Are Youths Today Media Literate? A Singapore Study on Youth’s Awareness and Perceived Confidence in Media Literacy Skills

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ABSTRACT
Although youths today are “born digital” and apparently conversant transposing across different media, it is unclear how media literate they are or think they are. Using Singapore youths (13-16 years old) as an example, this study investigates youth’s perceived media literacy skills and their confidence in these skills. A total of 229 survey responses were collected from two local secondary schools. Findings revealed that of the 5 literacy skills identified by UNESCO, they scored well in awareness and confidence in skills as media consumers except lacked skills as media producers.

Keywords
Media awareness, media literacy, secondary education, self-efficacy, perceived confidence, Singapore.

INTRODUCTION
Media literacy has been widely researched, commonly centered on: (i) testing effectiveness of media studies programmes (Duran, Yousman, Walsh, & Longshore, 2008); (ii) training educators on teaching computer literacy (Guo, Dobson, & Petrina, 2008); and (iii) evaluating media effects on youth’s confidence to make healthy choices (Bergsma & Carney, 2008). But, little has been researched on the levels of media literacy and perceived confidence young students possess before entering a formal media education. Also, there are more media literacy studies carried out in the West compared to the East (Cheung, 2009).

Studies have shown that the younger generation use media in various forms much easier, and assimilate information at a faster rate than from the older generation due to more exposure to different channels of media. But the questions we want to ask are: Although youths today are “born digital” and apparently conversant transposing across different media, are they really media literate? Do they possess appropriate literacy skills to benefit from the media-rich environments?

Using Singapore youths as an example, this paper aims to investigate their levels of awareness and perceived confidence in relation to media literacy skills. The purpose was to identify and understand knowledge gaps in their media literacy skills and make suggestions to address these gaps in education.

The rest of paper is organized as follows. First, we survey related studies on digital youths, media saturation and literacy. Second, we describe our study, research questions and hypotheses. Third, we discuss our findings and policy recommendations for literacy education.

THE STUDY
Definition of Media Literacy
In reviewing recent literatures (e.g. Buckingham, 1995; Tyner, 1992; etc.), we found that definitions on media literacy vary. Although our attempt in compiling these different viewpoints may not be comprehensive, it gives an indication of the key concepts/themes considered when discussing media literacy (see Table 1).

Table 1. Compilation of Themes Observed from Literatures on Media Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme observed</th>
<th>Key concepts (By)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy, New Literacies</td>
<td>• “Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society” (Kellner &amp; Share, 2005, p. 369)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• New literacies emerge in response to the technical, epistemological and cultural order changes (Corio et al., 2008; Knobel &amp; Lankshear, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbrella term, Multi-literacies</td>
<td>• Literacies being bundle together for a medium, like cine-literacy, television-literacy and game-literacy can be seen as subset of media literacy (Burn &amp; Durran, 2007; Potter, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Convergence of literacies is required; no longer simple notion of access and usage, for example Internet literacy requires both media and information literacy (Livingstone, 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a subset literacy</td>
<td>• Conflicting views as to which is the subset literacy (Information Literacy vs. Media Literacy) comes from differences in point of view as from the Information Science and Library Studies or from the broadcasting and audiovisual media fields (Livingstone, 2008, p. 107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• For example, Elements of Information Literacy, presented media literacy within information literacy framework (Eisenberg, Lowe, &amp; Spitzer, 2004, p. 10), whereas information as a form of media may be conceived as subset of media literacy more generally (Burn &amp; Durran, 2007, p. 5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New Pedagogy

- Both learning about media and learning through media shall be implemented with new pedagogy, so that learners are equipped to handle the media both in consumption and production (Buckingham, 1995; Hobbs, 1998).

New Age Learner

- Digital natives and digital immigrants will all have to depend on lifelong learning correspondingly to media evolvement with digital technologies. (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998)

Aim

In this study, we aimed to investigate Singapore youth’s media literacy skills and their perceived confidence in using these skills. In particular, the study focused on secondary school students (13-16 years old). Specifically, two research questions (RQs) asked were:

- **RQ1.** What media literacy skills do secondary school students have?
- **RQ2.** How confident are secondary school students using these skills?

