

COGNITIVE MECHANISMS OF CRITICAL MEDIA INFORMATION PROCESSING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Mukhabbat Adizova

Researcher, Bukhara International University

Abstract. *The paper examines the cognitive mechanisms involved in the critical processing of media information among university students. Particular attention is given to selective attention, information comprehension, cognitive evaluation, comparison of alternative sources, cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, reflection and metacognitive control. It is argued that critical processing of media information does not occur as a single cognitive act but represents a sequence of interconnected mental operations through which a student moves from initial perception of a media message to a reasoned judgement about its reliability and significance.*

Keywords: *media information; cognitive processing; university students; critical thinking; cognitive flexibility; selective attention; reflection; metacognition; information evaluation.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital environment has substantially changed the conditions under which university students receive and process information. Social networks, digital news platforms, video services, messengers, blogs and algorithmically selected content have become everyday sources of knowledge about social, educational, scientific and cultural events. Under these conditions, the psychological problem is not simply how much information a student can access but how that information is cognitively processed (Hobbs, 2011).

Exposure to a large amount of digital content does not necessarily result in deeper knowledge. Rapid transitions between short messages, images, videos, headlines and comments may encourage fragmented and superficial information processing. One of the central psychological aspects of media literacy is therefore the ability to transform immediate exposure to information into conscious cognitive analysis. The purpose of

this paper is to examine the cognitive mechanisms that underlie the critical processing of media information among university students.

MAIN PART

The psychological significance of selective attention lies in the fact that it determines which information enters further cognitive processing. If attention is systematically directed toward emotionally provocative or personally agreeable content, the student's perception of a particular issue may gradually become one-sided. Critical media processing therefore begins not only with evaluating information that has already been selected but also with understanding why particular information attracted attention in the first place.

Jabbor (2019), examining the psycholinguistic analysis of textual material, draws attention to the psychological processes involved in the perception and comprehension of texts. This approach is also relevant to contemporary media information because digital messages frequently combine textual, visual and contextual elements. Previous knowledge plays a particularly important role: when the topic is unfamiliar, students may rely more strongly on the authority, popularity or external appearance of the source, rather than on the evidence it presents (Potter, 2019).

The cognitive evaluation of information begins when a student moves beyond the question "What does this message say?" and asks "Why should I consider this information reliable?" Comprehension and acceptance are not identical psychological processes. At this stage, students need to analyse the source, evidence, logical consistency, context and possible purpose of the media message. Jabbor (2020), analysing the essence of cognitive methods in psychological research, emphasises the importance of cognitive constructs and individual cognitive characteristics in understanding personality functioning. Applied to media information, this suggests that students may use different strategies when organising, interpreting and evaluating the same content (Cheng et al., 2024).

Comparison represents another essential cognitive mechanism. A single source provides only one informational perspective. When students compare several independent sources, they can identify which elements are consistently reported, where interpretations differ and what information remains uncertain. Cognitive biases may complicate this process: students may pay greater attention to information that confirms

their existing views while applying stricter criteria to contradictory information. The popularity of a post or the approval of other users may also influence judgements even when these indicators provide no direct evidence of accuracy (Buckingham, 2019).

Media messages that provoke fear, anger, excitement or moral outrage can narrow attention and encourage rapid responses. The ability to recognise emotional activation and temporarily delay a conclusion provides additional conditions for deeper cognitive analysis. The speed of digital communication makes this especially relevant to information sharing: a student may understand that a message has not been verified but still redistribute it because it appears urgent, interesting or emotionally important (Hobbs, 2011).

Recent research on university students supports the importance of these higher-order cognitive processes. Galindo-Domínguez et al. (2025) indicate that the effects of digital media depend considerably on how students engage with information rather than simply on whether they use social networks. Critical thinking, metacognition, self-regulation and source evaluation have been identified as important components of meaningful interaction with digital information.

CONCLUSION

Critical media information processing is a complex cognitive activity that involves considerably more than receiving and remembering information. It includes selective attention, comprehension, contextual interpretation, source analysis, evidence evaluation, comparison, cognitive flexibility, reflection and metacognitive control. These mechanisms operate as an interconnected system through which students transform fragmented media content into consciously evaluated knowledge.

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