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The Digital Age's Impact on Generational approaches to Historical Literacy

Introduction

The digital age has established a new relationship between people and their historical past. The process of historical understanding now operates as a decentralized system which produces multiple conflicting interpretations through various digital platforms. The modern world offers complete access to extensive historical content, yet it creates multiple problems because of false information and biased algorithms and divided public discussions. The complex information environment demands educators to redefine historical literacy while understanding how different media environments affect each generation's historical understanding. The digital era has revolutionized how people learn about history through new opportunities, yet it creates multiple difficulties which affect different age groups in distinct ways. The analysis of this transformation serves as an academic necessity because it helps develop citizens who can handle modern democratic information environments (Wineburg 2018). The report investigates digital and historical literacy principles before studying different generational approaches to history and evaluating digital information systems' advantages and disadvantages to establish methods for developing strong historical literacy in the digital era.

Historical Literacy and Digital Competence Frameworks

Deconstructing Historical Literacy

Historical Literacy, or historical thinking, is an academic concept that goes beyond memorization of names, dates and places (Wineburg 2018). Research showed that the reliance on "narration pedagogy" when it is a direct feature of history teaching,

it leads students to experience history as rigid and static or simply boring. Thus, being a negative outcome that hinders their capacity to engage in higher-order thinking skills (Hobbs 2010). A critical analysis of history, on the other hand, is based in a series of investigative skills that empower individuals to help produce meaning and narrative through active construction. These foundational skills are to sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating. Sourcing can be viewed as the origin of where a document comes from and to have an awareness as to why the creator made it (Wineburg 2018). Contextualization is defined as the placement of a document in its proper historical context for interpretation (VanSledright 2006). Then, corroboration refers to the process of validating facts from one source through reference with other familiar sources to establish their validity and resolve discrepancies between accounts (VanSledright 2006). This offers a view of the learner as a participant questioning and curating evidence to make claims, rather than passively accepting an authorized truth (Wineburg 2018).

The Multidimensional Nature of Digital Literacy

The ground for a proper engagement in modern historical research is based on a crucial foundation and ability in digital literacy. Digital literacy is described as an individual's capacity to search, navigate, analyse, and communicate knowledge using digital platforms (Hobbs 2010). This skill is not a replacement for traditional reading but rather a critical extension of it, covering both technical and cognitive abilities (Hobbs 2010). Digital literacy refers to information processes; collect, analyse and assess the relevance of digital data and critical evaluation; the ability to recognize bias, judge the credibility of digital content (Hobbs 2010). One skill, referred to as "branching literacy," or the ability to navigate digital environments and create relationships and discoveries for oneself is crucial in a fluid, non-linear web (Hobbs 2010). The scale of historical information on the internet, often filled with contradictions, demands both technical skill and critical thinking.

The Generational Lens

The comprehension of how several groups approach historical information depends on a framework provided by generational identification. A generation as a collection of people linked by a common set of formative experiences, especially those happening throughout their youth and early adulthood, whether they are cultural events, financial changes, or national disasters, these formative events have a more profound psychological effect that influences the common memory of a generation (Schuman & Scott 1989). This historical awareness is deeply connected to the prevailing media of the day. The events that shape a generation are not just recalled but also viewed through the lens of the media first presenting them. Accordingly, the different media consumption patterns of every generation directly affect their

preferred styles of historical interaction and their sensitivity to problems of the digital age. Modern historical knowledge and digital literacy have a symbiotic relationship. Effective exercise of historical thinking abilities like corroboration and contextualization in the modern information environment requires first the digital literacy needed to negotiate that scene (Hobbs 2010). Verifying a historical assertion, for instance, calls for digital literacy to find several sources, assess their reliability, and compile data from many forms. The digital medium fundamentally alters the whole process of historical research rather than simply provides a fresh receptacle for existing knowledge. Therefore, for anyone trying to get and use historical literacy in the twenty-first century, the growth of digital competency is a fundamental necessity rather than a voluntary add-on.

Research Methodology

This report employs a mixed-emphasis analytical research design, focusing on integrating mainly a large scale of statistical data to compare generational habits, which is back by a focused Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to establish conceptual frameworks and qualitative context. The purpose is to review how historical literacy, digital competence, and generational media habits intersect. Therefore, the research stands on firm ground, which covers both hard data and established academic theory.

