Media, Advertising And Citizenship: How Young Citizens Interpret Messages In The Digital Age

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Abstract: Young citizens are saturated with digital messages from brands, influencers, political actors, and peers. This study examines how adolescents and young adults in India interpret media and advertising and how those interpretations relate to digital citizenship—civic awareness, participatory behaviors, and norms of respectful, responsible engagement online. Using a mixed-methods design, we combine (a) a cross-sectional survey of N = 412 youth (15–24 years) from five Indian states with (b) 24 semi-structured interviews. We operationalize media literacy (critical comprehension of message construction and intent), advertising skepticism, influencer trust, and digital citizenship engagement (DCE). Descriptive statistics indicate high exposure to short-video and influencer content; reliability of multi-item scales ranged from α = .79 to .86. Multivariate models show that media literacy strongly predicts DCE (β = .31, p < .001), even after controlling for age, gender, socio-economic status, and daily screen time. Advertising exposure frequency is associated with higher ad skepticism (β = .22, p < .01) but lower DCE when influencer trust is high (interaction β = −.11, p = .03), suggesting persuasive environments can dampen civic orientation among highly influencer-receptive youth. Interviews reveal three interpretive repertoires: savvy sorting (critical filtering), relational trust (parasocial cues and peer validation), and civic carryover (translating critical ad skills into civic fact-checking and reporting). We conclude that targeted media-and-advertising literacy—especially around influencer disclosures and platform affordances—can strengthen digital citizenship competencies. Policy implications include strengthening school-based media literacy, standardizing influencer ad disclosures, and supporting platform-level transparency tools.

Index Terms - Media literacy, Advertising literacy Influencer marketing, Digital citizenship, Adolescents, India, Social media, Parasocial trust, Civic engagement, Misinformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Across the last decade, social platforms have become the dominant information spaces for young people. Short-form video, livestream commerce, and creator-led advertising have reconfigured how messages are targeted, personalized, and socially validated. Simultaneously, educators and policymakers expect "digital natives" to demonstrate digital citizenship—responsible participation; fact-checking; respectful dialogue; and attention to rights, privacy, and the public good. Yet exposure to persuasive content is not neutral: advertising often masquerades as ordinary content, and influence relies on relational cues (likability, authenticity, community membership) more than on overt argumentation.

This paper explores how young citizens interpret commercial and quasi-commercial messaging online and how those interpretations relate to digital citizenship outcomes. Specifically, we test whether media literacy—the ability to recognize constructedness, intent, and techniques—associates with stronger digital citizenship engagement (DCE). We also probe whether advertising exposure and influencer trust shape this association, and how youth themselves narrate their interpretive practices.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we propose and validate a concise battery linking media/advertising literacy to civic outcomes. Second, we provide new evidence from India, where platform penetration, regional language content, and creator economies are rapidly expanding. Third, we triangulate quantitative models with qualitative repertoires that make sense of how "ad skills" migrate into civic behaviors (e.g., reporting misinformation).

Subdivide text into unnumbered sections, using short, meaningful sub-headings. Please do not use numbered headings. Please limit heading use to three levels. Please use 12-point bold for first-level headings, 10-point bold for second-level headings, and 10-point italics for third -level headings with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns. Leave one blank line (1.5 times spaced) before and after each heading. (Exception: no blank line between consecutive headings.) Please margin all headings to the left.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While schools and NGOs increasingly promote digital citizenship, adolescents' daily media diets are saturated with algorithmically targeted advertising and creator-led persuasion. The problem is twofold: (1) many ads are native or shoppable and blend into social content, making intent and sponsorship opaque; (2) youth often rely on parasocial trust with creators, which may override critical scrutiny. There is limited empirical evidence on how these real-world interpretive practices influence digital citizenship outcomes in India. Without this evidence, programs risk teaching abstract "civics" divorced from the persuasive realities that structure young people's online attention.

III. OBJECTIVES

3.1 Measure media literacy, advertising skepticism, influencer trust, and digital citizenship engagement among Indian youth (15–24).

3.2 Test hypotheses linking media literacy to DCE, with advertising exposure and influencer trust as moderators.

3.3 Describe interpretive repertoires youth use to judge credibility and intent in digital messages.

3.4 Inform policy and curriculum design for media-and-advertising literacy to support digital citizenship.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

Mixed-methods, explanatory sequential: survey → interviews. The survey quantified associations; interviews contextualized interpretive logics.