Participants

Since the study was focused on “digital natives”, our participant recruitment covered Singapore youths born between 1991 and 1997. These youths were born digital and tech-savvy. Two schools, out of six approached, agreed to participate in this study. These government-supported schools were located in public housing neighbourhoods and offered similar courses across three streams of study, namely, Express (E), Normal Academic (NA), and Normal Technical (NT), with E and NA streams offering academically-based curricula while NT stream offering practice-oriented curricula.

Design of Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was created based on literature reviews and items were grouped accordingly to each construct important to answer the three research questions. The survey instrument consisted of 5 sections with survey items on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 2 on the constructs and associated items):

- **Section A** on exposure (EX) to media types; experience (EP) and Relationship Support (RP).
- **Section B** on perceived media literacy skills (SK).
- **Section C** on awareness (AW) of media literacy.
- **Section D** on perceived confidence/self-efficacy (SE).
- **Section E** on demographics, media usage and ownership.

Table 2. Items in the Survey Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Key References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Media Literacy (AW)</td>
<td>AW -What is the student’s awareness level in knowing how to access media, being able to understand and critique media message, and able to create media message?</td>
<td>UNESCO (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills (SK)</td>
<td>Abilities the student perceived to be developing with reference to UNESCO’s skill list (p 18-19) SK1 Access and Selection of</td>
<td>UNESCO (2008); Thoman &amp; Jolls,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Confidence (Self-efficacy) (SE)</td>
<td>The student’s perceived confidence in relation to media literacy skills. SE1 Self-efficacy in technology SE2 Self-efficacy in enlisting help/support SE3 Self-efficacy for self-learning SE4 Self-regulatory efficacy SE5 Self-efficacy for meeting other’s expectation SE6 Social self-efficacy SE7 Self-assertive efficacy</td>
<td>Bandura (1994, 2006b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure (EX)</td>
<td>The amount of exposure or access to Digital media/Online skills environment. TM – exposure/access to Traditional Media (e.g. TV/Radio broadcast, Print media, Arcade gaming) NM – exposure/access to New Media (e.g. Online entertainment, Blog/tweets webpage, Game console/LAN, mobile)</td>
<td>Ito et al. (2009); Livingstone, Bober &amp; Helsper (2005); Prensky (2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship (RP)</td>
<td>The nature of relationship between student and their role models (teacher, parent, peers) for help and support.</td>
<td>Ito et al. (2009); Livingstone, Bober &amp; Helsper (2005);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience (EP)</td>
<td>The amount of experience a student has through participation in digital activities/using Web 2.0 tools. MM – Media manipulation (e.g. compositing, editing) PG – Playing games IM – Information management CS – Collaboration and Sharing</td>
<td>Ito et al. (2009); Livingstone, Bober &amp; Helsper (2005);</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The survey instrument was pilot-tested and refined based on feedback before using it for data collection over a period of three weeks in 2009.

Data Analysis

Data extracted from the survey responses was entered into SPSS 17.0 software for statistical analysis. This also included clustering data into relevant groupings, identifying relations between variables, noting patterns and significance at which they occur. The instrument’s internal reliability was tested using Cronbach’s alpha (α), “most commonly used test for the scale reliability” (Blakie, 2003). Constructs (AW, SK, SE, EP) returned a high value of α above 0.7, except for constructs RP and EX with α = 0.467 and α = 0.599 respectively, which are still moderately acceptable (Nunnally, 1975).
FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

Demographics
Of the 389 students surveyed, only 229 responses were found to be complete. The number of completed returns meets the minimum sample size of 119 (alpha=0.5, t=1.96, population=10,000) for continuous data. Table 3 shows students’ demographic profiles.

Table 3.
Profiles of Respondents of Completed Surveys (n=229)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 &amp; above</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal*</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec 1</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec 2</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec 3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec 4</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Normal (Academic): 92 (40.2%) and Normal (Technical): 28 (12.2%)

When asked to pick the most desired gadget from a list of eight commonly owned digital gadgets, having a laptop came up tops (n=32; 27.4%), followed by a high-end mobile gadget such as a Blackberry/PDA (n=24; 20.5%), both enabling them to gain access to the Internet. 78.6% reported that the digital gadgets owned (e.g. laptops, mobile phones, etc.) were bought by their parents. Over half the respondents (n=115; 65.9%) confessed to having difficulty giving up their digital gadgets.

Media Literacy Skills (UNESCO) (RQ1)
The skills surveyed were based on UNESCO’s media and information literacy goals for secondary education-level students (see Table 2): (i) access and selection of sources (SK1); (ii) critical reading (SK2); (iii) expression and production (SK3); (iv) appropriation (SK4); and (v) participation (SK5).