Data collection

The data was collected by the selection of specific institutional data for quantitative analysis and conducting a systematic search of academic literature for theoretical and empirical support.

1. Selected Institutional Data Integration

The core of the data relies on specific quantitative evidence regarding media consumption habits crucial for comparing generations.

Statistical data on digital usage, including internet and social media consumption stratified by age cohort, were directly retrieved and analysed from Eurostat (specifically referencing the 2022/2023 Digital Economy and Society statistics for the EU). Broader contextual quantitative data on media consumption trends across generations were integrated from reports published by the Pew Research Center.

This data is used to provide the objective, measurable foundation for the report's central comparative argument: the differing media pathways chosen by Gen Z and older generations.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Data Sources

The search focus provides theoretical frameworks which are required to interpret the quantitative trends, which include Foundational Conceptual Texts for core theory, Critical Empirical Evidence for interpretation.

The following sources were explicitly included in the data collection, categorized by their methodological purpose:

Foundational Conceptual Texts

Core definitions and Theoretical frameworks for the analysis:

Historical Literacy: Wineburg S.S. (2018), *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*.

Digital Literacy/Competence: Hobbs R. (2010), *Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom*.

Generational Theory/Collective Memory: Schuman H. & Scott J. (1989), *Generations and collective memories*.

Critical Empirical Evidence

These empirical studies are selected for the quantitative findings' interpretations from the institutional data. The search was intended to opt articles published between 2008 and 2024, to review the modern social media and misinformation around it. The main studies include:

Pew Research Center (2014), *Generations and Media* (showing how different age groups consume media).

Van Deursen & van Dijk (2014), *The digital divide shifts to differences in usage* (for a closer look at how digital literacy plays out in practice).

Bennett et al. (2008), *The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence* (for challenging the assumption of inherent digital skill).

The academic search was based on educational databases, and the focus was on the articles themes that had to address the connection of historical thinking skills and digital media in a generational notion.

Thematic Analytical Framework

Data analysis involved a Thematic Synthesis. Initially, the quantitative findings defined the primary observational categories, which were then interpreted and enriched by the conceptual frameworks from the qualitative literature, to make sure that the analysis is focused on applying theory to observed statistical trends, rather than simply summarizing existing studies.

Quantitative Data: Initial data focused on themes which were established to be supported by the institutional statistics, such as Media Platform Preference by Age and Frequency of Digital News Consumption.

Qualitative Interpretation: The conceptual literature was used to interpret the implications of these statistical differences, specifically choosing generational media habits onto the frameworks of Historical Thinking Skills (sourcing, corroboration) and the identified Digital Threats (algorithmic bias, misinformation).

Generational Narratives: A Comparative Analysis of Historical Engagement

The “Traditionalists” and Baby Boomers (1946–1964)

This historical understanding was due to the way this generation grew up in a world where the media felt unified. Television, radio, and printed newspapers were their main sources of information, and still rely on these more than any other generation. (Pew Research Center 2014). Their sense of history is about a collective memory of defining events, for instance events like the post-World War II economic boom, the Cold War, the Vietnam War etc. Overall, the information they received was filtered through professional journalists and editors who worked inside institutions that valued fact-checking and editorial standards, even if some bias was imposed (Prior 2013). Most Boomers use digital technology now, but for them, it's usually about reconnecting with old friends or family, not digging for news or researching history (Pew Research Center 2014). Mainly, since they are still dependant on trusted sources, their understanding of history tends to be more unified, but it also means they're less likely to challenge the familiar stories or question what's always been told.

Generation X (1965–1980) and Millennials (1981–1996)

Generation X and Millennials represent a transitional period in media consumption. As children, they grew up with TV, radio, and print. Then, almost overnight, they found themselves in the middle of the internet boom, learning to use email and cell phones as teenagers or young adults. People often call Millennials the first “digital natives,” but that label only tells part of the story. Unlike Gen Z, Millennials remember what life was like before everyone was online all the time (Prensky 2001). Big historical events left deep marks on both generations' historical consciousness, an event like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Overall, their approach to history and current events tends to mix old habits and new tech. They still turn to newspapers and TV, but digital news, social media, and online platforms have become just as important (Pew Research Center 2014). These generations were unique into how they helped build the early days of social media, by sharing personal stories, and public posts in blogs and the first social networking sites. The approach was open during that online experimental era, in contrast to the private style observed on today's social platforms (Van Dijck 2013).