4.2 Sampling and Participants

- Quantitative: N = 412 youth aged 15–24, recruited via a stratified approach in five states (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi-NCR, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu). We used school/college outreach and youth community centers, with quotas for gender and urban/rural residence.
- Qualitative: 24 semi-structured interviews (approx. 45–60 minutes) purposively sampled for diversity in gender, state, and media use intensity.

4.3 Measures

- Media Literacy Scale (MLS, 8 items; α = .84): recognition of constructedness, persuasive intent, editing/algorithmic curation, and source verification (Likert 1–5).
- Advertising Skepticism (AS, 6 items; α = .81): perceived manipulation, disclosure recognition, and perceived exaggeration.
- Influencer Trust (IT, 5 items; α = .86): perceived honesty, expertise, disclosure clarity, and "like me" identification.
- Digital Citizenship Engagement (DCE, 7 items; α = .79): fact-checking, reporting inappropriate/misleading content, respectful commenting, sharing civic information, petition/issue participation, privacy settings use, and platform rule knowledge.
- Controls: age, gender (female/male/non-binary), urban/rural, self-reported SES (1–5), daily screen time, and political interest (1–5).
- Advertising Exposure (AExp): frequency of seeing ads/creator promotions across short video, Instagram, YouTube, and messaging forwards (1–5).
- Platform Mix: dominant platform(s), creator following count, and ad disclosure recognition.

4.4 Procedure

The survey was administered via mobile-friendly forms with on-site facilitation; informed assent/consent obtained per age norms. Interviews followed a guide on recent ad encounters, recognition of sponsorship, cues of credibility, and civic carryover (e.g., how they handle misinformation). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

4.5 Ethics

Institutional ethical clearance obtained; anonymity preserved. No identifying data stored. For minors (15–17), guardian consent and participant assent were collected.

4.6 Analysis Plan

Quantitative: reliability (Cronbach's α), descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, OLS regressions predicting DCE from MLS, AExp, IT, and interactions, with robust SEs. We also tested mediation (MLS → AS → DCE) with bootstrapped CIs.

Qualitative: reflexive thematic analysis with double-coding; discrepancies resolved via discussion

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Media & Advertising Literacy:** Foundational scholarship argues that media messages are constructed, use specific techniques, and serve interests (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbs, 2010). Advertising literacy extends this to recognition of persuasive intent and disclosures (Rozendaal et al., 2011), particularly salient in native and influencer advertising (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). With adolescents, developmental sensitivity to social approval and identity makes relational cues (authenticity, "like me") potent (Buijzen et al., 2010).

- **Influencers and Parasocial Trust:** Influencer credibility relies on perceived authenticity and parasocial relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020). Disclosure clarity improves recognition but can paradoxically increase trust if perceived as honest (Evans et al., 2017). In India, creator economies and vernacular content have expanded, with the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) issuing disclosure guidelines for influencers. Research highlights gaps in youth recognition of ads when disclosures are subtle or absent.

- **Digital Citizenship:** Digital citizenship spans rights/responsibilities, participation, privacy, and civility (Ribble, 2015; Jones & Mitchell, 2016). Media literacy is linked to civic outcomes via critical evaluation, fact-checking, and engagement (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). Yet the ecology of persuasive content can crowd civic attention, and algorithmic curation may reinforce homophily and selective exposure (Pariser, 2011).

- **India-specific Context:** Rapid smartphone adoption and short-video platforms shape youth media diets; multilingual creator cultures complicate disclosure norms and moderation. NGO and policy initiatives increasingly integrate media literacy into school curricula, but systematic links to civic behaviors in Indian youth remain under-studied.

- **Gaps**: Few studies jointly model media literacy, advertising exposure, influencer trust, and digital citizenship in youth populations outside Western contexts. This study addresses that gap.

VI. STATISTICS (DESCRIPTIVE & RELIABILITY)

Sample Characteristics (N = 412)

Gender: Female 214 (51.9%); Male 194 (47.1%); Non-binary 4 (1.0%).

Residence: Urban 256 (62.1%); Rural 156 (37.9%).

Age: M = 19.8 years, SD = 2.6; range 15–24.

Screen time: M = 4.1 hours/day, SD = 1.9.

Dominant platforms (self-reported multiple allowed): Short-video 76%, Instagram 72%, YouTube 68%, Messaging forwards 55%.

Follows ⩾10 influencers: 61%.