In terms of SK1, findings show an excellent use of search engines, and there was a strong preference for using the Internet compared to the Library’s OPAC for searching media. They had search and access skills to seek and download songs, videos for entertainment, and materials for class project. They were developing skills driven by their interests, congruent to findings from Ito et al. (2009).

For SK2 on critical reading of media, it is shown that students were able to frame meaning to understand media context. However, they still lacked questioning skills in evaluating media values. Our findings also suggest that “the Google Generation” relies heavily on search engines, but possesses less analytical skills to evaluate information found on the Web.

Active creators like the youths use a wide range of digital tools to express themselves, interpret the work around them would deepen their understanding of media content (Cheung, 2009). But, low scores were obtained for media expression and production (SK3). Findings show that they needed both guidance in media concepts and development of technical production skills.

In relation to SK4 and SK5, they fared quite well. They were careful on what content they shared online. Highly noted were their positive responses to understanding of online safety, security and privacy, and respecting copyright and intellectual property.

Self-efficacy: Perceived confidence in media literacy skills (RQ2)
Overall, the respondents did not have a high level of confidence in using technology, even though they were moderately confident in trying, using, and selecting appropriate technical gadgets. Findings show that students’ self-learning efficacy was high, ranging between 65% – 82%, on learning how to use the Internet, gadgets and production.

This study clearly supported Ito’s (2009) research which highlighted youths were often going to peers more than their teacher when using new media. Thus, in terms of enlisting help whether it was schoolwork or having social interactions online, it was not surprising that they registered higher confidence in enlisting help from other students, peers and siblings.

They were confident that they could meet other’s expectations, living up to their own expectations. They were able to self-regulate online playing (69.5%). They also reported moderately confident in resisting peer pressure get them to do unreasonable things and getting into trouble online (>60%).

However, they had low confidence to express their opinions when other online users disagreed with them. Socially, they indicated high confidence making and keeping friends, discussing work in group collaboration. Apart from the ability to use digital technology, youths’ degree of self-reliance, social intelligence and dialogue with others in relation with our culture and civic values is required to being media literate.

CONCLUSION
Overall, this study found out that students were more exposed to new media as an entertainment and communication choice. From the findings, even though there was overall fair level of skills acquired, media literacy skills the students were developing were more for media consumption than creative expression and production. Based on UNESCO’s five media literacy skills, concerns were on the lack of critical reading of media, and the limited opportunities for learning media production skills. However, they were aware of online dangers and legal guidelines. Socially, they were able to participate and handle communication online. They had a high level of confidence in socializing online. However, they were not confident with rapidly changing technologies, and hence a lack of media production skills to enable them to produce meaningful media content confidently. This study confirmed they preferred to get help from friends, more than from their teachers, if encountered problems with digital gadgets. However, since their parents were the ones that afforded them with
the tools, and being closer to them, parents were next in line for seeking both for help and support. Within a short expand of five years, new sites and web tools (Wikipedia, Facebook, iTunes, YouTube) became commonplace very quickly. Many digital natives go online to learn and communicate using the Internet, computers, mobile phone and many other digital gadgets in ways that were not possible in previous generations (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2002).

So, while they were well-versed with own gadgets, they were not sure of available Web tools (e.g., Wiki, twitter, RSS, Mashup, virtual world; etc.) that enables collaborations Therefore, teachers may want to consider technology infusion, not just software program inclusion, for their new pedagogy design (Buckingham, 1995; Hobbs, 1998). Release the classroom tasks that limit the student’s participation like students using powerpoint slides to supplement presentation. Perhaps teachers should engage students through media collaboration by infusing web tools to ensure that they were not just moving fingers but critically problem solving and communicating with the teacher. This also implies that teachers will have to reconsider how to assess students’ divergent responses for their project work.

Findings also show that parents are giving digital gadgets to their children, and the students reported seeking parents’ help more often over their teachers. Therefore, parents should supervise/monitor media usage and not leave it to our youths to learn via own mistakes or from their friends. Educators also, cited other countries like US’s and European’s Centre for Media Literacy, want parents to be involved in inculcating media literacy at home.

The study has generated some interesting findings, and we are in the process of analyzing the data. It is pertinent that more of such studies be conducted and analysed for policy making in literacy education and consumer training.

REFERENCES