challenging" by mass audience (drama, tragedy, parable, analytical television program, etc.) did not exceed 6 % of the vote. 3. The vast majority of favorite media characters, according to the sample made by students, turned out to be male (about 63 %). While female respondents' preferences are distributed more evenly (58 % chose male characters for analysis, and 42 % – female), over 85 % of the male respondents selected to examine a male media character.

As one would expect, characters under the age of 18 and older than 35 years were not very popular with students in their 20s. Maximum attention was given to their peers – the age group between 19 and 35.

As for the ethnic characteristics, the students were unanimous – 84 % of respondents chose media heroes with white skin. About 14% of male respondents chose African American characters,

while nearly 6,5 % of female students analyzed a character with an indefinite ethnicity (animated character Shrek).

The respondents' current level of education (university) significantly influenced the choice of favorite media characters with higher education (63.2 %). However, 23.7 % of respondents like characters with secondary education, too.

Similar situation is with the type of study/occupation of popular media characters. The majority preferred qualified employees (65.8 %). Some male respondents also chose unemployed characters (14.3 %). Paradoxically, media characters with low qualification (10.5 % of votes) are three times more popular than heroes holding a higher rank (2.6 %).

As expected, the most popular media characters are bachelors (55.3 %). The second place is occupied by married characters (36.8 % with female voices prevailing).

The sympathies of twenty-something respondents, as a rule, go to childless characters (71 %). However, a quarter of the students surveyed named among their favorite characters fathers / mothers of a child. The popularity of characters with two or more children is minimal (from 3 % to 6 % of the vote).

As one might expect, students prefer physically attractive characters (57.9 %), or at least – conventionally good-looking (31.6 %). Media characters, unattractive by traditional standards, are appealing to only 7.9 % of respondents.

Curiously, the characters with athletic bodies have not become the leaders of student preferences (about 15 % of the votes without a noticeable gender difference among the respondents). Apparently, it's easier to relate with characters with "closer to real life" body (42.1 % of votes). In fact, slim heroes of media texts are also quite popular (34.2 %) Male respondents (28.6 %) demonstrated tolerance in relation to overweight characters.

The most popular features of media characters are such qualities as optimism (68.4 %), independence (68.4 %), intelligence (50 %), activeness (42.1 %), sensitivity (40.5 %), directness (36.8 %), wit (34.2 %). Such traits of media character as kindness, truthfulness, diligence, faithfulness got about one third of the poll. Meanwhile, such strands as kindness, care, and loyalty were more popular with female respondents; straightforwardness, activity – with male. In general, the choice of students tends to positive media characters. Such negative character traits as deceit, cowardice, passivity, pessimism, etc. left the respondents indifferent. At the same time, 5.3 % of the poll distinguished cruelty and rudeness in their favourite media characters.

About half of the respondents (without significant gender differences) have identified the positive role of the character from their favorite media text. 21 % of respondents (with the predominance of female respondents) marked romantic function as an important. Each tenth of the questioned singled out the character's comic function. A quarter of respondents noted that their favorite characters (usually TV presenter) do not have a pronounced positive / negative function in the media text, maintaining a kind of neutrality.

The majority of respondents (73.7 %) noted that the characters from their favorite media texts have a positive impact on the development of the plot. And only 7.9 % pointed to the negative impact (or both positive and negative impact together).

Thus, the analysis of the results of our survey confirmed the general trend of media contacts in the students' audience – its focus on the entertaining genres of audiovisual media; preference of characters who are physically attractive, positive, active, single, childless, educated, highly skilled males aged 19 to 35 years. These heroes are characterized by optimism, independence, intelligence, sensitivity, and wit. They are connoisseurs of life and have a positive impact on the development of the plot in a media text.

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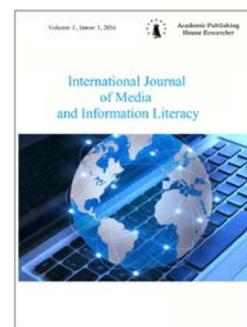
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## Necessity for Media Education in Early Childhood Programmes in Hong Kong

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### Abstract

Hong Kong, like any other cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is characterised by various sources of media for education, advertisement, relaxation and entertainment. Young children are immersed in the rich mass media environment whether at home, at school, or on the streets. The messages contained in these media sources are delivered in various forms and are meant to achieve specific goals for specific groups of people. While media education has been introduced in some primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2015), less has been said and done about the same in early childhood programmes (Cheung, 2012). This article builds a case for an urgent need for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** media education, early childhood programmes, Hong Kong, learning, media literacy.

### 1. Introduction

Mass media exert influences across all sections of humankind from infancy to adulthood. Such influences have increased in intensity and variety following the advance in information technology so common worldwide. Mass media not only reflect peoples' values, attitudes and norms but also shape the same (Wayne, 2001). For this reason, mass media have being described as one of the "four educators" others being teachers, parents and the physical environment (see Edwards, et al., 1998; Elkind, 1991). It could be argued that the younger the age the more the mass media effects and persistence of such effects due to children's critical stage of development. Experiences children receive before primary education have been found to determine later life (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Young, 2002). Hence, the types and ways the messages in media are presented to young children matter. The types and modes of presentation need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate (Wayne, 2001) to avoid children's vulnerability to "unacceptable" media messages. For this to be realised, parents and teachers need to work in partnership in the process of making young children media literate.

Media education or media literacy is an important curricular intervention for preparing young children for effective participation in their respective societies and the world in general. Media education has been found to be useful in the development of critical minds in young children (Wayne, 2001) as one aspect of multiple literacies (see Bonanno, 2002; Harste, 2003; Kellner, 1998). While media education has been introduced in some primary and secondary

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schools in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2005; 2015), less has been said and done about the same in early childhood programmes. The relevance for the media education in Hong Kong schools has been stressed (Cheung, 2004). This article builds a case for an urgent need for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong. It progresses through discussions about early childhood as a critical stage for learning, the concept of developmental and cultural appropriateness as applied to media literacy as well as media education and parental involvement. It then discusses media education pedagogy for early childhood education programmes. Finally, the article advocates for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong.

## 2. Materials and methods

This is a position paper. The author uses relevant and updated materials such as book chapters, articles, and reports to support the arguments. These materials are in the areas of media education, early childhood education, child development, neuroscience, learning, and pedagogy.

## 3. Discussion

### *Early childhood as a critical stage for learning*

Studies from neuroscience and child development have consistently confirmed that early years in life are critical for the child's learning and the rest of his or her life. There are several child development and learning theories that stress the role of early childhood for leaning and future performance at school and in society. They include for example, those by Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner and Montessori. In this section, I discuss the sensitivity of early childhood using Montessori's theory and the various studies on neuroscience as well as the empirical evidence in the field of early childhood education. Montessori's theory is used in this article due to what I consider as its explicitness and use of terms that signify sensitivity of early childhood. Although this theory, like others, was developed in a different socio-cultural context from that of Hong Kong, it provides an overview of the early years' sensitivity.