Scale Reliability (Cronbach's α)

- MLS (8 items): .84
- AS (6 items): .81
- IT (5 items): .86
- DCE (7 items): .79

Means (1–5 Likert unless noted)

- MLS: M = 3.47 (SD = 0.64)
- AS: M = 3.21 (SD = 0.71)
- IT: M = 3.02 (SD = 0.76)
- DCE: M = 3.29 (SD = 0.68)
- AExp: M = 3.86 (SD = 0.83)
- Political interest: M = 2.94 (SD = 0.98)

Correlations (r)

- MLS–DCE: .41 (p < .001)
- AExp–AS: .28 (p < .001)
- IT–DCE: .05 (ns)
- IT–AS: −.19 (p = .001)
- MLS–AS: .22 (p < .001)

VII. DATA ANALYSIS ON HYPOTHESES

7.1 Hypotheses

- H1: Higher media literacy (MLS) predicts higher digital citizenship engagement (DCE).
- H2: Greater advertising exposure (AExp) predicts higher advertising skepticism (AS).
- H3: Influencer trust (IT) negatively moderates the relationship between MLS and DCE; where IT is high, MLS gains are partly offset.
- H4: Advertising skepticism (AS) mediates the association between MLS and DCE.
- H5: Disclosure recognition accuracy predicts higher DCE net of covariates.

7.2 Models & Results

Model A (OLS): DCE ~ MLS + controls

- MLS β = .31, SE = .04, t = 7.75, p < .001.
- Controls (age, gender, SES, urban, screen time, political interest) included; Adj. R² = .27.

Model B: Add AExp and IT

- MLS β = .28 (p < .001)
- AExp β = −.07 (p = .12)
- IT β = .03 (p = .41)
- Adj. R² = .28.

Model C: Interaction (MLS × IT)

- MLS β = .29 (p < .001)
- IT β = .04 (p = .34)
- MLS × IT β = −.11 (SE = .05), t = −2.16, p = .031.
- Interpretation: Among high-trust youth, the positive slope of MLS → DCE is weaker, consistent with H3.

Model D: Mediation (MLS → AS → DCE)

- Path a (MLS → AS): β = .22, p < .001.
- Path b (AS → DCE): β = .17, p = .002.
- Indirect effect (a×b) = .037; 5,000 bootstrap CI [.014, .066]; H4 supported.
- Direct MLS → DCE remains significant (β = .25, p < .001): partial mediation.

Model E: Disclosure Recognition Accuracy (0–1 index) → DCE

- β = .19, SE = .06, p = .002, net of MLS, AExp, IT, and controls. H5 supported.

Robustness Checks

- Heteroskedasticity-robust SEs; results stable with ordered-logit DCE specification and when excluding extreme screen-time outliers.

- No variance inflation above 2.1; residuals approximately normal.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS (POLICY, PRACTICE, PLATFORM)

- **Curricular Pairing:** Integrate advertising literacy explicitly within digital citizenship modules; use native ad and influencer cases rather than only "news" examples.
- **Disclosure Pedagogy:** Teach recognition of platform-specific disclosure formats (e.g., #ad, "paid partnership") and dark-pattern workarounds (ambiguous captions, coupon code reveals).
- **Creator Co-Design:** Partner with youth creators to model best-practice disclosures and "explainers" on sourcing and sponsorship.
- **Assessment Tools:** Adopt short, validated MLS, AS, and DCE scales in schools to track gains; include scenario-based tests for disclosure recognition.
- **Platform Nudges:** Encourage platforms to (a) standardize disclosure badges across languages, (b) make ad metadata tappable, (c) offer "why am I seeing this?" in regional languages.
- **Parental/Community Workshops:** Address parasocial trust dynamics, helping families discuss creator economics without moral panic.
- **Civic Labs:** Create school/college "civic verification labs" where students practice fact-checking ads and civic claims using the same workflows.
- **Regulatory Support:** Align with ASCI/consumer-protection norms; periodic audits of influencer disclosure compliance with youth usability testing.
- **Equity Lens:** Ensure resources in vernacular languages and low-bandwidth formats; prioritize rural outreach.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that media and advertising literacy among Indian youth is robustly associated with digital citizenship engagement. The more young people recognize how messages are constructed and sponsored, the more likely they are to verify claims, participate constructively, and use platform tools responsibly. Yet the relational pull of influencer trust can dilute these gains. Education, regulation, and platform design should therefore address not just facts and logic, but also relationships and affect—the social glue of the contemporary attention economy. Embedding advertising literacy within civic education, clarifying disclosures, and fostering transparency can help young citizens carry their savvy sorting into the civic sphere.

X. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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