

The Imperative of Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills in the Religious Studies Curriculum of Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

This paper evaluates and interprets the media literacy and critical thinking skills, and advocates for their integration and incorporation into the academic curriculum of the religious studies in Nigerian Universities. Qualitative research methods was used both primary and secondary sources to collect data. The primary source includes interview of Head of Departments and students of Religious Studies from selected Universities in Oyo and Osun States in Nigeria. The secondary source comprises of reviewed works on Books, archival material, journal articles and the internet. The data collected were subjected to content analysis. The study observes that Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills are important in today's digital age, enabling individuals to critically analyse, evaluate, and create media content and also helps students solve problems, make decisions in life situations, and develop a stable identity and habit in the person especially in the Religious sphere. It posits that the field of Religious Studies, which examines the beliefs, practices, and cultural impact of religions, can greatly benefit from integrating these disciplines into its curriculum.

Key Words: Media Literacy, Critical Thinking, Skills, Religious Education, Curriculum

Introduction

The emergence of Media literacy has craved the interest of religious leaders, the Nigerian Government and educators from a variety today (Covington, 37). Thousands of media images intersect with human's lives every day. Media are penetrating cultures and inundating people with information at an ever accelerating pace (Covington, 37). Morgan citing Gerbner writes that television particularly has penetrated people's lives to such a degree that its consequences are felt around the world (Morgan, 27). He adds that new delivery systems signal even deeper penetration and integration of the dominant patterns of images and messages into everyday's life (Morgan, 27). At just a few hundred years old, mass media is a relatively new social and cultural phenomenon. Its growth and penetration have been fueled by the technological advances that have presented the necessary instruments to deliver mediated messages to the masses. To complement the technology there has also been an accompanying level of literacy among large numbers of people to utilize the disseminated information. But the mass media both depend on and affect human literacy and education (Arke)

Media literacy is a crucial skill in today's digital age, enabling individuals to critically analyze, evaluate, and create media content (Benigson). As the media landscape continues to evolve, it is imperative to equip students with the necessary tools to navigate and make informed decisions about the information they consume. Nigeria, as a rapidly developing nation, recognises the importance of media literacy and has taken steps to integrate it into the school curriculum (Blake & E.O. Haroldsen, 30).

Mass media and critical thinking skills are rising with education in some advanced and developing countries. With technological advances and additional media choices being developed, the media presents information at an ever-accelerating pace and substantially increasing volume (Schramm, 45). As important as Media literacy and critical thinking are, a basic definition of "media literacy" was developed in America at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy.⁹ Within a decade, the field has

grown to an eighteen-project poster session on media literacy issues at the 2003 National Media Education Conference in Baltimore (Arke).

Media literacy is a growing academic field in the United States. Educators in America have started to react to the successes of other nations such as Canada, Australia, Great Britain and New Zealand in teaching students about the media and its messages (Tugend). Curriculum for different categories of classes, degree programs on the undergraduate and graduate level, and research efforts are being developed in some western Universities to promote growth in the field (Tugend). A media literate person is expected to have the ability to “decode, evaluate, analyse and produce both print and electronic media. Feuerstein posits that one purpose of media literacy programs is to promote the critical thinking of students towards media texts (Feuerstein).

The Religious Studies curricula in Nigerian Universities are increasingly challenged by the digital information environment in which students daily encounter a flood of religious content, claims, and debates through social media, blogs, podcasts, and other online sources. Despite the centrality of religious education to professional, scholarly, and civic life, most programmes have not systematically integrated media literacy and critical thinking skills into their curricula. This gap leaves students ill-prepared to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content related to religion, making them vulnerable to misinformation, propaganda, stereotypes, and manipulative discourses that can undermine academic rigor, inter-religious understanding, and social harmony.