Montessori (1870–1952) divided development of a human being into 3 stages: absorbent mind (conception to 6 years), childhood (6 to 12 years) and adolescence (12 to 18 years) (Isaacs, 2007). The absorbent mind is viewed as consisting of 2 phases: unconscious absorbent mind (birth to 3) and conscious absorbent mind (3 to 6). She characterised the absorbent mind into 3 embryonic stages: physical embryo (embryo formation), spiritual embryo (post-natal emergence of child's uniqueness) and social embryo (internalisation of socio-cultural conventions). Basically, the absorbent mind as the term suggests, is the developmental period characterised by massive "absorption" of information from the environment as a result of the child's innate curiosity (which Montessori termed "horme") to make sense of the world around him or her. The unconscious absorbent mind involves children "absorbing indiscriminately from the environment that surrounds them" while the conscious absorbent mind reflects the "child's ability to organise and classify information, experiences and concepts" (Isaacs, 2007: 11). Montessori saw that this stage had critical periods associated with movement, language acquisition, routines, small details awareness, sense refinement and internalisation of cultural norms, values and beliefs.

Montessori described the childhood stage as characterised by children's keenness, eagerness and desire for belonging (Isaacs, 2007). It is the stage where the child acquires the cultural aspects of life. In adolescence, Montessori theorised that people's behaviour becomes turbulent, unpredictable and volatile (Isaacs, 2007). She further sub-divided this stage into puberty (12 to 13 years) and adolescence (15 to 18 years). As early childhood programmes in Hong Kong cater for children from birth to six, only the absorbent mind applies in this article.

Useful knowledge has been generated from studies in neuroscience, child development and animals all of which indicate that the first few years of life are critical. McCain and Mustard (McCain and Mustard, 1999: 21) summarise the main findings pertinent to the early years as follows:

(1) *Early brain development is interactive, rapid and dramatic;* (2) *During critical periods, particular parts of the brain need positive stimulation to develop properly;* (3) *The quality of early sensory stimulation influences the brain's ability to think and regulate bodily functions;* (4) *Negative experiences in the early years have long-lasting effects that can be difficult to overcome later;* (5) *Good nutrition and nurturing support optimal early brain and physical*

*development and later learning and behaviour; (6) There are initiatives that can improve early child development.*

There is sufficient empirical evidence that children's encounters in their early lives stay for a life time (Young, 2002). Insufficient or improper stimulation and experiences have been found to have negative effects that persist despite remedial actions and vice versa (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Loeb et al., 2004). These findings suggest that whatever young children are exposed to leave behind permanent or hard to die behaviours. Mass media as "another teacher" could be viewed as a tool for enculturation (Minkkinen & Liorca, 1978). Because young children learn differently from older ones, it is essential to discuss the concept of developmental and cultural appropriateness. This discussion would inform teachers and parents of the need for media modes and messages to be developmentally and culturally appropriate if children are to acquire the desired norms, values and world views.

#### *Developmental and cultural appropriateness*

Various sources of media exert immense influences and in a complex way to children's thinking, behaviour, world views and personality. These influences largely depend on the specific types of the media (and their envisaged messages) to which children are exposed, duration of the child's exposure to the media, age of the child and most importantly, the extent to which young children are media literate. It is almost impossible to detach children from encounters with the media (Cheung, 2016). This section illuminates the nature of the media and their influences on young children.

Media sources and their associated messages impact powerfully on young children's lives. There is an abundance of media sources available for young children in Hong Kong and the world in general. They include: the TV, the Internet, radio, media-print, computer games, film, toys and so on. Goldstein et al., (Goldstein et al., 2004) argue that children get and use information from these sources in a complex way. Information gained from one source is used to facilitate information acquisition from other sources which in turn influences children's participation in socio-cultural activities. Children's lives are surrounded by these various sources of media whether at school or home. The main question here is whether the messages contained in these media facilitate children's development and learning and maximise their participation in the social and cultural life.

One critical problem with media is that their messages are not necessarily direct and they need great care to understand and use. As L. Masterman (Masterman, 1994: 33) argues, "the media do not present reality, they represent it". This signifies the necessity for media education to be discussed shortly. Wayne (Wayne, 2001) critically writes about media culture and media violence for the purposes of making the TV work for young children. Violence, sex and sexuality (e.g. gender roles) are some of the media messages that could impact negatively on children's lives. Contrary to the earlier Aggression Catharsis Hypothesis where children's exposure to violent scenarios in media was believed to reduce violence in children, it has recently been proved the opposite of it. For example, Wegener-Spöhring (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004) conducted a study with fourth graders (ages 9 to 12) in 1985 and then in 2002 about the effects of violent messages in media upon children's lives. She hypothesised that children could demonstrate "balanced aggressiveness" (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 19) that is; children could limit their aggressive elements to the level of pretence rather than actual violence. Seventeen years later after children's exposure to violent messages, she found that children demonstrated both internalised aggression and externalised aggression. Statements such as "I've a Barbie, but I once tore off her leg" (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 30) and "When we make war too brutally, and my friend leaves for home crying ..." (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 29) were common. The main problem with young children is that they have difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality. Too much exposure to TV that use violence as solution to problems, make children use violence as solution to problems in life instead of negotiations (Wayne, 2001). Further, it has been learnt that "Aggressive skills are acquired earlier and more easily than mental and social skills" (Wayne, 2001: 4).

In the same vein, sex and sexuality as well as use of alcohol and drugs messages, unless checked by media literacy, tend to rush children into adulthood too early or lead to development of undesirable behaviours. Such exposures tend to send the message to young children that "everyone

does it” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996; cited in Wayne, 2001: 5). They lead to disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1984) or death of childhood (Buckingham, 2000).

The impacts of media are not only limited to the types of messages they portray but also depend on the length of time at which children become exposed to the sources of media. Wayne (Wayne, 2001) argues that despite the type of media messages, too much exposure to any one type of message do not yield good results. It could lead to consumerism and passivity as children fail to engage into active play. However, Goldstein et al. state that exposure to media, games and toys actively engage children mentally. In their studies, they found that “children are far from being the passive victims” (Goldstein, 2004: 3). Essentially the effects of any media source and/or message depend on the age of the child and whether such a child is media literate. It is hard to say when the child’s exposure to media is too long. This is also complicated by cultural variations where different expectations could be possible.

### *Media education and parental involvement*

Media literacy or media education is one of the multiple literacies that has become to be critical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for preparation of people to function maximally in their societies and the world in general. In early childhood education, media education, like any other intended knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings expected to be developed in young children require parental involvement for best results. Parents are children’s “first and most continuous teachers” (Elkind, 1991: 77). The fact that children are continually immersed in rich media environment whether at school or at home justifies the need for parental involvement. In addition, the key issues addressed in media literacy as will be discussed subsequently, obligate programmes for young children to work in partnership with parents.