Generation Z (1997–2012) and Beyond

Generation Z referred to as “digital natives” are the only who lived their entire lives with access and exposure to smartphones and social media (Bennett et al. 2008), they perceive digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, etc. not only for entertainment, but also a main way they get their news and information (Bahiyah & Wang

2020). The digital exposure has shaped how this generation connect and engage with history. Research shows that overall traditional lecture-based history lessons, often fail to capture the interest of this generation, instead leading to low motivation and poor academic performance in the subject (Hobbs 2010). In response, interactive and multimodal approaches based on digital tools are highly effective at increasing learners' engagement and improving knowledge (Hobbs 2010).

A critical analysis of how this generation's digital handles the digital world reveals the fact that it's not as simple as it is often perceived, a common assumption is that because Gen Z are "digital natives," they are inherently more skilled at navigating the digital world and verifying information credibility. Research tells a different reality suggesting that older adults, drawing from years of experience and that steady build-up of knowledge "crystallized intelligence", can do a better job telling real headlines from fake than their younger peers. In contrast, Gen Z moves fast in processing a flood of information, but sometimes that speed works against deeper judgement. Therefore, highlighting a crucial distinction between technical skill and intellectual wisdom (Wineburg 2018).

Generations seek different ways into remembering the past, which is deeply influenced by their formative years and the media that defined them. The term "reminiscence bump" refers to the way people remember their teenage and early adult years more clearly than other periods. Psychologists link this to the process of shaping our identities during that time (Schuman & Scott 1989). For Baby Boomers, these memories evolve around big historical events, the example of people watching the same news broadcast, hearing the same story, building a sense of national identity together. Generation Z's memories work differently. A major social or political moment for them doesn't come packaged in one neat story. Instead, they piece it together from the overall exposure of social media posts, short news clips, etc. Consequently, their collective memory feels less unified and more independent, even contradictory at times. The medium matters, how people first encounter a historical event shape not just what they remember, but how they understand history in the first place. Every generation builds its own foundation for what the past means, and those foundations are completely different across generations (Van Dijck 2013).

New Research Era in Digital History:

The Digital Open Access to History

Digital archives represent an important shift in historical research and education, by digitizing and making primary source documents available online. The institutions have been attempting to democratize history and extend access to materials once reserved for specific individuals, for a specific period, to visit physical archives

(Jeurgens 2012). This affects directly the pedagogical system, which shift a traditional, teacher-centered model to a student-centered, inquiry-based approach (Hobbs 2010). As for the students become no longer limited to the simplistic narratives of textbooks, instead directly interact with raw historical evidence including letters, diaries, maps, photographs, and oral histories and then draw their own conclusions (Jeurgens 2012). This process directly fosters critical analytical and thinking skills, which are central to historical literacy (Wineburg 2018). The non-linear, hypertext nature of digital archives allows users to create their own pathways through a collection of documents, making connections and discoveries that would be nearly impossible to find in a traditional, linear format (Jeurgens 2012). The digitization of oral history has rekindled interest in “aural history” and led to the development of sophisticated tools for analysing sound and video recordings, moving researchers beyond a sole reliance on transcripts (Jeurgens 2012).

The pedagogical potential of these tools is clear when one examines the direct connections between their functionalities and the development of core historical skills.

The broad and remote access to primary sources allows students to not just read but as an obligation, but to figure out where a document comes from, and think hard about its context (Wineburg 2018).

The exposure of content in all shapes and sizes, visuals, texts, audio, opens up new ways for learners to observe and interpret, which helps them with different learning styles find their own path.

The non-linear hypertext pushes the users to make their own connections between documents. learners make their own connections and find patterns, synthesizing and not just following a specific way (Jeurgens 2012).

Search engines and data analysis tools at the students' fingertips allow them to explore materials in fresh ways, spot themes and patterns that might've gone unnoticed before.

