

# **(SOCIAL) MEDIA LITERACY COMPETENCIES IN THE WORKPLACE: ENHANCING THE COMMUNICATION OF YOUNG EMPLOYEES**

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# ABSTRACT

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New media technology and social media impact all employees directly and indirectly, becoming a ubiquitous element of the workplace. Members of organizations feel the impact on an individual, group, organizational, and even societal level. Young people especially are heavily influenced by new digital media channels, including social media platforms, which later on impact their communication as they enter the workforce in large numbers. Moreover, their ability to work together, collaborate and coordinate among themselves relies on synchronous and asynchronous communication that happens over digital devices, mainly spurred by various contemporary working arrangements (remote work, hybrid work, coworking, working on mobile technology, and similar). This makes using social networks and other digital media platforms and tools imperative for successfully completing work-related tasks and objectives (Ligurgo, et al., 019). Therefore, enhancing (social) media competencies in the workplace is essential and shapes new ways of working and communicating on different organizational levels. This paper will attempt to answer what the social media literacy competencies needed by young employees to communicate better in a professional work environment are. Answering this question will be addressed from the perspective of a social media literacy (SML) model rather than from the technical aspect. As a data collection method, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with office workers, whereas the results of these interviews were analyzed with the employment of grounded theory. Investment and collaboration for a comprehensive social media literacy education are vital for organizations to start addressing the phenomenon in the workplace and educate the employees on how social media and communication via this platform can better the overall work climate, communication, and well-being.

**Keywords:** media literacy, social media, young employees, communication, workplace



# 1) INTRODUCTION

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We live in a world filled with challenges in numerous aspects, especially in business. The rising prices, unpredictable movement of natural resources, financial crisis, bigger competition, reduced profits, etc., bring the necessity to make some changes on a global scale. This directly impacts organizations and their culture as possible reinvention and inclusion of innovative approaches may be vital to achieving greater employee satisfaction and productivity (Pitt & Bennett, 2008).

Employees play an essential role in the success of the organization in the business surroundings that are changing all the time. In this regard, one of the major changes currently is the shift from manual to knowledge workers. Knowledge workers represent more than 2/3 of the entire workforce (Ramírez & Nembhard, 2004).

Among the essential skills that, aside from employees, everyone should possess to succeed in life are internet connectivity and digital literacy. Therefore, organizations and businesses are at a crossroads provoked by digital changes. It's clear the internet has become a place where most human interactions and activities happen. In their nature, humans need to form relationships, networks, and alliances to build a community for their interests, friends, family, education, religion, and of course work.

Having this in mind, in the previous period, such innovative communities based online occupied the personal and workspaces of employees (Shirky, 2008). This is especially the case with young employees. Still, there are some doubts regarding networking websites that millions of users utilize globally, leading to reserves for sharing personal information.

Regardless, young employees tend to spend a great deal of time on social media, usually for non-work purposes such as engaging with per-

sonal connections, communicating with family and friends, following sports, downloading and streaming content, and similar. With this enhanced presence of social media in people's everyday lives, it has become a necessity to find the balance between the usage of social media and its impact on the productivity of young employees regarding organizational time and resources.

Moreover, participation in social media brings other benefits to youth that should be taken into consideration. They include informal learning, exchange of knowledge, preserving the organizational resources in digital formats, and even enhanced workflow and productivity and effective utilization of computer-aided technologies. Due to this, information technologies and social media have entered the workplace and are inevitably a part of it.

Social media tools are key for effective communication with global customers, coworkers, and suppliers. It's a bridge between continents and countries, helping in the management of the complexity of the global organizational setting. Not to mention that whole processes have been entirely automated because the employees aren't able to complete all required tasks within a specific time-frame anymore. So, in the words of Hutley (2009), 'None of us can work in a vacuum in today's world; we must work with one another to get things done'.

A constant challenge that organizations deal with is contextualizing this occurrence and how it affects the ability of employees to complete tasks at hand and separate the personal and professional utilization of the information technologies of the organization. The wasted time through activities on social media and the internet represents a hidden cost to the organizations. For instance, let's say that an organization has a department comprised of eight people and each of them is on social media or doing some of the aforementioned internet activities for an hour per day. This means an employee goes to waste considering the eight-hour working day.



In terms of disabling access to certain sites and networks, the IT technician can't know every social networking platform to do that. This has also led to an ethical debate about the extent to which employers should monitor the online communication of their employees.