Media education is considered to be one of the school subjects or a cross-cutting issue across the school curriculum at levels of education other than pre-school programmes (see Cheung, 2012). In early childhood education, it could better be viewed as requiring integration with other subjects rather than as a distinct subject. Most early childhood curricula across the world advocate for integrated curricula (see Zhu & Wang, 2005). One of the reasons has been that young children are unable to view knowledge as belonging to specific disciplines or subjects. Indeed, media education itself as a form of literacy requires application to every aspect of life that involves meaning-making process. Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 369) define literacy as follows: “Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artefacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society”. Children engage in the process of message extraction from the various sources of media discussed in this article. It is these messages that affect children’s behaviour, world views and values. It is therefore important to provide young children with the necessary critical analysis tools suitable to their developmental level to prevent them from becoming victims of the “unsorted media messages”.

Most media educators have attempted to delineate the key issues that need to be addressed in media education. Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374-377) revisited various literature and found that at least five issues were critical for one to extract messages from media critically. The next part discusses these issues while attempting to relate them to the age of pre-schoolers for developmental appropriateness.

### *Key issue 1. Principle of non-transparency: All media messages are “constructed”*

In this issue it is cautioned that messages contained in media are not straightforward. Any person extracting a message from any media source needs to view media as problematic. This necessitates for the need of media literacy and heralds for the challenges teachers and parents have in making young children media literate. For example, how can parents and teachers work together to make young children capable of differentiating fantasy from reality, able to deduce multiple messages from a single media text and decide which one suits children’s age level and cultural life?

*Key issue 2. Codes and conventions: media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules*

This point cautions that there is no direct, one-to-one relationship between words, signs and symbols with the intended message (connotation vs. denotation issue). Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374) argue that “With younger students the terms (connotation and denotation) are simplified into separating what they see or hear from what they think or feel”. In early childhood education, it could involve asking children to represent various concepts such as rich, poor, strong, weak, master, slave, police, prisoner, and so on using different methods of representing messages. These methods of representing messages would include use of pictures and creation of models.

*Key issue 3. Audience decoding: Different people experience the same message differently*

It has been established that people do not receive and interpret media messages the same way. One media source could lead to different messages for different people. Ang (Ang, 2002: 180) states: “Textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves: a certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it”. This fact helps to sensitise parents and teachers’ careful selection of the media sources to which they expose children bearing in mind that media texts are interpreted differently. In practice, teachers and parents could expose young children to one media source such as a cartoon, picture or toy and ask them to explain what it is all about. This helps children realise that one media text could mean different things to different people – a skill which is essential in life.

Cognitive flexibility characterised by children’s awareness of perceptual differences about the same phenomenon is critical in multicultural societies. As Hong Kong is steadily becoming a multicultural megalopolitan city, the necessity for this cognitive attribute can not be overemphasised. Kellner and Share’s (Kellner and Share, 2005: 375) statement about this attribute is illuminating: “The ability for students to see how diverse people can interpret the same message differently is important for multicultural education, since understanding differences means more than merely tolerating one and other”.

*Key issue 4. Content and message: Media have embedded values and points of view*

This point seeks to draw the attention of those interacting with media to be critical about the media contents so as to discern biases, objectivity or subjectivity caused by certain world views and values. The messages contained in media contents are hardly neutral; that is, they are always tied to particular socio-cultural positions. This is basically the essence of postmodernism. In programmes for young children, parents and teachers could use the various media sources discussed in this article to inculcate specific values and world views in children. It is also necessary to help children develop the awareness that media contents hold specific world views and are value-laden. This could be done by relating media contents to specific contexts or media producers. For example, adults could give children a certain statement and ask them to tell who might have stated or could state it and why.

*Key issue 5. Motivation: Media are organized to gain profit and/or power*

Here the main issue is to help young children gain an understanding that media are produced for various purposes including profit and/or power. It is the issue closely related to the issue number four above but here the main task is to facilitate children’s awareness of the media producers’ agendas. As Wayne (Wayne, 2001: 1) argues, “thinking and talking” together with children helps to address many problems and challenges posed by media.

#### **4. Results**

*Media education pedagogy for early childhood programmes*

Just as young children learn differently from older children so does the pedagogy for young children from older ones. Young children learn best through active engagement in hands-on activities and discussions based on daily life experiences (Katz, 1995). Shared learning between adults and children using materials available in the environment lies at the heart of pedagogy in early childhood programmes (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This is the essence of scaffolding as used in the socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978) and “the child as an active agent of the environment

and the teacher as the facilitator of the child's development" in the Montessori theory (Isaacs, 2007). This section outlines the role of adults vis-à-vis the role of young children in the process of making young children media literate.

The five key issues outlined in the foregoing section serve as benchmark in the media education pedagogy. These issues constitute higher mental functions whose development in children requires children's active engagement in the learning process. Higher mental functions are mental processes such as perception, attention, memory and thinking which become internalised, mediated and used deliberately by children in problem situations (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Children need to develop specific strategies that they can use to critically engage with the media for the purpose of making sound judgements based on media messages. All the sources of media discussed in this article and others not discussed here should be used as avenues for shared learning between children and adults and among children themselves.

It has been argued in this article that young children in Hong Kong are continually immersed in a rich media environment. Within this environment children perpetually engage in "spontaneous learning" (Isaacs, 2007). Restricting children from contacts with media could not only be a formidable task but also deprivation of the rights of the child. To prevent "unacceptable" media messages from reaching children, other countries have enacted laws to deter media producers from the delivery of media such as advertisements that negatively affect children (see Wayne, 2001). While this strategy could work in some way, this article views pedagogical strategy as the most powerful alternative leading to development of critical minds that last for a lifetime.

The media-rich environment in Hong Kong needs a media education pedagogical intervention early in children's life for best results. The sooner the better and the later we attempt to introduce media education the less the results. Isaacs' (Isaacs, 2007: 13) characterisation of the environment and the role of adults and children in it is worthy quoting:

*As the child responds to the stimuli within a given environment, be it at home, school or nursery, the adults present should observe and interpret behaviours according to the developmental stage of the child. With this in mind, they should ensure that the activities, materials, objects and occupations in the environment are brought to the attention of the child to facilitate, scaffold and extend developmental opportunities for the child. Adults, as well as child's peers, act to some extent as a catalyst in the maturation process, while the materials, objects and occupations within the environment scaffold the child's learning.*

## 5. Conclusions

The influences of media on children's lives are immense. In Hong Kong, the media-rich environment would be expected to exert tremendous influences on young children's lives. Probably, the younger the child, the stronger the effects. As experiences in children's early lives have been found to have effects that last a lifetime, a curricular intervention on media education early in children's lives is a prudent strategy. Such a strategy needs to be developmentally and culturally appropriate. It also needs to involve parents for best results because children are exposed to media sources whether at home or at early childhood centres. The parental involvement strategies should be expected to differ from one context to another and from programme to programme due to socio-cultural differences. Due to children's age, it is suggested that media education be integrated with other curriculum experiences and activities. The goal should be to develop higher mental functions in children that will enable them to reflect critically on media messages so as to make sound judgements. In addition, media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong has the potential for making children ready to live in a multicultural society.