Social Media as a Historical Forum

Social media platforms are quickly becoming major players in education, even if they stir up some debate. TikTok and YouTube, for example, actually boost student motivation, help them engage more, and improve how much they learn in history class (Bahiyah & Wang 2020). The big difference? These tools break away from the old-school, where the teacher is the main source of information, which usually leaves students bored and barely remembering anything (Hobbs 2010). When students have control over their own educational content, the example of little TikTok lectures, and suddenly, they move from barely knowing the basics to really thinking deeply about historical topics. The involvement of students to find their own style of learning, not just sitting back and watching, flips the switch on how they learn (Bahiyah & Wang 2020). Instead, it sparks creativity and allow students understand

history, and only just memorizing dates and names. Consequently, learning turns into something fun, hands-on, and way more interesting (Bahiyah & Wang 2020). YouTube as a platform demonstrate the potential for high-quality and long-form documentary content to thrive in the digital space, possibly competing and surpassing the quality of traditional television documentaries (Bahiyah & Wang 2020).

The pedagogical opportunities presented by digital tools extend beyond simple engagement; they create a new mode of teaching and learning. The traditional model of history instruction, and the teacher being the sole source of information struggles to capture the attention of a generation accustomed to interactive multimedia (Wineburg 2018). Currently, based on direct access to original sources and the chance to make and share their own takes on history, students need to do more than memorize facts. Teachers function more as facilitators, helping students dig into real questions, weigh evidence, and figure out what's true when sources disagree. The transformation is much more than the notion of swapping chalkboards for screens, but a real shift in how education works, pushing students to think critically and build the kind of historical literacy you need in a digital world (Jeurgens 2012).

Digital Threats to History

The Danger of Misinformation

Historians proved that misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are not new phenomena, it was documented in the examples of ancient Rome, during 17th-century plagues, and in 19th-century newspaper hoaxes (Hobbs 2010). However, the modern digital information ecosystem represents a radical departure from these historical precedents. The internet and social media make it easier to share information but also supercharge it. For instance, false or misleading stories travel faster and farther than anyone in the past could've imagined (Van Dijck 2013). Furthermore, people are compelled to deal with an environment, which has created a ground for the spread of deepfakes and propaganda, which directly threaten the public's ability to access accurate historical information and make informed democratic decisions (Wineburg 2018).

The Hidden History

Echo chambers and filter bubbles, both pose a significant threat into shaping how people view historical understanding. Starting of the concept of an echo chamber, which is basically an online space where individuals willingly connect with others who think the in the same way, thus holding into the pre-existing beliefs and isolating them from different and opposing viewpoints (Jamieson & Cappella 2008). On the other hand, a filter bubble, as a concept is a state of "intellectual isolation"

caused by algorithms that tailor a user's search results and content feed based on their past behaviour and search history (Pariser 2011). While the two terms are often used interchangeably, echo chambers are the result of conscious user choice, while filter bubbles are the result of non-transparent algorithms (Pariser 2011). Both phenomena cultivate confirmation bias, whereby individuals only seek out information that confirms their beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence. This creates an "unrealistic impression that everyone believes the same way we do," leading to a fragmentation of the public sphere and a rise in political polarization (Jamieson & Cappella 2008).

The systematic algorithm plays a big role into "corroboration", which is one of the most important parts of learning history. The mean is by systematically filtering out information that challenges a user's existing beliefs, the algorithms effectively prevent them comparing stories and asking tough questions. Therefore, removing the opportunity for critical inquiry and the development of a non-biased perspective. The tech behind it all, especially the way these platforms are built to keep you scrolling quietly acts like an editor, picking and choosing what you see. The result? People walk around with a warped sense of history, way more open to propaganda, because they never get to practice real critical thinking (Pariser 2011).

The Archival and Algorithmic Bias

Archives aren't just dusty rooms full of old papers but places where those in power argue behind closed doors about what matters and what gets forgotten (Jeurgens 2012). Power plays a quiet complicated role beyond shaping history online than just fake news or obvious lies. For instance, the institutional decision-makers have immense power in determining what records are selected for preservation, thus fundamentally influencing the composition and character of archival holdings. Consequently, affecting the collective memory of society (Jeurgens 2012).

