

Article

Emirati University Students' Perceptions of the Role of Media and Information Literacy in Understanding Media Ethics: A Survey of Self-Reported Views

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Abstract

The study explores Emirati university students' perceptions of how media and information literacy enhance their understanding of media ethics. It specifically investigates students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of professional media standards, enhancing their respect for individuals' privacy, promoting their social responsibility, regulating their ethical digital interactions, and the challenges they face in distinguishing reliable from misleading media content. The study administered a survey to a quota sample of 300 students from Al Ain University. The results indicated that students perceive media and information literacy as playing a significant role in shaping their understanding of professional media standards, enhancing their respect for individuals' privacy, and promoting their social responsibility. The results also showed that students perceive considerable challenges in distinguishing reliable from misleading media content. Furthermore, no statistically significant differences emerged in students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their understanding of media ethics by gender. However, statistically significant differences appeared by academic year and the college in which students study, favoring the College of Communication and Media. Finally, there is a strong positive correlation between students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of professional media standards and both their perceptions of respect for individuals' privacy and the regulation of their ethical digital interaction with others.

Keywords: media information literacy; media ethics; Emirati university students



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1. Introduction

The contemporary media environment has been transformed by two converging forces: the rapid expansion of digital platforms and the widespread deployment of artificial-intelligence techniques in content production and circulation. These developments have reshaped not only the technologies used to produce and consume media messages but also the ethical standards by which those messages are evaluated, extending the scope of media ethics beyond conventional professional norms to include credibility, accountability, intellectual property, privacy, and the management of misinformation in online environments (Ahmad et al., 2025a; Safori et al., 2025). Media ethics is therefore no longer confined to the newsroom; it is a competency demanded of every active participant in the digital sphere.

Media and information literacy have emerged as the principal educational framework through which such competencies are cultivated. Defined as a comprehensive educational

framework that aims to develop students' ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and produce information critically and ethically, MIL has been, in recent years, increasingly discussed in the literature as a determinant of moral discrimination in media use, source-credibility assessment, and the ability to recognise and resist misleading information (Džogović et al., 2025; Oreqat & Abuhasirah, 2022). Concurrently, the digital turn has extended MIL's conceptual scope to incorporate digital literacy as an essential component, particularly in engaging with the ethical implications of AI-enabled tools—algorithmic bias, content authenticity, and professional responsibility—that increasingly mediate information access in higher education and beyond (Okela et al., 2024, 2025; Mansoor et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has further extended the MIL construct into the operational domain. Studies across multiple national contexts have shown a close relationship between elevated MIL levels and the capacity to detect manipulative media tactics, to exercise critical visual analysis in response to deep-fake and synthetic content, and to evaluate news claims against verifiable sources (Washington, 2023; Aljalabneh, 2024). Across this body of work, MIL is described as a three-dimensional competency that links knowledge, critical evaluation, and responsible participation in the digital world, supported by a body of foundational scholarship on media literacy, critical thinking, and digital citizenship (Buckingham, 2003; Livingstone, 2004; Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2013).

MIL's contribution to media ethics is, however, argued in the literature primarily through attitudinal and behavioural observation rather than through the specific construct of perception, that is, students' own reported accounting of what MIL does for them. Furthermore, while the wider literature has established that MIL supports ethical media conduct, the ethical dimension of MIL is most often discussed in studies located in Western or East Asian higher-education settings, while Arabic-language contexts and Gulf higher-education institutions remain comparatively under-represented. Few studies evaluate systematically how MIL contributes to ethical media awareness among university students in the United Arab Emirates in terms of professional standards, privacy, social responsibility, and digital ethics simultaneously. This gap in the literature is important because, in today's digitally saturated environment, ethical media awareness entails more than the detection of misleading information; it entails a coherent awareness of professional norms, privacy boundaries, social accountability, and responsible online presence.

The present study is positioned, therefore, as an exploratory contribution that documents what UAE university students themselves report as the role of MIL in shaping their understanding of media ethics across these interconnected dimensions and the challenges they report in applying MIL-related competencies in practice. In doing so, the study aligns with national priorities for promoting tolerance, responsibility, and societal awareness in line with the United Arab Emirates' policy framework, while remaining consistent with the international MIL scholarship on which it draws.