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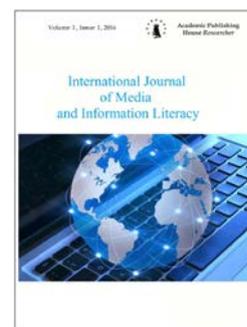
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## Understanding the Phenomenology of Asynchronous Online Interactions in an Academic Business Setting in the Sultanate of Oman

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### Abstract

Interpretive discussions on asynchronous online interactions in an Omani academic setting seem to be muted in the literature. The purpose of this phenomenological research was to understand the meanings constructed by Omani International Business Administration (IBA) students enrolled in Electronic Commerce (MANG2402) class as regards their confabulations using Facebook as a platform of interaction. We examined the written reflective narratives of 25 IBA students describing their lived experiences of asynchronous online marketing exercise during Spring 2015 Semester at the College of Applied Sciences – Rustaq, Sultanate of Oman. Our analyses of data surfaced the following main themes: (a) Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination; (b) Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships; (c) Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement; (d) Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills which consisted of the following sub-themes: Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge, Gaining General Knowledge, and Developing Communication Skills; and, (e) Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, asynchronous online interactions, Omani business students, facebook, social media.

### 1. Introduction

Asynchronous online interactions in an Omani academic setting seem to be muted in interpretive research literature. Our research problem was located in the social construction of meanings in a technology-mediated communication in asynchronous online interactions of individuals. The problem was situated in the context of social media engagement using Facebook as the platform of social interactions, where social media represented technology per se. In a broader sociological view, social media engagement may be construed as the interaction between individuals on social networks which is seen as the interplay of trust and knowledge (McGurk, 2015, in Segumpan, 2016). What meanings were constructed by people as regards their engagement in social media? This was the pivotal question that guided our research.

Online social networks are effective teaching tools because of their rationality and cost-effectiveness. It is rational since most students already use the system; it is cost-effective because

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the network infrastructures are ready-to-use (Towner et al., 2007, in Mathupayas, 2011). According to Vural and Bat (2010, in Topaloglu, Caldibi, & Oge, 2016):

*Social media are networks where individuals interact with others using writing, pictures, videos and audio files the content of which is determined by users completely without time and space limitations and where sharing, interaction and discussion are fundamental. Social media has become an ideal channel today by making continuous updates, multiple uses and virtual sharing possible (p. 351).*

Serrat (2010, in Segumpan, 2016) views social media as an umbrella term encompassing technology integration with social interaction to produce some value. In our research, this “social interaction” was observed in social media engagement among our participants. Through multidirectional conversations, social media afford shared community experiences for content to be created, organized, edited, combined and shared. They comprise of online technologies and practices that users leverage to share concepts, experiences, insights, opinions, and perspectives in social interface (Serrat, 2010, in Segumpan, 2016).

Various social media such as Google+, Facebook, Researchgate and Twitter have emerged due to the rapid development of the Internet, which resulted in fundamental changes in communications and information exchange (Cai et al., 2014, in Topaloglu, Caldibi, & Oge, 2016). According to eBizMBA (2016, in Segumpan, 2016), Facebook is the number one social media platform with 1.1 million users, followed by Twitter with 310,000,000 users, and LinkedIn with 255,000,000 users. These figures appear quantitative in nature but this piece of information provided support to our choice of using Facebook in our phenomenological research.

Schwartz (2009, in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) views engagement with social media, in particular, Facebook, as a form of communication, saying that “*I now see Facebook as part of a larger commons, a space in which we stay connected ... (it helps) keep my metaphorical door open, and that increases the potential for real-time, face-to-face conversations that are rich with connection, depth, risk-taking, and growth*” (p. 138). Mazman and Usluel (2009) made an elaboration:

*While social networks have been adopted and being used extensively by many people, it is notable that they are not adopted in the educational field as much in other fields, despite providing various advantages for the educational context as in personalization, collaboration, information sharing, common interest, active participation, and working together (Mazman and Usluel, 2009: 26).*

The literature review seems to have muted the voices of people in surfacing the meanings of social media engagement in an academic setting. No study of this kind yet was made which understands the lived experiences of higher education students, in particular, in social media engagement using the Facebook platform in the context of the Sultanate of Oman.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### *Objective of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Omani International Business Administration (IBA) students engaged in asynchronous online interactions in an academic setting. Specifically, this study sought answers to the research question: What were the meanings that surfaced from students’ Facebook engagement? We were interested in understanding the meanings attributed by Omani IBA students of their engagement in social media, in particular, Facebook.

### *Methodology*

#### *Phenomenology as Research Frame*

Our research was anchored on descriptive phenomenology, a type of phenomenology inspired by the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl was a German philosopher considered by Vandenberg (1997) as the “fountainhead of phenomenology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 11). Phenomenology is not underpinned by the positivist need for ‘right’ answers; rather, it aims to develop an empathic understanding that truth is multiple and that context determines the meaning of the experience (Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011). The aim of descriptive phenomenology as espoused by Alkharusi (2013) is:

*...to understand the shared meanings of several individuals, to be interested in understanding rather than explaining lived experience in a close and natural way, to describe how individuals experience and interpret their realities, to allow participants to talk about their own experiences in their own words, and to consider central meanings or essences of the experience. By assuming that there are universal perspectives among all people who share a common experience, the inquiry aims to identify those universal elements and perspectives that constitute general experience (Alkharusi, 2013: 119).*

Descriptive phenomenology examines how individuals live; that is, how they behave and experience situations (Giorgi, 1985, in Makoe, 2007). The individuals' descriptions are based on their experiences within the context in which the experience is taking place. The lived context of the individual is central to this research. The meaning of the phenomenon, such as social media engagement, can only be revealed in its totality and its relationships with its particulars and therefore essences can only be seen in every constituent of the meaning (Makoe, 2007).

Mastin (2008) defines experience in a phenomenological sense, as a construct that:

*"...includes not only the relatively passive experiences of sensory perception, but also imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition and action. In short, it includes everything that we live through or perform. Thus, we may observe and engage with other things in the world, but we do not actually experience them in a first-person manner. What makes an experience conscious is a certain awareness one has of the experience while living through or performing it" (Mastin, 2008: 1).*

According to Husserl (1970, in Lester, 2016), "pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions". Using phenomenology as our research frame, we examined how Omani IBA students described their lived experiences in Facebook engagement.

