

The role of public service announcements in creating media literacy

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Abstract: Media literacy is an essential communication tool that helps develop individuals' ability to evaluate and interpret media content consciously and analyze it critically. In today's digital age, the dissemination of media literacy education not only protects individuals from misleading or manipulative content but also improves their ability to access correct information. Public service announcements (PSAs) are considered a vital tool for creating media literacy by enhancing social awareness, raising consciousness, and educating the public, thanks to their potential to reach large masses. This study was conducted to examine the importance of PSAs in creating media literacy. The study sample comprised a PSA series titled 'Nuclear Family' prepared by the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council. The study was conducted using content analysis, which is a qualitative research method. The data were analyzed using the MAXQDA 2024 qualitative data analysis program. The results of the study highlighted the use of PSAs as an effective tool in raising media literacy awareness. Especially, the issue of information reliability was at the forefront in terms of combating disinformation. The results conformed to the international and national findings on media literacy and PSAs, revealing that they play an important role in media literacy. The study systematically examined the relationship between media literacy and PSAs, thus contributing to the available findings and offering suggestions for increasing social awareness.

Keywords: media literacy, public service announcements, communication, media, awareness, information

Introduction

Rapid developments in communication technologies and the digitalization process have radically transformed individuals'

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interactions with the media. The increase in information pollution and disinformation emphasizes the importance of the concept of media literacy. Media plays a vital role in shaping how individuals access information and influence cultural production processes in today's societies. Media literacy includes the skills of analyzing, interpreting, and critically evaluating information as well as accessing information. Public service announcements (PSAs) are considered essential communication tools for acquiring these skills. PSAs are communication tools that enhance social awareness, raise consciousness, and include messages for the public welfare. This study was conducted to examine the importance of public PSAs in creating media literacy. The main aim was to systematically analyze the relationship between media literacy and PSAs through a series of PSAs titled 'Nuclear Family' produced by the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK). The unique value of the study lies in its holistic and interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between media literacy and PSAs. The findings may contribute to the available findings by examining the role of PSAs in media literacy education, especially within the Turkish context. It was conducted using content analysis, a qualitative research method, aiming to contribute to the theoretical and practical knowledge of media literacy and PSAs.

Literature review

Public service announcements

In the most general terms, PSAs can be defined as messages that aim to raise public awareness. PSAs are considered an effective communication tool in today's world of rapid technological development and increasing media consumption for promoting social goals to large masses (Martins 2024). PSAs are essential in acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies related to media literacy. They contain advice, recommendations, and warning messages, contributing to increasing the level of knowledge and awareness of society (Gürel et al. 2024).

PSAs are essentially commercials with messages for public welfare (Bator & Cialdini 2000). Their contents are prepared by public institutions, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and associations, reach large masses, and are effective in creating social awareness thanks to their structures that appeal to visual and auditory senses (Walther et al. 2010; Akova 2017). Hence, they serve as an

informative and educational tool while raising the awareness of individuals about a particular issue (Gazi & Çakı 2019).

PSAs are designed as short and concise messages; they are broadcast through various communication channels and include specific strategic objectives (Bigsby et al. 2013; Corrigan et al. 2015). They address the current problems of society and thus help individuals avoid certain behaviors and habits that are likely to harm themselves, their environment, and others. PSAs can be delivered to the target audience through channels such as television, radio, print media, billboards, Internet, and digital platforms (Fishbein et al. 2002; Fuhrel-Forbis et al. 2009; Werb et al. 2011).

Bilgiç (2016) argues that PSAs are short-term educational, informative films, audio messages, and sub-tapes created by public institutions and nongovernmental organizations. Their purpose was to foster positive changes in thoughts and behaviors or to promote a new law. In other words, they are visual, audio, and textual messages on issues of interest to society prepared for broadcasting in mass media and approved by passing through control mechanisms (Akova 2017; Gazi & Çakı 2019). In this sense, PSAs aim to increase awareness among individuals and raise the general level of consciousness in society (Çiftçi & Agocuk 2021).

PSAs have been created over time to ensure that individuals exhibit desired behavioral changes or increase their level of social awareness (Werb et al. 2011). They can attract the attention of the target audience, shape their attitudes, and create positive social change owing to their characteristics such as not having a commercial purpose, being short-term, and having an emotional impact (Martins 2024). PSAs are usually prepared for a short period. They focus on raising awareness of a certain issue, influencing individuals' attitudes, and creating long-term behavioral changes. Therefore, it can be argued that PSAs are prepared per the established principles based on public interest (Pernisco 2020; Zaitseva et al. 2020).