On the other hand, employees, with an emphasis on young ones, experience a challenge related to work overflowing into their personal life. Through the regular use of internet-connected devices to stay in touch with the work network even outside of the office, the employees may find themselves sending emails from home or interacting on organizational social media channels after working hours. It's a fact that more and more professionals use social media platforms daily. Yet the way social networking software is utilized, if it has an impact on the rise or fall of productivity, and the way the enterprise-friendly use and design may advance remain open questions (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). According to Pitkow & Kehoe (1996), social media isn't the primary reason for technological innovations that endanger employee productivity.

Every new technology raises concerns until it is fully understood and endorsed. That was the case with the appearance of telephones in offices, which is still a topic of discussion. This occurrence affected employees' productivity as well, since they spent time talking to people outside of work to build their social network. Personal computers followed; the employees spent a considerable time playing games, threatening their productivity.

Still, the role of social media networks and other information and digital technologies is key for advanced communication between employees, predominantly young employees. Productivity that involves cognitive tasks can be challenging to measure when compared to productivity that can be identified in units. So, there is more room to assess this topic further and see how advancing the (social) media competences in the workplace can lead to better communication between young employees considering the fact that organizations are widely utilizing social media in different operations from marketing to customer outreach.

## 2) LITERATURE REVIEW

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The conceptualization of literacy has been connected to the broader concept of information (Bucher et al., 2013). With that in mind, the term information literacy term was born, achieving its peak usage in the U.S. in the 1980s, 1990s, and even today. Mackey and Jacobson (2011) revisit what was once known as the ability for locating, using information, and evaluating it to become independent individuals who commit to lifelong learning. They outline the literacy framework and the multiple literacy types (media literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, and cyberliteracy) and advocate for the conceptualization of meta-literacy as an "overarching, self-referential, and comprehensive framework that informs other literacy types" (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). This comes at a time when social media and online communication platforms massively entered the workplace and impacted the everyday lives of employees. The traditional thinking of what literacy represents and even what information literacy represents may not suffice now that "being social" has become the new normal in the professional world.

Considering this, the semantics of what literacy means has changed and broadened recently. From gaining the ability to read and write, now it refers to the ability to comprehend and produce information via a variety of media channels (Lanham, 1989). From this, it can be deduced that a media-literate individual refers to someone who can read and participate in the creation and evaluation of messages through various media (Ashley et al., 2013).

During a time when we are all overwhelmed by media and media platforms are at our fingertips, the importance of being media literate is growing by the day. Whether it's analyzed on a societal, group, organizational, or individual level, media



literacy can help foster conversations, new ideas, partnerships, struggles, and opportunities. Barton and Hamilton (2000) point out that we can understand literacy, in general, better based on 1) literacy practices (ways of using the written language and what we do with literacy), 2) literacy events (activities and occurrences, requiring or demanding different literacies), and 3) texts (the focal point of the activities).

The media ecosystem is constantly evolving and complex to be put into a single box. As a result, studies conceptualize various types of media literacy, including news literacy, film literacy, digital literacy, and now social media literacy. Social media platforms increase both in number and popularity by the day. They have become an inseparable part of people's daily lives. These platforms burst with different types of content – the text being one of the core ones – which users create, share, and consume. This active, daily usage of social media brings an onset of fresh literacy events demanding literacy practices.

Social media represents a web-based service, enabling people to open a semi-public or fully public profile in the framework of a system with defined boundaries, generate a list of fellow members of this said system with whom they connect, and browse and explore this list and lists made by others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It functions on user-based activities where both creators and consumers can interchange and, as such, rests on three pillars or constructs – Web 2.0 as the infrastructure, communities of interest, and content generated by the social media users (Ahlqvist et al., 2010).

The relevance of social media is seeing upward trends as users generate, distribute, and filter content based on their needs and preferences. The platforms, themselves encourage contribution, participation, exchange of information and opinions, and providing feedback from interested parties. At first, focusing on young users, now social media platforms have become versatile to accommodate users from various age groups and backgrounds.

In the workplace context, the professional lives of users have easily spilled over on platforms like LinkedIn, and even Facebook employees can be found browsing during working hours. Researchers have analyzed the various benefits of using social media in the workplace. These refer to improvements in communication, morale, engagement, and overall job satisfaction, increased knowledge and skills sharing, increased productivity, recognition and promotion of diversity, and introduction of new ways for informal learning (Pitt & Bennett, 2008; Sophia van Zyl, 2009; Luo et al., 2018).