This critique of archival power doesn't stop at physical archive but also online. Algorithmic bias can arise from incomplete or unrepresentative data, which push systemic inequities by producing unfair and discriminatory outcomes (O'Neil 2016). For instance, if a digital archive or AI model is trained mostly on the voices of one powerful group, then the history it tells will be tilted in their favour. That bias whether intentional or not, still decides which stories get told and which ones fade away. In the end, people are left with a digital history that props up certain perspectives and shoves others to the sidelines (O'Neil 2016). That's not just a glitch but a real problem that can keep social divides going strong.

Critical Examination of The Digital Divide on Access and Power

Digital Inequality and Historical Knowledge

The “digital divide,” used to be understood in a simple manner, for instance some individuals had computers and internet, others didn’t. However, as per today’s context, it is more accurately described as a concept of “digital inequality” that includes both access and usage (van Deursen & van Dijk 2014). The digital inequality is reinforced by existing social disparities deepened by socioeconomic factors, such as age, education, race, income, and geographic location (van Deursen & van Dijk 2014). The consequences of this divide are not only a matter of technical access, but they have a direct impact on historical literacy. Individuals who lack access to high-speed internet or possess insufficient digital skills are effectively excluded from the benefits of the “democratization of history,” such as access to digital archives and online learning platforms (Jeurgens 2012).

The effects of digital inequality extend beyond mere access and into the realm of behavior. Research indicates that while many people from less-advantaged groups have access to the internet, they are more likely to use it for entertainment rather than for educational or political inquiry (van Deursen & van Dijk 2014). The divide isn’t only about getting connected, also about how people use technology, and what they get out of it. Even as more digital resources show up, lots of people miss out on the chance to really dig into history. Thus, naturally, the knowledge gap sticks around, and the old social and educational inequalities just keep going, despite all the hopes people once initially had on digital technology (van Deursen & van Dijk 2014).

The Politics of Digitization

Digital technology intends to be a tool for democratizing history. However, the process is far from a neutral implementation. Institutions usually decide what gets digitized and shared, with most people not invited to the decision making (Jeurgens 2012). Thus, when we refer to “encoding” history online, it begs the question: who’s getting their stories preserved, and who decides what matters? Mainly people with power and money end up benefiting most from these digital archives. Therefore, by default keeping old social divides alive in a new form (O’Neil, 2016). The world without having open and accountable ways to pick what goes online, the digital revolution isn’t really shaking up the old power structures. It’s just dressing them up in new tech. That’s a problem we can’t ignore (Jeurgens 2012).

Recommendations to Historical Literacy in The Digital-Age

Critical Digital Skills Development: An effective pedagogical approach for the digital age shouldn't be contested simply to handing out devices to learners and teaching them the skills needed to navigate the complex aspects of technology (Hobbs 2010). Teachers need to weave in core historical thinking skills, which include like sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating, right into their digital lessons, by using real examples from online news, social media, and digital archives (Wineburg 2018). It's more than just checking facts. Students need to spot their own filter bubbles, look for voices outside their usual circles, and really dig into whether the information they are exposed to online is trustworthy, even if it comes from social platforms (Pariser 2011). Students ought to put in a situation to put efforts, in order to learn how to break out of those bubbles and listen to people who see things differently, thus helping them grow into more open-minded, empathetic citizens, ready for real conversations in the world (Pariser 2011).

Integrating Digital and Traditional Approaches: The adequate approach to historical education isn't just about going digital or sticking to old-school methods, rather blending both in an efficient manner. Social media projects get students interested and involved, but they're just initial steps. As, when you combine that energy with real research in digital archives and classic scholarly sources, you get something powerful (Hobbs 2010). The hybrid approach allows students use the excitement of new technologies in general, while making sure their work still has the depth and discipline that real history demands. In the end, this isn't just about learning facts, it's about getting students ready for a world where they need to handle both new and old tools to make sense of a complex reality.