Media literacy

Media literacy is one of the types of contemporary literacy that includes individuals' skills to use the media (Alvermann & Hagood 2000). Media literacy is an interdisciplinary study that extensively uses methods and tools from various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, politics, culture, sex, art, and aesthetics (Koltay 2011).

This concept refers to the process of analyzing and interpreting the messages produced by the media in the context of the current conditions (Chauvin 2003; Livingstone 2004). In other words, it is a multidimensional process involving the coding, interpretation, analysis, and interpretation and conveyance of symbols through the media (Brown 1998; Messaris 1998).

Potter (2016) points out that media literacy comprises a set of skills that allow individuals to evaluate media content consciously and is used as a tool to manage media influences. Therefore, media literacy should not be considered solely as a concept related to media. It is directly related to the development of democracy, cultural participation, and effective citizenship (Christ & Potter 1998).

Consequent to all the changes and transformations, the media has shifted from being an element impacting culture to being directly at the center of cultural production processes and has become culture itself (Jols & Thoman 2008). In this context, media literacy should be considered not as a mechanism that protects individuals from the impacts of media but as the ability to adapt to the changing and developing media environment, make critical analyses, and consume the media consciously (Potter 2021).

Media literacy helps individuals establish a critical and autonomous relationship with the media. Within this scope, it enables them to develop the competence to decode, evaluate, analyze, and reproduce content from printed and electronic media (Aufderheide 1992).

As a comprehensive discipline not limited to the analysis of traditional media, popular culture, and digital media, the main objectives of media literacy are to allow individuals to acquire the habit of questioning, improve their forms of expression, acquire critical thinking skills, communicate effectively, and act as active citizens (Sezer 2019). Media literacy helps create and develop a critical awareness of the form, content, and context of media messages, encourages them to access accurate information, and critically evaluates media content (Koltay 2011; Hobbs 2016).

Methodology

Aim, subject, and questions of the study

Despite the widespread use of PSAs, academic studies in this field are scarce, and the sources examining the relationship between media literacy and PSAs are limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the role and importance of PSAs in creating media literacy.

The transformation in information and communication technologies has made media literacy one of the basic requirements of the contemporary world (Mutlu 2004; Hobbs 2016). On the contrary, PSAs gain importance as informative content designed for social issues and prioritizing social benefit (Kamerer 2012; Potter 2021).

The study sought to address the following questions:

- Which media literacy themes do the PSAs include?
- What are the most emphasized concepts regarding media literacy in PSAs?

Research design and sample

The study was conducted using a qualitative research method that allowed in-depth analysis of events and situations. Case analysis, which enables detailed analysis of the subject under study within its own boundaries, was preferred as the research design (Mitchell 2008; Punch 2020).

The samples were selected using the purposive sampling method, which enables the identification and selection of cases with a diversity of information. Accordingly, the five-episode PSA/cartoon series titled ‘Nuclear Family’ on RTÜK’s website ‘medyaokuryazarligi.gov.tr’ was selected as the study sample.

Data collection and analysis

The research data were collected in February 2025 and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This analysis was conducted by identifying appropriate categories and units of analysis that reflected the nature of the analyzed data and the purpose of the study (Cohen et al. 2020). MAXQDA 2024 qualitative data analysis program was used for analyzing the data coded according to the themes and categories created by using various scales developed by Erişti and Erdem (2017), Güdekli et al. (2022), and Ulu Aslan and Baş (2022). In this context, the data were coded and modeled under the media literacy theme.

Results

The media literacy theme was developed by analyzing the data obtained from PSAs based on the research questions with the aim of understanding the media literacy themes of the study. The model for the categories and codes forming the media literacy theme is presented in Figure 1.

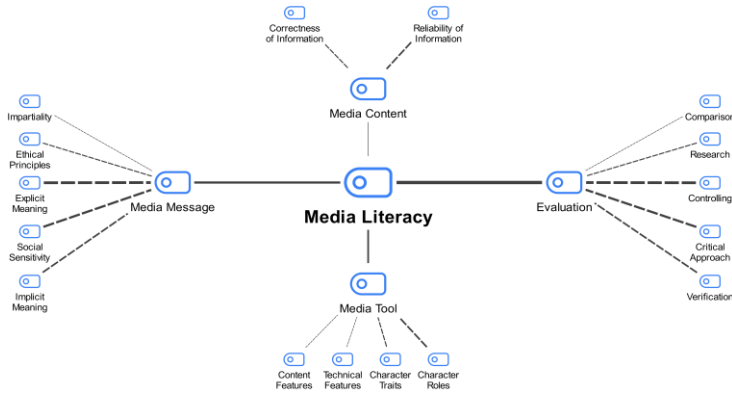


Figure 1: Media Literacy Theme

As shown in Figure 1, the theme of media literacy was divided into four different categories: media content, media message, media tool, and evaluation.