On the other hand, using social media in the workplace comes with some possible negative aspects and challenges. Organizations can experience higher absenteeism, waste of productive time, decreased work-life balance, abuse of the Internet and social networks usage which can lead to a reduced organizational reputation, addictive features of social media associated with the need for quick feedback, impatience, the rise of self-centrism in employees, and similar (Armstrong et al., 2000; Chen et al., 2008; Kidwell, 2010).

After reviewing the concept of literacy and media literacy historically in literature, as well as defining social media and its impact in the workplace, we can establish what social media literacy is. Its conceptualization is derived from the foundations outlined by media literacy in a way that social media literacy incorporated the social media aspect besides other digital and traditional media. As a result, social media literacy focuses on how efficient and effective users are when they're communicating via the Internet while benefitting social relationships (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2015). Vanwynsberghe and Verdegem (2013) understand it as "practical, cognitive, and affective competences required to access, analyze, evaluate, and create content on social media in a variety of contexts."

As can be seen from the literature review and the definition, the competences play a crucial role in what (social) media represents. Most of the studies reflect on cognitive competences as the top



competences required for this type of literacy. Understanding, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, interpreting information, assessing the motive, purpose, and credibility of social media posts, critical thinking, and related skills can be part of these competences (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). Besides these, other vital competences related to social media literacy include technical, practical, and socio-emotional competences (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). The employees' competences and (social) media literacy is at the heart of our research to explore their connection to overall communication in today's contemporary organizations and business world.

### 3) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in December 2022 – January 2023 with seven (7) employees that use social media in their workplace in civil society organizations and the private sector in Skopje.

The participants were between 23-33 years old. Only employees that use a minimum of one social media platform were chosen for the interviews (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp). The semi-structured interviews were held in Macedonian and English language, facilitated by one of the researchers that asked the questions and guided the discussion while the other one recorded the sessions and transcribed them.

The transcribed data were analyzed using grounded theory and the constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965). The researchers analyzed it in three steps. Firstly, in the open-coding stage, they examined each data line and coded all transcripts independently. The latest codes were compared

to the ones before them to see if the same code suits the following line or if a new code should be made, or if the one before should be modified in any way (Saldaña, 2021). This was done repeatedly until every transcript was coded.

In the second coding stage, the researchers conducted axial coding, during which they grouped the codes into conceptual bins and started the categorization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Eventually, they elaborated the categories from the primary coding and put them into groups based on emerging themes.

### 4) FINDINGS / RESULTS

The interviewees were asked a variety of questions regarding their experience with social media usage, skills as well as challenges they encountered. Their answers were categorized into four (4) key areas that the analysis is based on. The areas are technical competences, awareness about information that's posted on social media, privacy protection skills, and knowledge of social relationships. The examples that appear below are taken from the transcripts of the interviews.

#### *Technical competences*

In this area, the young employees answered how a profile on a social media platform can be opened as well as which challenges they faced while utilizing social media. The aim was to identify how much they know the technical aspects like opening an account, adding or deleting friends, following people, and posting content.

Most of the users know how to launch accounts on different social media platforms, while one 32-year-old male participant said he uses only one



social media platform, LinkedIn, and knows how to make a profile only on this platform. He said that he doesn't post anything "because I don't have time to maintain it, and I use it only to stay in touch with what my colleagues and peers are doing".

Especially the younger participants, aged between 23 and 28 years old, said that they consider themselves knowledgeable of multiple platforms and use at least 2-3 platforms at once, exploring all options they offer.

Regarding the challenges they face while using social media in their workspace, two female and a male participant agreed that they can't respond to messages regularly when they have tasks to complete at work. Another male added that he couldn't post personal content as regularly as he would like due to his focus being on posting content on the organizational social media page.

#### *Awareness of information that's posted on social media*

To see how aware the young employees are of the information posted on social media, they answered whether they have encountered fake news on social media. All of them said that they had seen such news and half of them found the real news afterward.

A female 27-year-old participant said that she always checks the source first and reads the comments to see if the news is legit. "If it's something that's really important to me or my job, I go to the search engines, too, and look for the information in multiple reputable places that I trust".

#### *Privacy protection skills*

Some users stated that privacy is their priority while they are in the online world. "I didn't even add my boss during the first two years on this job", says a female 24-year-old employee.