Contributing to the problem is a paucity of empirical data on the current state of Nigerian university Religious Studies curricula regarding media literacy and critical thinking, including how these competencies are taught, assessed, and sustained across programmes. There is also a lack of a coherent theoretical and practical framework for embedding these skills into the curriculum in a scalable, contextually appropriate manner. As a result, graduates may complete their studies without the competencies needed to navigate media-saturated religious landscapes, which can limit their professional readiness in education, ministry, journalism, policy, and public life, and potentially exacerbate misinformation and sectarian tensions. This study identifies these gaps and seeks to articulate the imperative for integrating media literacy and critical thinking into the Religious Studies curriculum across Nigerian universities.

This Study adopts qualitative research method in both primary and secondary sources to collect data. The primary source includes interview of Head of Departments and students of Religious Studies from purposively selected Universities in Oyo and Osun States in Nigeria based on their strategic locations within the two states. These are University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Adeleke University, Ede and Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo. The secondary source comprises of reviewed works on Books, archival material, journal articles and the internet. The data collected were subjected to content analysis.

In today's digital age, where information is readily accessible through various media channels, it is crucial for individuals to develop media literacy and critical thinking skills. The field of Religious Studies, which examines the beliefs, practices, and cultural impact of religions, can greatly benefit from integrating these skills into its curriculum. This article explores the importance of incorporating media literacy and critical thinking skills in the Nigerian Universities Religious education. While numerous claims that media literacy and critical thinking are related, some scholars are of the opinion that both nomenclature are not the same and do not serve the same purpose, though they can be interrelated. So it is necessary to do a conceptual clarification.

Conceptual Analysis

Defining Media Literacy

The term “media” generally refers to mass media messages communicated through visuals, languages and/or sounds that are produced for a remote mass audience using some form of technology (Sbai). These include traditional print-based media, that is to say books, newspapers, magazines and audiovisual media including computer games, the Internet and blogs. Media also include recorded music, billboards and advertising in all of its forms (Sbai). In the classroom, the media are likely to include textbooks, posters,

and maps. In the past, literacy has referred to the ability to read and write. In the recent times, we get most of our information through a complex system of media technologies (Sbai). The ability to read many types of media has become an essential skill in the 21st Century. Media literacy therefore can be typically defined as the ability to access, enjoy, interpret, analyse, produce, and evaluate messages in all varieties and combinations of print, visual, and digital formats. Media literate individuals can use communications media to solve problems. They have a critical, informed understanding of the way that both individuals and organizations construct media messages. In addition, they recognise the role of the audience in both processing those messages and creating meaning from them (Sbai).

Media Literacy is also observed by Christ and Potter as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages obtained from various media outlets (Christ and Potter, 7), (Aufderheide, 76). This definition was developed at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy in 1992 and marked the start of a formal field of academic interest in the topic (Arke). These various media outlets include television, radio, recorded music, newspapers, books, film, magazines and the Internet/World Wide Web as mentioned above. Everyone possesses some degree of media literacy. Every individual has some degree of awareness regarding the media, its messages and the impact it has on his or her lives. Potter describes media literacy as a continuum much like a thermometer where there are degrees (Potter).

Summarily, Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages in a variety of forms, including print, digital, and visual media. It involves developing an awareness of how media shapes the understanding of the world and influences human beliefs and behaviour. By incorporating media literacy into the Religious Studies curriculum, students can learn to critically examine religious messages presented through various media platforms.

Defining Critical Thinking

Definitions of critical thinking range from the simple and succinct to elaborate academic prose. For example, Norris posits that thinking critically can be defined as rationally deciding what to do or believe (Norris, 45), (Arke). On the other hand, Scriven and Paul define critical thinking as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesising, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action (Scriven and Paul), (Arke). Undoubtedly, the importance of thinking and reasoning in human life is to the extent that they are referred to as the main distinction between human and other beings. In fact, what distinguishes human from other animals is his remarkable ability to think and reason.