#### *Participants and Study Setting*

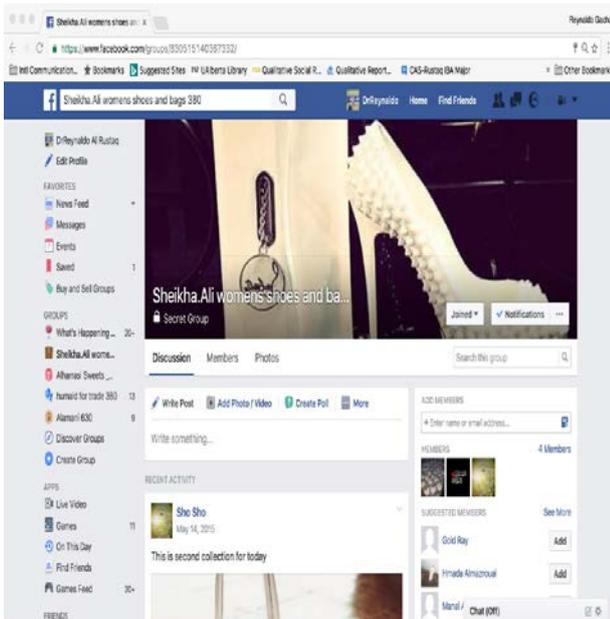
The participants of the study involved college students enrolled in Electronic Commerce (MANG2402) class during the Spring 2015 semester at the College of Applied Sciences (CAS) – Rustaq. CAS is a public higher education institution under the Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman. In addition to its Rustaq campus, CAS is also operating in Ibri, Nizwa, Salalah, Sohar and Sur.

All participants were females, Omani nationals, and enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in International Business Administration (B.Sc. IBA) program. At the time of this research, the CAS-Rustaq was offering the following business-related Majors: International Business Administration (IBA), Tourism and Hospitality, and Accounting.

MANG2402 aims at providing IBA students the knowledge and skills on how to use or apply technology in their business-related transactions and activities, among others. It is a required 3-credit course with two (2) contact hours each for Theory, Practice, and Extra Practice, irrespective of the Major, and is offered during the fourth semester. It has no pre-requisite course, which means that students could even register for this course in earlier or later semesters. At the time of this study, the main topics in the course included the following: Overview of Electronic Commerce; E-Marketplaces, Structures, Mechanisms, Economics, and Impacts; Retailing in Electronic Commerce; Consumer Behavior, Customer Service, and Advertising; Business to Business E-Commerce; E-Government, Online Publishing, E-Books, Blogging and E-Learning; and, E-Commerce Security, Electronic Payment Systems New Developments.

#### *Data Collection*

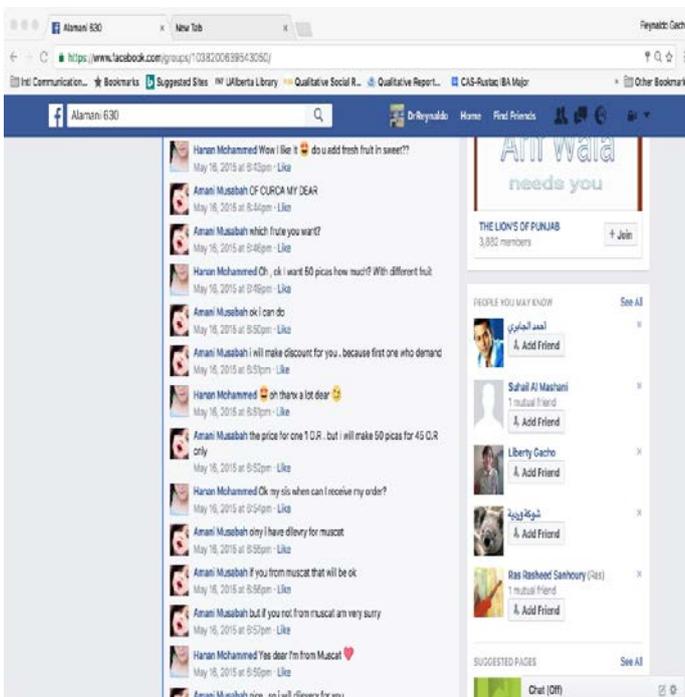
One of the authors taught MANG2402 at the time of this study. In the beginning of the semester, the course expectations were explained to the students, including a graded individual project known as Social Media Engagement. In this activity, we required the students to open a Facebook account and add one of the authors into their account in order to monitor the unfolding of activities and discussions among the members. They had the option to use their real names or use pseudonyms for privacy issues. Prior to registering for the course (i.e., MANG2402), only a handful of them had Facebook. The students were instructed to create a "secret" group in their Facebook, the members of which were restricted only to their friends who had similar likes, hobbies and interests. Figures 1 and 2 show sample screenshots of the groups created and the conversations made.



**Fig. 1.** Screenshot of a cover page of a Facebook group.

Facebook was used as the platform for social media engagement because according to Lee, Hosanagar and Nair (2015, in Segumpan, 2016):

*Facebook messages have rich content attributes (unlike say, Twitter tweets, which are restricted to 140 characters) and rich data on user engagement. It requires real names and, therefore, data on user activity on Facebook is often more reliable compared to other social media sites (Lee, Hosanagar and Nair, 2015, in Segumpan, 2016: 75).*



**Fig. 2.** Screenshot of sample conversations.

The students were given detailed information and specific instructions on the nature of, and expectations from, Social Media Engagement as a class activity, especially its relevance to the course. Whether the students had new or existing Facebook account, students were instructed to

choose a hypothetical business that they would like to venture into in the future – a product-oriented business (e.g., selling mobile phones), a service-oriented business (e.g., managing a laundry shop), or both product and service-oriented business (e.g., a restaurant). The students had to simulate the role of sellers (marketing professionals, in general) and their friends as buyers, or more broadly, as customers. The course, as mentioned earlier, covered topics related to marketing, such as retailing and advertising, thus, students were expected to put into practice the theories and principles learned from lectures and laboratory exercises.

The online asynchronous interactions of the students with their “customers” took place outside of lecture hours, between weeks 10 and 12. Quoting VanGorp (1997), Carter (2000, in Segumpan, 2016) explains briefly what happens in asynchronous interactions.

*Users can control the timing of communication interactions, thereby affording a period of unspecified latency. This latency allows participants the time they need to read, reflect upon, and formulate a response to previously received messages (Carter, 2000, in Segumpan, 2016: 14).*

We, as researchers, were neutral; i.e., we acted only as observers in order not to influence the unfolding of discussions and flow of interactions. We upheld the principle of *bracketing*, which is a method used to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford, 2016).

Immediately after the conclusion of the allotted period, we requested the students to reflect on their Facebook engagement experience. One session was dedicated solely for this purpose in order to elicit freewheeling ideas and opinions. The intention was also to create an environment where students’ lived experience was described naturally as well as ensure that each submission echoed individual voice. Students’ narratives were guided by the main point for reflection: Describe your experience of using Facebook in the course and write in details how you felt about the course activity (i.e., Social Media Engagement).