2. Problem Statement

The United Arab Emirates presents a distinctive site for examining MIL and media ethics. The country is undergoing rapid digital development alongside an exceptionally broad cultural diversity in its higher-education student body, where active engagement in digital media has been documented as contributing to cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills while simultaneously posing ethical challenges that require educational responses responsive to the local cultural context (Assad et al., 2025; Baskara, 2024; Erişti & Freedman, 2024; Mumtaz et al., 2024). Within this environment, media literacy is positioned, in the regional scholarship, as a means of promoting both local and cross-border cultural understanding and of supporting the ethical interpretation of media messages. At the same time, the regional evidence based on MIL and media ethics is uneven: while

Mansoor (2023) has assessed the alignment of Arab media-education curricula against UNESCO standards, the perceptual dimension, i.e., what students themselves report MIL to do for their ethical awareness, has received comparatively limited attention in Gulf higher-education contexts.

Drawing on this context, the present study formulates its problem at the perceptual level. Specifically, the study investigates Emirati university students' perceptions regarding the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of media professional standards, enhancing their awareness of the importance of respecting individuals' privacy, developing their sense of social responsibility, and regulating their patterns of ethical digital interaction with others. The study also investigates the challenges that students perceive in distinguishing between reliable and misleading media content, particularly considering the pervasive circulation of false information and the proliferation of misleading visual content supported by artificial-intelligence technologies, which complicate the verification skills on which ethical media conduct depends.

By framing the problem in these perceptual terms, the study defines itself as a documentation of what students report as the role of MIL and the challenges they report in applying MIL-related competencies in practice, rather than as a claim that MIL has directly produced any specific level of ethical understanding or commitment to ethical behavior. Four perceptual dimensions (professional standards, privacy, social responsibility, and ethical digital interaction) and one perceptual challenge dimension (source-verification difficulty) are investigated across three personal characteristic subgroups (gender, college, and academic year), with the design deliberately restricted to a cross-sectional snapshot that captures perception at a single point in time and does not, on its own, permit attribution of the observed perceptions to MIL programme exposure. The rationale for this design choice, and the sampling logic that operationalises it within Al Ain University, is set out in the Methodology section that follows.

3. Research Questions

The study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

What are UAE university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of media professional standards?

What are UAE university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their respect for individuals' privacy?

What are UAE university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their sense of social responsibility?

What are UAE university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in regulating their ethical digital interaction with others?

What are UAE university students' perceptions regarding the challenges they face in distinguishing between reliable and misleading media content?

4. Research Hypotheses

1. There are statistically significant differences in Emirati university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their understanding of media ethics, attributed to their personal characteristics.
2. There is a statistically significant positive correlation between Emirati university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of media professional standards, their perceptions regarding respect for individuals' privacy, and their perceptions regarding the regulation of ethical digital interaction with others.

5. Literature Review

5.1. Key Construct Definitions

Five terminologically contested concepts drive the analytical vocabulary of this study. Because each of these terms has generated definitional disagreement in the educational, media, and information-science literatures, an explicit statement of the operational meaning adopted here is required before the theoretical framework is set out.

Media and information literacy is adopted in this study in the programmatic sense most recently consolidated by UNESCO: a composite educational competency that integrates the abilities to access, evaluate, understand, and create media content across multiple formats and platforms, and that is positioned as a precondition for the exercise of informed citizenship in digital media environments. The construct is treated here as encompassing both its media-literacy lineage (the critical-reading tradition associated with [Buckingham, 2003](#); [Livingstone, 2004](#); [Hobbs, 2010](#)) and its information-literacy extension (the source-assessment tradition associated with the library and information-science literature), while retaining Potter's three-component cognitive architecture (personal status, cognitive structures, and media literacy skills) as the analytical lens through which the perceptual data are organised.

Digital literacy is adopted in the narrower sense used in the higher-education scholarship on academic and professional skill development: the operational capability to locate, evaluate, and produce digital content using information and communication technologies, complementing rather than substituting for MIL's critical-interpretive dimension. Within the present study, digital literacy is treated as a sub-component of MIL's media engagement repertoire and is foregrounded specifically in Dimension 4 (ethical digital interaction).