Thinking is a process in which information are put together in an appropriate way so that a new result can be attained. In other words, one's thinking deeply examines one's affairs in order to obtain a desirable and reasonable result (Arke). Creative thinking in a nutshell means being able to create something new or find new and effective ways to do better. In the present age, children and adolescents need to improve their creative thinking skills in order to make the right decisions and solve complex societal problems. This is imperative in order to face the amazing developments of the third millennium (Arke). They must enhance their research, problem solving, and search skills. So critical thinking should be considered as an internal process whereby the problematic situation of life is critically analyzed and the solving the problems are wisely identified. On the other hand, the most important element of one's personality is the desire to think and to think critically. Critical thinking helps students solve problems, make decisions in life situations, and develop a stable identity and habit in the person.

Connectivity between Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

There is a connection between Media Literacy and Critical Thinking. Media literacy advocates and seeks to provide individuals with a set of analytical skills that enable consumers to be more critical in their media consumption and in some cases have those skills also apply to other behaviors such as smoking cessation, drug abuse or bad eating/overall habit. This makes at least one connection between the media literacy movement and the philosophical field of critical thinking to become more apparent (Scheibe and Rogow, 56). The analytical and evaluative components of media literacy aim to have viewers to be more active

and alert about the media content they consume and the programming selections they choose (Sbai). Critical thinking scholars indicate those who possess critical thinking skills are able to analyse, interpret, evaluate, explain, and self-regulate, among other things. Learning to approach life and particularly media consumption choices with this skill set can enable consumers of all ages to be more discriminating about how they utilize all aspects of media (Sbai).

Silverblatt links media literacy and critical thinking skills when he notes the primary element of media literacy as “A critical thinking skill that enables audiences to develop independent judgments about media content.” (Silverblatt, 56). He continues by stating that media literacy is first and foremost about applying critical thinking skills to our primary source of information, the media (Silverblatt, 56). Feuerstein looked at media literacy as a means to develop critical thinking in children ages 10-12 in six Northern Israeli primary schools. As pupils increase their experience with a media literacy program, they will show greater gains proportionally in media analysis and critical thinking skills (Feuerstein, 59).

Critical thinking involves the ability to objectively analyse information, identify logical fallacies, consider multiple perspectives, and make reasoned judgments. Integrating critical thinking skills into the Religious Studies curriculum enhances students' ability to engage with religious texts, teachings, and debates.

Integrating Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills into Global Education

Global education has been defined as education which promotes the knowledge, attitudes and skills relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural, interdependent world (“What is Global Education?”). That is to say, global education is not only concerned with teaching specific subjects. For instance in foreign language classrooms, the teacher’s role does not only lie in teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and writing, the teacher instead is supposed to get his/her students aware of the changes and problems occurring in the world around them ranging from economy, politics, scientific discoveries to poverty, conflicts, environmental destruction and diseases (“Global Education”).

In the United States of America, media literacy education began in the 1970s. Since then, there has been a shift toward an emphasis on media literacy as empowerment, stressing critical thinking and production skills (Arke). More materials are now aimed at schools and teachers. In order for students to develop the analytical and technical skills needed to be fully literate in a contemporary sense, media analysis and media production should be continuously reinforced from kindergarten through high school and beyond in many different subject areas. The purpose of media literacy education is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be very critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world. Therefore, the purpose of media literacy education today as it is currently explained by the National Association for Media Literacy Education in the western world, that is, to help students develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world (Arke)

Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills in Nigerian Religious Studies Curricula

The researcher interviewed four Head of Departments and eight students from selected Universities in Oyo and Osun states respectively. During the interviews of Head of Departments and interactions with students of selected Universities, It was observed that none of the selected Universities had media literacy and critical thinking skills as courses in their curricula of Religious Studies. Apparently, upon further enquiry most Religious Studies department do not have these courses in their curricula (Mepaiyeda). However, the importance of Media Literacy and Critical Thinking skills in Religious Studies curricula will make the field and relevant to the contemporary society and religious landscape (Ogidiolu).