Based on the PSAs analyzed, both the information itself and its source were scrutinized within the media content category. The code reliability of information within this category was relatively more prominent. Messages related to social sensitivity, mostly with explicit meaning, were frequently repeated in the media message category. In another category, media tool, the prominence of character roles was more noticeable. This was especially associated with the fact that PSAs were shaped around the family theme. Evaluation was the most intensively used category, referring to the processing, reviewing, and comprehending the available data. The controlling and critical approach codes were used more frequently than others.

The frequency density of the four different categories that formed the media literacy theme as a result of the coding is presented in Figure 2.

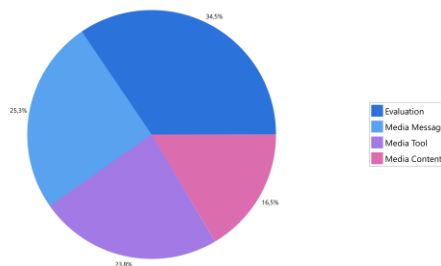


Figure 2: Intensity of the Categories Forming the Media Literacy Theme

Media content had the lowest rate (16.5%) among the categories. This was followed by media tool (23.8%) and media messages (25.3%). The evaluation was the category with the highest rate (34.5%). The results showed that all four categories were important. However, an evaluation was made based on the messages given more intensively in PSAs. The issues aimed at raising societal awareness focused more on problem-solving and answering the question ‘How?’

The coding frequencies of the media content category with the lowest intensity of the media literacy theme are presented as follows:

Code	Coding Frequency (f)	Coding (%)
Reliability of Information	24	55.81
Correctness of Information	19	44.19
Total	43	100

Media Content Category

The coding ratio of the correctness of information code ($f = 19$) in the media content category was 44.19%. The reliability of information ($f = 24$) had a higher coding ratio (55.81%). Attention was also drawn to the accuracy of information in PSAs, but the reliability of information was emphasized more.

The coding densities of the media tool category generated based on the data obtained from PSAs are presented in Figure 3.

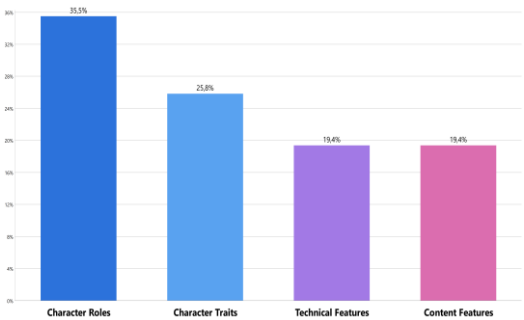


Figure 3: Media Tool Category

In the media tool category, the character roles code was used more frequently than the others (35.5%). The code character traits ranked second (25.8%). The technical features and content features codes with

the lowest ratios had the same ratio of 19.4%. It was clear that the character roles were displayed more dominantly. The role distributions, such as mother, father, sister, and brother, were made clear, especially in the sample in which the family theme was emphasized. The coding densities of the media message category, which had the second-highest coding frequency, are shown in Figure 4.

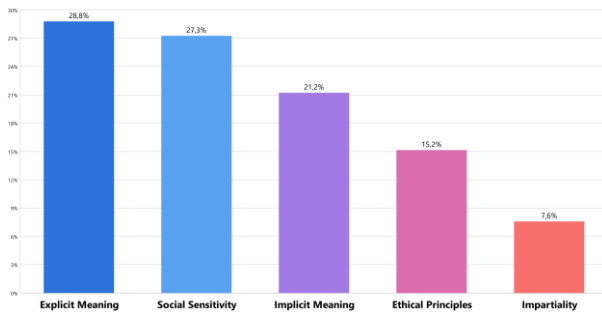


Figure 4: Media Message Category

The most frequently used code in the media message category was explicit meaning with a ratio of 28.8%. Social sensitivity ranked second (27.3%) with a small difference, followed by implicit meaning (21.2%), ethical principles (15.2%), and impartiality (7.6%). Explicit meaning and social sensitivity codes were frequently emphasized with close ratios. The results from the sample revealed that the conveyed message was clearly emphasized and addressed socially essential issues.