#### *Narrative Analysis as Analytical Frame*

Meanings from the data were surfaced using narrative analysis. These data were the reflective write-ups made by the participants after the period of the Social Media Engagement was over. At this stage, students’ names and registration numbers were withheld for privacy and confidentiality reasons. Privacy refers to the research participant’s direct disclosure to the researcher while confidentiality refers to the extent to which the researcher protects the participant’s private information. Privacy is a basic human right while maintaining confidentiality is a professional obligation (Columbia University, 2016).

As explained by Riessman (2005, in de Jager et al., 2016), narrative analysis is the analysis of text in “storied” form; in this case, written narratives of participants’ “stories” of their lived experience in online asynchronous interactions in a simulated marketing environment. Citing Riessman (2005), de Jager et al. (2016) espoused further:

*A narrative text involves the telling of a sequence of events, which, in the act of narrating are organized by the narrator. The narrator interprets the text, selecting information to include, how to describe it, and how various elements are connected. Therefore, narrative analysis focuses on the narrator’s construction of meaning: in other words, not only what happened but how they understand or make sense of these events. It privileges knowledge gained from personal experience as opposed to master narratives or dominant discourse surrounding a given topic. The notion that meaning is partly or entirely socially constructed is implicit in the philosophical underpinnings of narrative analysis. It acknowledges the role of the researcher in the process of meaning making. Researchers must organize information generated from narrative interviews and interpret it. Research output represents how the researcher has made sense of how the participant has made sense of their experiences (Riessman, 2005, in de Jager et al., 2016: 1410).*

We analyzed manually a total of 25 narrative scripts and examined themes that surfaced. Braun and Clarke (2006, in Segumpan, 2016) define thematic analysis as a method for “*identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes... data set in (rich) detail*” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, in Segumpan, 2016: 77). We used the framework of Braun and Clarke in making sense of the reflective narratives written by the participants, which consists of the following phases: Familiarizing with the data; Generating initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; and, Producing the report.

### *Quality of Data*

The issue on 'data quality' is akin to the notion of reliability and validity in quantitative research. Researchers such as Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001) speak of primary validity and secondary validity in qualitative research. The former includes (a) credibility, (b) authenticity, (c) criticality, and (d) integrity and the latter includes (a) explicitness, (b) vividness, (c) creativity, (d) thoroughness, (d) congruence, and sensitivity. Being phenomenological in nature, our study used a different lens in reflecting 'reliability and validity' as construed in quantitative research. We situated 'data quality' in the following context as compiled in the work of Noble and Smith (2015):

*Accounting for personal biases which may have influenced findings.* In our research, we accomplished this by being neutral in the online discussions. We had to bracket our personal subjectivities regarding the topics or issues raised in the asynchronous discussions and in analyzing the data.

*Acknowledging biases in sampling and ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis.* We acknowledge that our participants were not selected according to biased criteria because those who participated were students enrolled in MANG2402 (Electronic Commerce).

*Meticulous record keeping, demonstrating a clear decision trail and ensuring interpretations of data are consistent and transparent.* In our research, all records of interactions and discussions unfolded online; that is, in social media, with Facebook as the platform. Data were interpreted according to the phenomenological research tradition.

*Establishing a comparison case/seeking out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure different perspectives are represented.* We did not make a comparison of the findings but rather, we surfaced the various meanings from the lived experience of the participants.

*Including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to support findings.* Being phenomenological in nature, our research focused on themes that emerged from the social interactions of participants using Facebook as a platform.

*Demonstrating clarity in terms of thought processes during data analysis and subsequent interpretations.* We were clear with our data procedures, especially as regards thematic analyses using the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, in Segumpan, 2016).

*Engaging with other researchers to reduce research bias.* We had confabulations with each other and researchers in the qualitative tradition and provided independent reviews of how our research and data collection and analyses unfolded.

*Respondent validation: includes inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript and whether the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being investigated.* This is known as member checking in the phenomenological research tradition, defined by Henry, Chapman and Francis (2011) as the "returning of findings to participants for them to validate their contributions" (Henry, Chapman and Francis, 2011: 129). Although this procedure is done by many qualitative researchers, we skipped member checking; we were guided by the wisdom of Henry, Chapman and Francis (2011) that "member checking is incongruent with phenomenology because there is no directive in interpretive research to prove or generalize, so the idea of validation is illogical...phenomenological research is to develop a comprehension of what it is like to live experiences" (Henry, Chapman and Francis, 2011: 30). They clarified further:

*Member-checking threatens the rigor of phenomenological studies. A far better strategy is to seek clarification during the co-construction of the data. With careful planning, including a sound appreciation of the chosen philosophy, the emergent data and interpretation will prove rich and meaningful and member-checking can be made redundant in phenomenological research (Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011: 37).*

### **3. Results**

#### *Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination*

One of the themes that surfaced was Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination. The participants expressed views that their engagement in Facebook, could allow them to exchange information. They constructed their experience as a form of information sharing and dissemination. For instance, it was mentioned by the participants:

*I know that by my experience, that I do my small business which about sweet by Omani hand. And I used the face book for promotion my business when I used the social media I get some advantages like: Reached to large number and different people from different s countries. Also, Easy to promote the products. (Participant #035)*

*I found difficulties in what information I have to represent for our group members about our products to attract them. I found difficulties in term that not all of my groups members interact with me, some of them were very lazy they never interact. (Participant #036)*

The meanings that surfaced also echoed the usefulness of Facebook engagement as a mechanism by which the participants could share with the online community information about the nature of their business undertakings, such as selling products, providing services, or both.

*Facebook allows us to create special Pages for businesses or brands. I created a Facebook to provide services for which is about photography and I promote about my business in this great site. Actually I have Instagram before 2 years. I see that communication on facebook is more than 52 Instagram. When I create account on facebook many people contact with me on my page and others on private message. Some of the want my studio to ret for them and other want to know where my studio located and so on. Therefor, Facebook is main program to promote about any products and is a good idea that allow us to share information with others and ask the any question. Facebook offers a very customisable ads placement service, which is also very easy to use and cost effective. (Participant #019)*

In the preceding comments, the tone was about the promotion of a business. The meaning surfaced that through Facebook engagement, people are able to advertise their business in a savvy way. Another perspective, shown in the comments that follow, construed Facebook engagement as a way by which people (e.g., customers) could acquire information per se online. When customers, for instance, were searching for information, social media could be a good avenue for obtaining such information.