Artificial intelligence is adopted in the broad technical sense employed in the contemporary media-ethics scholarship: computational systems whose outputs, including natural language generation, image synthesis, and algorithmic content recommendation, simulate functions traditionally associated with human cognition. Within the present study, AI is not treated as a measurement target in its own right; it is invoked as a contextual driver of ethical complexity in the digital sphere (particularly in the production of synthetic and misleading content) and as a background condition for the verification challenges captured in Dimension 5.

Disinformation is adopted in the typological sense established in the information-disorder framework: deliberately false or misleading content produced and disseminated with the intent to deceive, distinguished in this study from misinformation (false content disseminated without deceptive intent) and malinformation (genuine information disseminated with deliberate intent to harm). The construct is foregrounded in Dimension 5 and in the substantive interpretation of the source-verification challenges reported in Section 8.

Digital citizenship is adopted in the civic-participation sense used in the educational scholarship on responsible online conduct: the norms, competencies, and behaviours that govern an individual's constructive participation in digital social spaces, including respectful interaction with others, responsible content production, and accountability for one's digital footprint. Within the present study, digital citizenship provides the civic-participation backdrop against which Dimensions 3 (social responsibility) and 4 (ethical digital interaction) are interpreted.

With these definitions explicitly stated, the theoretical framework set out below becomes anchored to a coherent set of constructs rather than to partially overlapping everyday usages.

5.2. Theoretical Framework

Media literacy is theoretically situated within a broader constellation of related concepts, including digital literacy, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven information change, dis-

information, and digital citizenship, each of which has generated its own considerable body of scholarship (Buckingham, 2003; Baskara, 2024; Mansoor et al., 2024; Mrah, 2022; Al-Ali et al., 2024). Although these constructs inform the wider landscape within which media literacy works, the present study is purposely limited to the ethical dimension of media literacy, that is, the cognitive mechanisms through which media exposure shapes individuals' ethical awareness and conduct, and therefore adopts Potter's cognitive theory of media literacy as its primary analytical framework, rather than offering an extended theoretical treatment of these adjacent constructs.

The study adopts James W. Potter's cognitive Theory of Media Literacy as an analytical framework for understanding the perception of media literacy in enhancing Emirati university students' awareness of media ethics, especially considering the rapid digital transformations and the growing influence of media and social media platforms. The theory is based on the basic hypothesis that the media exerts a cumulative and continuous influence on individuals cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally, whether directly through individual exposure or indirectly through the social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape patterns of media perception and awareness (Potter, 2013).

Potter's Theory of Media Literacy asserts that media literacy represents a fundamental input for enhancing ethical awareness of the media, as its role is not limited to increasing superficial knowledge of media content but aims to develop an integrated critical awareness that encompasses cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions. In the university context, the cognitive dimension contributes to enabling students to analyze media messages and understand their structure and content, while the ethical dimension enhances awareness of media responsibilities, respect for human values, and avoidance of unprofessional practices such as misinformation, defamation, and violations of privacy and intellectual property rights. The absence of some of these dimensions leads to a partial understanding of media content and restricts the ability to evaluate it according to integrated professional and ethical standards (Potter, 2010).

The theory also assumes that interaction with the media is often automatic and unconscious as a result of the density and frequency of messages, and that possessing basic information alone is not sufficient to ensure ethical behavior unless it is coupled with critical awareness and self-motivation. Students also face a challenge in filtering information and ethically dealing with intense media flow, especially in open digital environments (Potter, 2004).

Media literacy is based on three main overlapping components: personal status, cognitive structures, and media literacy skills. Personal status refers to an individual's awareness of their goals and values during media exposure, which enhances control over the reception and interpretation of content rather than being subject to its automatic influence. Cognitive structures include a system of knowledge organized around the nature of media messages, their production mechanisms, and their societal influence, which enables students to interpret content according to ethical and professional standards. Media literacy skills are embodied in the abilities to analyze, evaluate, compare, deduce, and synthesize. They enable students to distinguish between professional and unprofessional content, and between reliable and misleading information, and to adopt conscious ethical stances towards media content they consume or produce (Potter, 2018).

The theory is based on two basic principles that support its close connection to media ethics. The first is that protecting individuals from the negative effects of media is not only achieved through external control, but also by empowering them through media literacy, so that they have the ability to interact ethically with the media. The second is that human cognition is the main input to behavioral change, as ethical media practices are a

direct result of the development of awareness and critical cognition in individuals (Potter & Christ, 2021).