Most interviewees publish photos and videos of their personal life on Facebook and Instagram, but only three of them said that they accept only peo-

ple they know to be their friends and view their posts. The others expand their network further, no matter if they know the people they accept or not.

On the other hand, only two participants stated that they have enabled two-factor authentication when logging in to their profiles to keep them protected from hacking.

#### *Knowledge of social relationships*

Eventually, the young employees revealed their competences when it comes to social relationships. Most of them confirmed that they follow their colleagues on social media and communicate online with one another during the workday. "We are a big company and I found out that my colleague got her master's degree through Facebook", says one of the male participants.

However, they all agreed that it could sometimes be hard to keep everyone satisfied. A 25-year-old female employee recalls how a post with pictures of a colleague's wedding was a reason for a feud among the team due to the fact that not everyone was invited to the wedding.

Still, when asked whether using social media in the workplace helps them communicate better with their colleagues, five participants gave a positive answer whereas only two consider that their communication remains the same with or without using social media in the workplace.

Below (Table 1) is an overview of the findings through statements of the participants that fall under the specific key social media competences areas that were discussed.



**Table 1:** Statements from the semi-structured interviews

Technical competences	Awareness of information	Privacy protection skills	Knowledge of social relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I use Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram during the day.</li> <li>▶ I can make an account on all social media platforms.</li> <li>▶ I don't have time to maintain my LinkedIn profile, and I use it only to stay in touch with what my colleagues and peers are doing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I have seen fake news in my feed.</li> <li>▶ If it's something that's really important to me or my job I go to the search engines, too, and look for the information in multiple reputable places that I trust.</li> <li>▶ I know who can see what I post and what they can do with the information.</li> <li>▶ I don't always believe what I read on social media without checking the source first.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I have a two-factor authentication enabled every time I log into my account.</li> <li>▶ I only accept people I know to be my friends.</li> <li>▶ I want to have more friends and followers on social media, so I accept everyone.</li> <li>▶ Privacy is my top priority. I didn't even add my boss during the first two years on this job.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ I follow my colleagues on social media and we communicate there during working hours.</li> <li>▶ We are a big company and I found out that my colleague got her master's degree through Facebook.</li> <li>▶ My colleague posted pictures of her wedding and everyone saw it. Those that weren't invited confronted her about it in the lunch area.</li> <li>▶ Using social media in the workplace helps me communicate better with my colleagues.</li> <li>▶ It's the same for me with or without social media when it comes to communicating with my colleagues.</li> </ul>