*More explanation, if you want advices to make your business successful only asks them. You will find a lot of information that can help you. Also, you can know news during social media. Social media become one of the primary resources for news because all people who work in media have account in social media. Moreover, you can share your ideas. (Participant #036)*

#### *Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships*

The participants also construed Facebook engagement as a means of developing relationships with their social networks, thus, the theme Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships emerged from the analyses. From the written narratives, it surfaced that engaging in social media, in particular, Facebook, would allow the participants to establish relationships with other people, such as their customers. One participant quipped: “*My best experience in face book is make relationship with customer*” (Participant #035). In real-life business, customer relationship does matter. Forging relationships with customers, for instance, could bring in better sales and customer loyalty. Grant (2010) says that if we are conscious of what we can do for customers and how we can help them, there will be symbiotic, life-nurturing relationships, which will consequently make business easier.

The analyses echoed that Facebook engagement was seen as a way of developing connections with people, be they customers, suppliers, distributors, employees, or investors. This could be constructed as a form of social capital, cited in the work of Grant (2010) as the personal relationships among those that people do business with. As expressed by the participants:

*I have my own face book occurring in real life and it's called my life. The only advantage I can see of Face book is that you can connect with people who are a great distance away but then is not that emails are for. People use Face book in different ways and for different purposes to connect with friends. (Participant #207)*

*I will talk about my experience in the use of Facebook in my project which is in my opinion a cultural openness cognitive widely between countries and helps to speed communication and mutual understanding between people and knowledge of the most important news and the most important events on the social, sporting, artistic and religious level and all other areas, and help to create new social relationships away from the places of work, study and family. (Participant #070)*

*Facebook allow me create many relationship with many friends from different country and I learn from their experience and knowledge. Facebook help the me to attract with customer and help me to deal with them... (Participant #128)*

The asynchronous conversations among the participants also surfaced a positive tone among them, in particular, with regard to their overall experience vis-à-vis Facebook. As mentioned by the participants:

*I have benefited a lot from my experience about social commerce via Facebook. This experience has provided me many benefits including: is able to interact with others and become characterized by social and personal relationship with others has become strong. Through this experiment can reach a large number of people. (Participant #004)*

*Also I learn how can attract customers to buy my products and make good relationship with them. I used interesting advertising to attract customer and the facebook give me good chance to offer my products such as allow to download images and videos so the customer can show my products and some do not have these services so facebook is good program. Moreover help my business to be very easy and successful. (Participant #166)*

#### *Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement*

The theme Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement also emerged from the interpretive lens of the study. The meanings surfaced a theme that recognized Facebook engagement as an encouragement to the participants to venture into real and actual business work sooner or later in their life. A participant wrote: "And now I can open my own project, promotion in an easy and fast way is not a lot of time, effort and money" (Participant #004).

*In the future if I make a business certainly I will use Facebook or any social media programs because I think it is effective way to promote your business and to make it successful. And now I become more excuses about the use of the face book and how to deal and communicate with consumers. Especially because I have an idea in the future I want to create a small business to sell sunglasses and surely I will use social media programs. (Participant #070)*

*In addition, I will increase the flowers in my account and continue to promote my business in facebook which is the tourism in Oman because I want to improve my knowledge and need to attract a lot of customer to visit my country. (Participant #128)*

The above statements voice out a promising perspective as raised by the participants themselves. The study was able to surface a meaning that Facebook engagement could serve as a motivation to the participants to engage into real-world business. A participant said:

*It helped me to learn how I can become a business women and establish a new business in the future...I will continue my business which is the Belgian Chocolate in Facebook because I like this project so much and I want to increase my knowledge in how I can attract my customers. Also, I am going to add new followers in order to learn from them and from their experience and knowledge. (Participant #036)*

*At the end, social networks is very important in our life. From my experience in Facebook and promote the products in it, I feel I am business women because I receptive to the idea of electronic commerce. (Participant #137)*

#### *Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills*

Another theme that surfaced from the analyses was Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills. This reflects a positive vibe that the participants had with regard to their experience in engaging in Facebook. In particular, this theme epistemologically defines knowledge and skills as an offshoot of social interaction from Facebook engagements. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme, namely, (a) Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge, (b) Gaining General Knowledge, and (c) Developing Communication Skills.

#### *Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge*

The meanings that surfaced from the study showed knowledge converging on business affairs and business administration, thus the sub-theme, Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge. In particular, it emerged from the analyses that Facebook engagement could afford the participants knowledge that they could use in their future business undertakings. It was not the intention of our study to dig into the philosophical nature or categories of knowledge that surfaced from the analysis but rather to deconstruct knowledge in terms of new concepts and ideas which were acquired by the participants from their Facebook engagement. For instance, it was mentioned in the narratives:

*I know how to persuade the customers and don't make them have doubt about our business. Also, I get the ability in how to promote and every time I try attracting the customers in different ways to get high satisfy of our customers. One more advantages it make me know about the cost of market and the ability to face the compotators and make my business improve at all time. (Participant #046)*

*I get good experience and information that help me in future to know how to market and promotion for my owner business also I have good information to solve many problem that can affect me to promote in social media. I have learned from this experience that social media is a creative way to marketing through. As well as, I was able to advertise my products and services in various forms, it can be photo, video or audio as well. Through this I believe that this originative way of doing business is easier and cheaper. (Participant #068)*

Positive impressions were created by the participants as regards their Facebook engagement experience. They echoed learning derived from such experience with regard to their construction of the notion of business, in particular, concepts related to marketing and electronic commerce. Sample narratives include the following:

*Firstly I do not know how the electronic trade before I start this project, but through this project I understood and learned how to be electronic commerce are and how will promote efficiently in a good way. Moreover, this project helped me how to share the products and its information easelly. In addition to that, Through this project I gained experience of how the electronic commerce exactly in the Facebook program. (Participant #137)*

*My social media experience is very interesting and useful for my major. I learn a lot of things about social media. Also I am very interest when I deal with the customer and promote about my businesses in facebook program. (Participant #128)*

#### *Gaining General Knowledge*

Another sub-theme that surfaced was Gaining General Knowledge. Epistemologically, this relates to the learning experience that transcends the boundaries of business per se. As expressed in the views that follow, Facebook engagement was also construed as a vehicle for learning concepts and ideas that relate to general issues or broad topics other than business. In particular, the findings of our research surfaced technological knowledge, or the social media application itself, such as how to use videos and to set security setting of the group. For instance, it was highlighted by a participant: "I have gained many experiences such as: how to create a group on Facebook and also how to open an account in Facebook" (Participant #004). It was also mentioned in the narratives:

*facebook one of the useful program...I learn how to put photo of my product or how to put video and common. In addition, I learn how to create my page. Also how create security group... (Participant #888)*

The study was able to surface other forms of general knowledge that the participants acquired from Facebook engagement. In the sample narratives that follow, the participants highlighted some situations, in particular, the advantages and disadvantages they faced while engaging in online discussions.