Accordingly, the framework is increasingly important in explaining the behavior of Emirati university students, as the purposes of using these platforms affect cognitive beliefs and the level of commitment to the ethics of publishing and media circulation. Entertainment-based use or uncontrolled social interaction may be associated with poor information verification and the adoption of unethical media practices, while meaningful cognitive use contributes to promoting critical thinking, awareness of media ethics, and social responsibility in the digital space (Celik et al., 2021).

A full understanding of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) needs critical engagement with other scholars whose work complements and challenges Potter's intellectual focus. David Buckingham, Sonia Livingstone, and Renee Hobbs have notably shaped MIL discourse by highlighting socio-cultural, critical, and pedagogical dimensions. Combining the perspectives of Buckingham, Livingstone, and Hobbs provides a necessary socio-cultural and pedagogical counterweight to Potter's cognitive effort, fostering the essential engagement required for the MIL framework. Buckingham's (2003) emphasized media language, representation, institutions, and audiences, shifting the analytical lens toward the socio-cultural construction of media, illuminating what is managed and why it is constructed to expose the systemic biases and power structures within the broader media ecosystem. This is additionally extended by Livingstone (2004), whose framework of access, analysis, evaluation, and creation moves ethical thoughts outside individual consumption toward active digital citizenship, a shift for students who are concurrently the creators of digital content. Connecting these scholars' views, Hobbs (2010), on the other hand, supports a dynamic synthesis of empowerment and protection, exploring that MIL needs to transcend cognitive processing to address the wider cultural and political contexts. Accordingly, these scholars confirm that MIL interventions are not merely technical but are educationally balanced and responsive to the developing digital landscapes crossed by Emirati university students.

The suitability of Potter's framework to the UAE higher-education context warrants brief justification, given that UNESCO's MIL framework, which is regularly used in studies of media education in the Arab region, is already cited in the present paper and informs part of the instrument design. The two frameworks operate at different analytical levels. UNESCO's framework is principally oriented to the policy and curricular dimension: it specifies what MIL education should achieve at the programme level, the competencies learners should acquire, and the teaching strategies that should be adopted. Potter's framework, by contrast, is principally oriented to the individual cognitive dimension: it specifies how media exposure shapes the cognitive structures through which learners interpret messages, and how those structures can be deliberately developed into ethical and critical competencies. The present study's research design, which is a cross-sectional, perception-based survey of individual students' reported views, is fundamentally an individual-level inquiry rather than a policy-level audit, and Potter is therefore the more productive theoretical lens for the analyses undertaken here.

Potter's framework also aligns with three features of the UAE higher-education context. First, its tripartite decomposition—personal status, cognitive structures, and media literacy skills—maps onto the dual curricular logic of UAE media programmes, which target both professional formation (cognitive structures and media literacy skills) and value-based civic formation (personal status), and allows the present study to position MIL's role across both registers simultaneously. Second, the central premise that ethical media conduct is “a direct result of the development of awareness and critical cognition in individuals” corresponds to the UAE's national objectives of cultivating tolerance, responsibility, and societal awareness,

and to the participants' own tendency, as reported across the four normative dimensions, to attribute ethical outcomes to cognitive processes rather than to external regulation alone. Third, because the UAE higher-education sector encompasses a culturally diverse student body, the personal-status component of Potter's framework accommodates within-group variation more readily than a single uniform curricular standard would.

The two frameworks are accordingly treated here as complementary rather than competing. UNESCO informs the conceptual vocabulary adopted in the Introduction and the Problem Statement, and is explicitly referenced for Dimension 5 (challenges in distinguishing reliable from misleading content), where the international policy consensus on source verification is most directly relevant. Potter, by contrast, supplies the cognitive-level architecture through which the perceptual data in this study are organised. Audit-level evaluation of curriculum fidelity against UNESCO's competency sets is something the present data do not permit and would require an instrument designed for that purpose; the dual engagement adopted here ensures that the study speaks simultaneously to the international MIL policy conversation and to the individual-cognitive question that the present design is positioned to address.