The coding data of the evaluation category, which had the highest coding frequency in the media literacy theme, are presented in Figure 5.

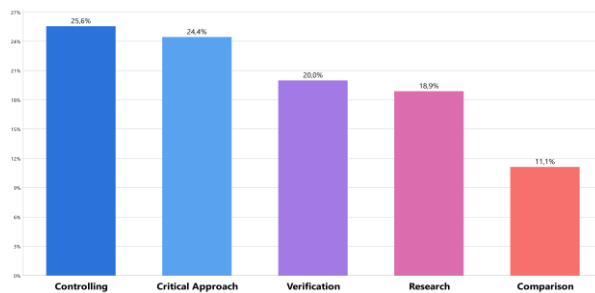


Figure 5: Evaluation Category

The most frequently used code was controlling (25.6%) in the evaluation category. Other codes were critical approach (24.4%), verification (20.0%), and research (18.9%). The comparison code (16.1%) had the lowest distribution ratio. An extremely small difference was observed between the controlling and critical approach codes and the verification and research codes. Accordingly, the controlling code was most intensely emphasized in the PSAs identified within the sample. However, it was understood that a critical approach was displayed with a questioning attitude.

Discussion

Media literacy has gained importance as a basic skill that allows individuals to critically evaluate media content in the digital age. Nowadays, disinformation is widespread, and PSAs stand out as effective tools in developing media literacy thanks to their ability to access large audiences.

PSAs are communication tools used to enhance social awareness and create behavioral change. They range from traditional media to digital platforms, contribute to raising public awareness in areas such as health, environment, education, and social justice, and encourage a more conscious evaluation of media content.

This study revealed the multidimensional structure of the relationship between media literacy and PSAs through qualitative content analysis of RTÜK's 'Nuclear Family' PSA series. The data analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 2024 program.

Based on the analyses of the results, the role and importance of PSAs in the development of media literacy under the media literacy theme have emerged. The study provided important clues on how the media literacy needs of the digital age can be addressed through PSAs. In addition, the two research questions, which were the starting point of the study, were answered. Hence, the study results aligned with those in the literature.

The findings related to the first question of the study, 'Which themes do PSAs contain about media literacy?' revealed that media literacy in PSAs was structured around four main categories: evaluation (34.5%), media message (25.3%), media tool (23.8%), and media content (16.5%). This distribution indicated that PSAs particularly emphasized the evaluation and media message dimensions of media literacy. The emphasis on the reliability and accuracy of information in PSAs was vital in conveying the basic components of

media literacy. In particular, the evaluation category had the highest intensity with a rate of 34.5%, indicating that PSAs adopted an approach to develop critical thinking and analytical evaluation skills.

For the other question of the study, ‘What are the most emphasized concepts regarding media literacy in PSAs?’, the codes of controlling (25.6%) and critical approach (24.4%) in the evaluation category and clear meaning (28.8%) in the media message category were found to have the highest ratios. The analysis results for this question also indicated that the concepts of information reliability, clear meaning, character roles, and controlling came to the fore. In particular, the fact that 55.81% emphasized the reliability of information was considered a significant finding in terms of combating disinformation in today’s digital age. PSAs particularly focused on the developing critical thinking and control mechanisms in raising media literacy awareness. The results within the media literacy theme indicated that PSAs were concentrated in the categories of evaluation and media message. Especially, controlling, critical approach, and clear meaning codes were prominent, highlighting the importance of PSAs as an effective tool in creating media literacy awareness. The emphasis on the reliability and accuracy of information in PSAs was significant in conveying the basic components of media literacy.

Conclusion

This study revealed that PSAs could be used as an essential tool for developing media literacy. It showed that using PSAs effectively in media literacy education might help increase social awareness and develop media literacy skills. In addition, the study revealed that PSAs adopted an approach supporting critical thinking skills and emphasizing information reliability in media literacy development. The results highlighted that PSAs could be used as an essential tool in media literacy education.

The study results indicated the role of PSAs in developing media literacy. Also, the impact of PSAs in raising social awareness was analyzed in detail.

Future studies should examine the relationship between media literacy and PSAs through various target audiences and media channels. In particular, investigating the effect of PSAs broadcasted on digital media platforms on media literacy may be of significance. In addition, the role of PSAs in developing media literacy skills should be explored through experimental studies, and their long-term effects

should be examined. Finally, a comparative analysis of the relationship between media literacy and PSAs across varying cultural contexts can offer valuable theoretical and practical contributions to the field.

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