*My experience in social media is perfect experience for me because is the first time for me to use Facebook and I learn things. Firstly I learn how to use Facebook tool, how to create new group in Facebook and how to connect with people. There are a lot of advantages for Facebook you can chatting together, share information, business promotion, and entertainment. And there are a lot of disadvantages for Facebook it is has negative effect on teenagers, get various, there are a lot of hackers and sometimes you lose your account. (Participant #000)*

*I use facebook to do my project and I do not have enough information about facebook. Also before using facebook I think this program is bad program and after using facebook my ideas changed. I learn many things... (Participant #166)*

#### *Developing Communication Skills*

Developing Communication Skills also surfaced as another sub-theme of the analyses. This could be epistemologically understood as skills learned from the exchanges of ideas and views among the participants and their social contacts. Facebook engagement was seen as helpful in improving communication skills of the participants. A participant, referring to the Facebook engagement experience, quipped: "It helped me to improve my communication skills due to my interaction with different friends" (Participant #036). Another view expressed was: "Communicate

with a very large number of visitors to web pages and this means that you can see the challenges that face and the aspects of prefer or hate that what they offer of products” (Participant #137).

The following narratives show how the participants spoke positively of their Facebook engagement experience, in particular, how the engagement experience helped in harnessing their communication skills:

*Through this project; I learned how to communicate with others and how to make ads electronically. In addition, I learned to use Facebook in a good way and how to create a new group with different people. Also, I learned how to respond the customers when I communicate with them. (Participant #777)*

*It has increased my experience through this project, and I learned a lot of things that I knew nothing but as an act of a private collection and dissemination of the all-new. Also I learned how to communicate with customers and argue and debate in price. In addition, when I saw my colleagues who offer their products to customers and pricing was increasing enthusiasm I have to do more. I felt like I was a real merchant and I liked the project so much... (Participant #019)*

#### *Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment*

The last theme that surfaced from the analyses was Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment. Epistemologically, this theme refers to Facebook engagement as a source of fun and enjoyment among the participants. For instance, a participant wrote: “The fact was my experience on social commerce via Facebook very fun. I am also happy because I can really attract the attention of consumers by me” (Participant #004).

The experience of engaging in online interactions served as a platform for participants to derive pleasurable experience from their online confabulations. The narratives below echoed such wholesome entertainment among the participants:

*I helped me to entertain because it has many of entertainment methods like photos, jokes and videos....It helped me to represent my idea or my opinion in my friend group and that help to make them feeling happy. (Participant #036)*

*My experience in the use of a social networking programs were wonderful and very helpful for me. I was used Face book to promote my products to customers. I was achieved great profits is not money, but the experience in the promotion of products and the method of dealing with people and with the products that I sell. (Participant #097)*

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings of our phenomenological research provided an understanding of the lived experience of Omani IBA students of their asynchronous online interactions. The meanings that surfaced from our research indicate that one of the key educational attractions of Facebook engagement could be seen in the ease of education-related interactions and exchanges between students. It provides the opportunity to re-engage participants in the learning process, promoting a ‘critical thinking in learners’ about their learning (Selwyn, 2007). Facebook could be used as a good educational tool to organize class activities and student’s communications. Student may interact with each other for many purposes such as getting information about class activities, networking with each other, getting class notes, and to set up meetings and to create project groups (Al-Mashaqbeh, 2015: 60).

In our study, Facebook engagement could be construed as social networking used by our participants in promoting their products, services, or both. It enriched students’ experiences in creating pages then allowed them to search for potential customers or persons with similar interests and invited them to view and possibly joined their page as a friend or follower. Social networking was also used to broadcast announcements or communicate with members (Perryman, 2011). As expressed in our research:

*I Gained from this experience many benefits such as I got to know ways to promote the product in the social media and how to deal with people in a successful manner and think in new and attractive ideas to the customer also the idea of promoting a particular product in the social media attract many customers and increase the sales ratio therefore rises profit it is also famous for the project. (Participant #666)*

According to Greener and Grange (2013), the Facebook application, like other social networks, encourages sharing of knowledge, ideas, friends, thoughts, favorite items of all kinds from leisure activities to places, and is an effective way to promote events. Academic research into

Facebook has been mainly concerned with privacy and digital identity issues but there is an urgent need to explore such technologies in relation to education if teachers are not to be marooned in a technological backwater (Greener and Grange, 2013: 93).

From the narratives, Facebook may appear to be like many other social networks where students are attracted to it because of a combination of self-presentation (Selwyn, 2007) and personal satisfaction from being engaged in social interactions online. As seen in the narratives below, Facebook engagement could be akin to knowledge acquisition in its generic sense, but zooming our lens in the meanings constructed by our research participants would point to one theme, which was related to business.

*How can choose my friends and customer. Moreover, there are many experience I get it from using fecebook. One of this who to use this program in useful way... moreover, I learn how to deal with different customer. so I know that customer have advisers taste. that mean I learn how to choose product that are suitable for all customer with suitable price. (Participant #888)*

Put it in another perspective, to cite Brown and Adler (2008), with technology growing exponentially, the web has provided newer ways to learn. Mobilization of such fast evolving technologies impact how students learn through social media and social networking. A new theoretical framework represents how knowledge is constructed within this growing virtual arena and needs to be further understood by educators. The challenge now is to engage diverse learners in learning not just about something but learning to be a full participant in the field (in Salomone, 2013: 1). In our research, students were active learners and as Salomone (2013) puts it, “*These days, engagement with learning is likely to mean engagement with technology. This is because networked computers seem to offer open-ended possibilities for promoting and supporting engaged learning*” (Salomone, 2013: 1).

Another implication of our research could zoom in the epistemology of engagement, which is construed by Heldref (2003, in Salomone, 2013) as the “*time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities*” (Heldref, 2003, in Salomone, 2013: 8). Krause and Coates (2008, in Salomone, 2013: 17) suggest that engagement is the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes.

If Facebook engagement is a socially mediated phenomenon, and the construction of knowledge through collaboration and active learning is what many teachers in higher education have found to be a more meaningful approach to learning and teaching than offering pure knowledge acquisition, then encouraging students to be connected, using any current technology, makes sense (Greener & Grange, 2013: 93). Students’ reflective interactive experiences and subsequent personalization of experiences in their social interactions online were extremely critical in helping them define their overall engagement experience. The use of active collaborative learning within a meaningful construct created optimal engagement opportunities for students, which helped them stay connected, and ultimately engaged (Salomone, 2013: ix).

## 5. Conclusion

Our research was able to surface meanings from the voices of participants in their technology-mediated communication. In particular, our findings show that the meanings in socially constructed asynchronous online conversations demystify Facebook engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination; a Node for Building Relationships; a Boost for Business Engagement; a Concave of Knowledge and Skills; and, an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment. These themes and sub-themes provided an understanding of Facebook engagement in the context of Arab learners, in particular, among Omanis. We have thickened the discussions of the phenomenon of Facebook engagement and as aptly expressed by Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read (2002): “*Success in the online environment depends on the creation of safe spaces for conversation, problem solving, and intimacy among students who might never meet. The virtual online space provides metaphorical cafés for human contact*” (in Perryman, 2011: 38).

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