Importance of Media Literacy in Religious Studies

Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of religions. It is posited that teaching media literacy, students can critically analyze how religious concepts, practices, and individuals are portrayed in the media (Makinde). They can examine biases, stereotypes, and misrepresentations that often arise in news articles, documentaries, and social media platforms. This enables students to develop a balanced

and informed understanding of religious diversity and challenges existing prejudices (Omowaye and Bayone).

The internet has become a primary source of information, including religious content. By developing media literacy skills, students can effectively evaluate the reliability, credibility, and bias of digital sources related to religious topics. This equips them with the ability to differentiate between accurate and misleading information, enabling them to make informed judgments and avoid falling prey to misinformation and fake news. (Elizabeth and Bukola)

Media significantly influences religious practices and beliefs. By studying media literacy, students can explore how media shapes religious ideologies, rituals, and communal identities. They can critically examine how religious leaders and organizations use media to disseminate messages, recruit followers, and propagate their perspectives. This understanding helps students grasp the complexities of religious dynamics in contemporary society (Josiah).

Benefits of Critical Thinking in Religious Studies

Ewuzie opines that critical thinking skills enable students to analyse religious texts, such as sacred scriptures and theological writings, in a nuanced manner (Ewuzie). This was corroborated by Ogidiolu who posited that through critical thinking skills, student can evaluate the historical context, interpret symbolism, and identify underlying themes and contradictions. This promotes a deeper understanding of religious traditions and encourages students to question and challenge conventional interpretation (Ogidiolu).

Religious Studies courses often involve discussions on sensitive and contentious topics. By fostering critical thinking skills, students can engage in respectful and thoughtful dialogue, considering diverse viewpoints and evidence. This helps create an inclusive and intellectually stimulating classroom environment that encourages open-mindedness and empathy (Adekanmbi and Ogunleye).

Critical thinking skills are essential for students to apply their knowledge of religious studies to real-world contexts (Makinde) By critically analyzing religious phenomena, students can evaluate their ethical implications, social consequences, and relevance to contemporary issues. This empowers them to become active and responsible participants in society, capable of making well-informed decisions (Sunday).

Conclusion

It is obvious that media is a very serious global issue because it may be very misleading in the sense that it is capable of creating stereotypes, prejudices, and false images about things and people, which Media illiterate students will ignorantly promote.³⁸ For this reason, integrating Media literacy education is essential for the purpose of equipping students with tools to analyze and evaluate media messages as well as to create new forms of media. This integration also enhances learning autonomy, helps students create their own learning styles and strategies, as well as improves the students' responsibility as promising good citizens.

The integration of media literacy and Critical Thinking Skills in the Nigerian Universities' curriculum especially in the Religious Education in Nigerian Universities is a crucial step toward equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate the digital age. By developing critical thinking skills, promoting responsible digital citizenship, and fostering creativity, media literacy empowers students to become informed consumers and active contributors in the media landscape. The successful implementation of media literacy in Nigeria relies on collaborative efforts between educational institutions, media organizations, and government agencies. Continued support, teacher training, and awareness campaigns are essential to ensure the effective integration of media literacy into the curriculum of religious studies, ultimately preparing students in religious education for a media-rich and rapidly evolving world.

Recommendations

In line with the conclusion of this study, the followings are recommended.

- i. The Nigerian University Commission (NUC) should make effort to include Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills as courses, either as electives or compulsory in Religious Studies.
- ii. It is also imperative to organise an academic body that will design adequate curriculum for the courses and ensure their implementations.
- iii. The curriculum should be designed to cover areas of religious studies such as exegesis in biblical studies, theories of religion in sociology of religion, approaches in African Traditional Religion, historical approaches in Church History, theories in Religion and Conflict Resolution, and approaches in Islamic Studies
- iv. Departments in various Universities are encourage this change which can also reflects in their various change in nomenclature to make the department dynamic, versatile and relevant to the contemporary demands

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