Democratic Historical Literacy: In today's digital world, historical literacy at its core is about giving people the tools to think for themselves. Therefore, students learn that history isn't just a bunch of information and facts, but the fact that ideas can clash, that stories change depending on who's telling them. Then, they're better prepared for the messy, noisy reality of life online, where people are divided and controlled narratives are all (Wineburg 2018). Also, when teachers connect the dots between old events and what's happening now, students start to notice the biases baked into all kinds of stories, not just the ones in textbooks. Furthermore, coming to an understanding that history isn't just some boring list of names and dates, but alive and shaping the world we wake up in every day. On this ground, is the foundation for people to think deeply care and engage with the world around them.

Conclusion

The digital age has altered how mankind approaches its past, and the story of that transformation holds huge opportunities as well as vast risks, felt in a variety of ways by generations old and new. The democratization of the archive, and the development of interactive learning tools that can be an engaging way into historical knowledge represent a potentially more inclusive and dynamic historical education. Still, in the process of having these new opportunities to access quality journalism who we trust, misinformation runs out of control and there is still digital discrimination. The path forward requires a continuous and adaptive approach, demanding an intended pedagogy which cultivates the historical and digital literacies, by moving students from passive consumers of information to active and critical investigators. Thus, calling for a societal commitment which addresses the digital divide and ensure that the benefits of historical democratization are available to all in a fair manner. The aim is having individuals equipped with the critical thinking skills to use these tools responsibly, rather than technology mastery, especially that the public life is currently so divided. Therefore, it's necessary to keep working on building a strong understanding of history, because a society with citizens who are historically literate is healthier and more vibrant for a democracy.

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Summary

This study investigates the transformation of historical literacy across different generations due to the modern digital information ecosystem. The study employs a mixed-emphasis analytical research design, integrating statistical data on generational media consumption from sources like Eurostat and the Pew Research Center with a systematic literature review on core frameworks. The findings reveal a generational duality, while digital archives and platforms like TikTok and YouTube offer a more engaging, inquiry-based approach to history, simultaneously introduce severe threats, including the rapid spread of misinformation, the intellectual isolation caused by filter bubbles and echo chambers, and systemic algorithmic bias in digitized historical content. The analysis shows that digital fluency does not equate to critical judgment, highlighting that deep historical thinking must be actively taught in the digital realm. The core recommendation is a hybrid pedagogical approach that integrates traditional scholarly discipline with digital media analysis for a democratic historical literacy capable of navigating a complex and divided information environment.

Keywords

historical literacy, digital competence, generational differences, misinformation

Streszczenie

Wpływ ery cyfrowej na pokoleniowe podejścia do kompetencji historycznych

W niniejszym artykule poddano analizie zmiany w zakresie kompetencji historycznych w różnych pokoleniach wynikające z nowoczesnego cyfrowego ekosystemu informacyjnego. Wykorzystano mieszany projekt badawczy o charakterze analitycznym łączący dane statystyczne (pochodzące z takich źródeł jak Eurostat i Pew Research Center) dotyczące korzystania z mediów przez poszczególne generacje z systematycznym przeglądem literatury przedmiotu w zakresie kluczowych ram teoretycznych. Uzyskane wyniki ujawniają ambiwalentny charakter ery cyfrowej. Z jednej strony archiwa cyfrowe i platformy takie jak TikTok i YouTube oferują bardziej angażujące podejście do historii oparte na

samodzielnym dociekaniu, z drugiej zaś wprowadzają poważne zagrożenia, w tym szybkie rozprzestrzenianie się dezinformacji, izolację intelektualną spowodowaną przez bańki filtrujące i komory echa, a także systemowe błędy algorytmów (stronniczość) w selekcji zdigitalizowanych treści historycznych. Analiza pokazuje, że biegłość w posługiwaniu się technologiami cyfrowymi nie jest równoznaczna z krytycznym osądem. Dojrzałe myślenie historyczne w przestrzeni wirtualnej wymaga aktywnego kształcenia. Główną rekomendacją jest wdrożenie hybrydowego modelu pedagogicznego, który łączy tradycyjny rygor metodologiczny z krytyczną analizą mediów cyfrowych. Podejście to ma na celu osiągnięcie demokratycznych kompetencji historycznych pozwalających na sprawne poruszanie się w złożonym i spolaryzowanym środowisku informacyjnym.

Słowa kluczowe

kompetencje historyczne, kompetencje cyfrowe, różnice pokoleniowe, dezinformacja