**Source:** The author's interpretation.

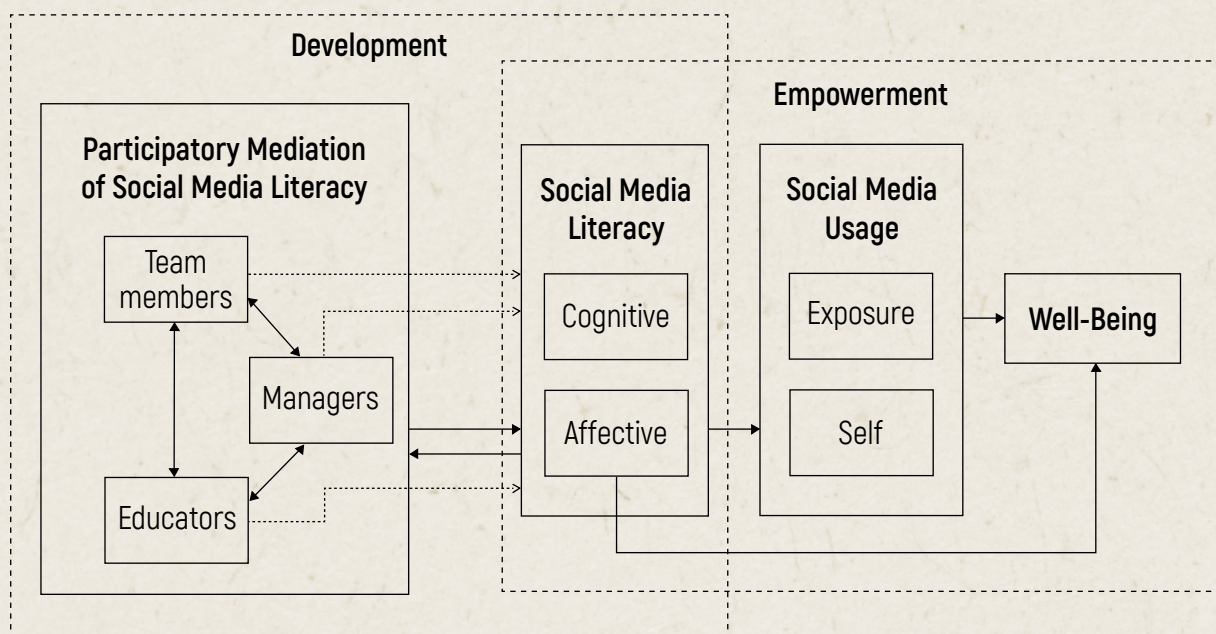


# 5) DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the context of improving social media literacy levels and related competences of employees at work, we adapt the Social Media Literacy (SMILE) model, which was first developed by Schreurs and Vandenbosch (2020). The model aims to map and understand the mechanism and processes relating to social media literacy to empower social media users (in our case, employees who use social media) and develop social media literacy. The empowerment aspect of the model is based on the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). In contrast, the model's development aspect is grounded in an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), pointing out that users can develop social media literacy when interacting with the environment. An overview of the adapted SMILE model, which we propose, is given in Figure 1.

The model assigns social media literacy the role of a moderator and a predictor. It acts as a moderator between the users' consumption of social media and their well-being. Their competences regarding social media literacy should help employees understand how to use social media for their and their organization's benefit and mitigate the negative effects. This will most likely lead to better communication in the workplace, a positive work climate, and ultimately well-being for all parties involved. Moreover, social media literacy acts as a predictor in the sense that it impacts the content preferences of the users. This may most likely be a result of the user's personal social media behavior and exposure to other pieces of content on social platforms. When users have the skills to use social media in the right way, their content preferences will change as a result of that. So, informational, educational, and factful content is shared and prioritized.

**Figure 1:** Adapted Social Media Literacy (SMILE) model



**Source:** Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). *The bioecological model of human development*. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (p. 797). New York, NY: Wiley.



An important element of the model is the reciprocal and conditional processing occurring between the actors in the model, including the employees or the social media users themselves, on the one hand, and the team members, management, and educators on the other hand. These processes grounded in the socialization theory (Grusec & Hastings, 2015), argue that different actors in the environment don't affect people individually, rather, they work in synergy and simultaneously, thus weakening or strengthening each other. With that in mind, the development of social media literacy will be fruitful when one actor interacts with the impact of other fellow actors.

Accordingly, the model points out that employees acquire different social media literacy competences based on the type of actor or agent they interact with. We emphasize team members, managers, and educators as crucial agents in this model. As such, we can talk about socialization and qualification actors (Biesta, 2006). The former explores the development of social media literacy in informal surrounding with team members and peers. When employees share their personal views, knowledge, opinions, and experiences, they acquire new skills as part of a social group, which in our case, refers to a team within a business organization or the entire organization. Creating a mutual channel of learning where everyone learns from everyone is paramount in nurturing social media literate members of the organization. Opposing this, qualification is a more formal and structural way of acquiring new skills. Educators (external consultants, researchers, workshop facilitators, and similar) are an exemplary type of actor that facilitates this form of learning. These people are usually in charge of instructing employees how to comprehend, use, and evaluate messages in the media.

Considering the conclusions of the published literature, our qualitative research, and the adapted SMILE model, we can stress that nurturing and facilitating the process of acquiring new social media literacy skills in the employees is beneficial for the work climate, professional communication,

and well-being. Only through a structured and systemized education on this topic can managers and members of an organization see the benefits of using social media even in the professional surrounding. As social media becomes ubiquitous and new generations, including Generation Z, become present in the workforce, all interested parties should work towards bringing this topic into the limelight and investing more in this type of education.

## **6) LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Some limitations to this study exist and, at the same time, influence the potential next opportunities for new research. The research was largely conducted through a literature review and a qualitative research method, i.e., semi-structured interviews. This may guide further research and efforts to try qualitative approaches like surveys that employ standardized questions and a Likert scale as a complementary analysis. The study focuses predominantly on Skopje and the broader surrounding of the Republic of North Macedonia. Yet, other countries may deal with other factors and different social contexts. As a result, future research can explore in more detail the state of social media literacy in the workplace across multiple countries. Eventually, semi-structured interviews can result in subjective interpretation, which can be considered a limitation. Therefore, one should be cautious when generalizing the conclusions and findings of the research.



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