5.3. Previous Studies

Recent studies have shown that MIL plays a major role in enhancing university students' understanding of media ethics and developing their skills in consciously and critically dealing with media content and digital information. An example is the study conducted by [Tarbiyati and Riady \(2025\)](#), which found that information literacy contributes to developing critical thinking among students, enhances the ethical use of information, and helps them learn on their own and solve problems. Ajibade's study ([Ajibade, 2025](#)) also showed that MIL enhances students' understanding of media ethics, enables them to evaluate the credibility of media content, and reduces the pursuit of misleading news. This highlights its role as a fundamental input for building a media-conscious and ethically committed generation in the digital environment. This is also consistent with a study conducted by [Ali \(2024\)](#), which concluded that media literacy enables students to detect false messages. [Safari and Sorri \(2024\)](#) also highlighted the diversity of skills acquired by students, including safe interaction with content and critical analysis of images and videos. However, Mrah's study ([Mrah, 2022](#)) revealed a gap between students' perception of their skills and actual ability, as 55% of them acknowledged weaknesses in their critical skills, which confirms the importance of systematically integrating MIL to enhance critical thinking and the ability to distinguish between correct and misleading information.

In terms of the dimensions of media perception and behavior, a recent study ([Tadeo et al., 2025](#)) confirmed that students' practice of advanced critical thinking in analyzing news and verifying the credibility of sources reflects an advanced awareness of the dimensions of media education and its ethics. Recent research (e.g., [Džogović et al., 2025](#)) also indicated that training students in information literacy skills enhances their ability to search for, evaluate, and use information ethically and supports critical thinking and the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources. This is consistent with research ([Essa et al., 2023](#)) in that students' awareness of media education concepts is emotionally reflected in respect for other opinions and is shown through positive behaviour when publishing content that reflects their convictions. This intersects with the results of research regarding students' ability to produce useful media content ([Mansoor, 2023](#); [Ali, 2024](#)) and research confirming the enhanced ability to interact safely and analyze media content ([Tadeo et al., 2025](#)).

At the institutional level, [Salameh and Abuhasirah \(2025\)](#) highlighted the need for university students to receive specialized training in media literacy to enhance their skills in verifying information, detecting fake news, and promoting the responsible use of media.

Tatar et al. (2022) also emphasized the need to integrate MIL into university curricula systematically, as this contributes to preparing students who are more aware of and committed to media ethics in the digital age and ensures the development of critical thinking skills, distinguishes between correct and misleading information, and respects professional values and intellectual property in the digital environment.

An examination of previous research indicates that there is a strong relationship among media and information literacy, critical thinking skills, evaluating information sources, and responsible/ethical usage of media message content (Tadeo et al., 2025). Despite the growing number of studies examining misinformation detection, technological digital skills, or simply general media usage, there has been less research that has focused extensively on the ethical dimension of MIL in a comprehensive manner (Hulus, 2026). Specifically, MIL has received little attention in terms of how it relates to professional media standards, respect for privacy, social responsibility, and ethical digital interactions within university contexts throughout the Arab Gulf. Therefore, there is a demand for future empirical studies that investigate these dimensions of MIL collectively for a more detailed understanding of how MIL can be employed as a framework for developing ethical media awareness in higher education.

6. Methodology

6.1. Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative approach that aims to reach accurate knowledge of phenomena, events, and observations by researching their elements, variables, and characteristics (Ahmad et al., 2026) and providing sufficient information to interpret and analyze them, to understand their effects and implications. It also aims to develop appropriate procedures and instructions to address, develop, or change them or predict their future (Al Olaimat et al., 2021).

Within the framework of descriptive research, a survey was used to explore the attitudes, opinions, and viewpoints of a group of participants toward a topic covered by the media (Ahmad et al., 2023). This approach was applied to students at the College of Communication and Media and the College of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences at Al Ain University in the UAE to explore Emirati university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their understanding of media ethics.

6.2. Study Population and Sample

Al Ain University was selected as the research site based on two considerations, one practical and one academic. Practically, the institution provided direct access through the authors' affiliation, so that the survey could be administered under the same institutional conditions and approval framework, which reduces procedural variability that would otherwise confound cross-site comparisons. Academically, Al Ain University hosts, under one institutional umbrella, two colleges with meaningfully different curricular exposure to media-related content: the College of Communication and Media, in which media and information literacy-related content is integrated throughout specialised coursework, applied production modules, and the discipline-specific curriculum, and the College of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences, where students encounter media-related content primarily through general-education modules rather than through specialised media training. The two colleges, therefore, constitute a within-institution contrast that allows the same survey instrument to capture variation that would otherwise be diluted across differently structured curricula. The consistency between college gap, documented empirically ($p = 0.000$ across all four dimensions examined), confirms that the contrast is real for this site rather than theoretical. The 50/50 split between the two colleges, the gender-balanced

intake (150 male, 150 female), and the distribution across the four undergraduate years (32.3%, 26%, 23%, and 18.7%) reflect a deliberate quota design aligned with the cross-cohort comparison the study undertakes. The findings should nevertheless be read as pertaining to the particular institutional and curricular configuration described here; generalisation to other UAE universities, or to institutions whose college structures differ from this one, will require replication at additional sites before any inference at the national level can be supported. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	50%
	Female	50%
College	Comm & Media	50%
	Edu, Hum & Soc Sci	50%
Academic Year	First Year	32.3%
	Second Year	26%
	Third Year	23%
	Fourth Year	18.7%

6.3. Study Instrument Scale

To evaluate the respondents' answers to the questionnaire items, a four-point scale was used, the items of which indicate the degree of the respondents' agreement with the items. Score (3) represents the highest degree of agreement (with a high degree), and score (0) represents the lowest degree (none). To determine the rating level of the respondents' answers, the scale was calculated by subtracting the upper limit (3) from the lower limit (0), then dividing the result by the number of required categories, which are three categories (high, moderate, and low), so that the equation becomes: $(3 - 0)/3 = 1$, where 1 was added to the end of each category according to the following:

$$0.00 - 1.00 = \text{low} / 1.01 - 2.00 = \text{moderate} / 2.01 - 3.00 = \text{high}$$

The questionnaire has been created via a deductive process based on the research objectives, research questions, and Potter's cognitive theory of media literacy. The questionnaire's items measured five related dimensions based on literature and the conceptual framework of the study, specifically understanding of media professional standards, respect for individuals' privacy, social responsibility, ethical digital interaction, and issues related to determining reliable versus misleading content. There was a primary focus on concept indicators also commonly cited in media literacy research, including credibility of sources, accuracy of information, objectivity when reporting, protection of individuals' privacy rights, responsible participation, and critical analysis/evaluation of media messages, as shown in Table 2. Upon completion of the draft version, media specialists and academics reviewed the instrument for face validity (wording clarity for respondents) and for content validity (alignment of the item set with the construct domain of each of the five dimensions). Because instruction at Al Ain University is delivered in Arabic, the questionnaire was administered to students in Arabic; an English version was available only as a checking tool used by bilingual members of the review panel to verify construct consistency across the two languages. Three concrete categories of revision were implemented in response to evaluator feedback: (i) Lexical Precision—items phrased with ambiguous verbs that could be read as programme-level actions ("introducing", "developing") were sharpened to specify the perception-level reading ("developing my understanding..."); (ii) Dimensional

Alignment—one item initially drafted under Dimension 4 (ethical digital interaction) was reassigned to Dimension 3 (social responsibility) because the evaluator judged its content to concern societal interaction rather than the interpersonal online conduct targeted by Dimension 4; and (iii) Response-Scale Clarification—items in Dimension 5 (challenges) were re-checked to ensure that higher scores uniformly signal stronger perceived difficulty, preserving directional consistency with the four normative role-attribution dimensions. No item was deleted in either round. The internal-consistency values reported in Table 3 confirm the reliability of the final, post-evaluation version of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Development of the questionnaire instrument.

Variable	Items	References
Dimension 1—MIL and Professional Standards	Introducing the rules and ethics of media work.	(Potter, 2018; Potter, 2013; Hobbs, 2010; UNESCO, 2021; Ali, 2024; Aljalabneh, 2024)
	Helping understand that news must be accurate and truthful.	
	Teaching how to deal with fake news and rumors.	
	Developing the ability to distinguish between right and wrong media practices.	
	Enhancing awareness of the importance of conveying information objectively and without bias.	
Dimension 2—MIL and Individual Privacy	Promoting caution in respecting others' private lives.	(Potter & Christ, 2021; Livingstone et al., 2020; Lund et al., 2025; Umar, 2022)
	Promoting the avoidance of publishing photos or data without permission.	
	Developing an understanding of the risks of privacy violations through digital media.	
	Deepening awareness of the importance of protecting personal data.	
	Strengthening understanding of the boundaries of sharing and what protects individual privacy.	
Dimension 3—MIL and Social Responsibility	Developing an understanding of the role of the media in serving society, not harming it.	(Potter & Christ, 2021; Buckingham, 2003; Martens & Hobbs, 2015; Safori & Sorri, 2024)
	Clarifying that media can promote positive values such as cooperation and respect.	
	Refraining from sharing and republishing anything that might stir up strife or harm society.	
	Promoting a sense of responsibility when publishing or sharing news and content.	
	Increasing awareness of the impact of the media in shaping people's opinions and attitudes.	
Dimension 4—MIL and Ethical Digital Interaction	Raising awareness of the need to respect cultural and intellectual diversity on the Internet.	(Potter & Christ, 2021; Gbore et al., 2025; Tatar et al., 2022; Al-Ali et al., 2024)
	Commitment to avoiding abuse and cyberbullying.	
	Increased awareness of the risks of unethical online behavior.	
	Encouraging the use of polite language in digital discussions.	
	Developing interaction across digital platforms ethically.	

Table 2. *Cont.*

Variable	Items	References
Dimension 5—Challenges in Distinguishing Reliable from Misleading Content	Inability to distinguish reliable and misleading sources.	(Livingstone, 2004; Hobbs, 2010; Orhan, 2023; Mrah, 2022; Salameh & Abuhasirah, 2025)
	The similarity between true and fake news limits the ability to distinguish between them.	
	Difficulty in knowing the goals of the entities that produce media content.	
	It is difficult to verify the credibility of news spread on social media platforms.	
	Poor training in media content validation skills.	

6.4. Reliability

The reliability of the research instrument was evaluated using Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-V25). Reliability estimates were calculated for each section of the instrument, along with the correlations between individual items and their corresponding sections. In media research, a reliability coefficient of 70% or above is generally considered acceptable (Cruchinho et al., 2024). The overall reliability of the instrument reached 91.7%, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Table 3 explains Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients for the questionnaire dimensions.

Table 3. Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients for the questionnaire dimensions.

Dimension	Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient
Dimension 1—MIL and Professional Standards.	78.5%
Dimension 2—MIL and Individual Privacy.	78.6%
Dimension 3—MIL and Social Responsibility.	71.8%
Dimension 4—MIL and Ethical Digital Interaction.	76.1%
Dimension 5—Challenges in Distinguishing Reliable from Misleading Content.	90.2%

7. Results

7.1. Role of MIL in Shaping Understanding of Media Professional Standards

Data in Table 4 show that the overall average role of MIL in shaping students’ understanding of media professional standards was high. The most prominent of these roles was “Introducing the rules and ethics of media work,” with a mean score of (2.75) and a high level. The lowest of these roles was “Enhancing awareness of the importance of conveying information objectively and without bias,” with a mean score of (2.61) and a high level.

Table 4. Role of MIL in shaping understanding of media professional standards.

Item	Mean	SD
Introducing the rules and ethics of media work.	2.75	0.478
Helping understand that news must be accurate and truthful.	2.73	0.465
Teaching how to deal with fake news and rumors.	2.69	0.572
Developing the ability to distinguish between right and wrong media practices.	2.66	0.620
Enhancing awareness of the importance of conveying information objectively and without bias.	2.61	0.582
Overall Mean	2.69	0.543

These results indicate that students perceive MIL as playing an important role in shaping their understanding of media professional standards. The high overall mean (2.69) reflects a strong perception among students that media literacy supports their understanding of media work practices according to professional and ethical principles, with the highest agreement registered for “Introducing the rules and ethics of media work” ($M = 2.75$) and the lowest for “Enhancing awareness of the importance of conveying information objectively and without bias” ($M = 2.61$). This elevated perception is consistent with the curricular goals typically associated with media-education programmes at both colleges; however, the cross-sectional design of the present study does not allow us to attribute this perception directly to any particular programme, since the data capture students’ views of the role of MIL rather than capturing any externally verified change in their professional conduct.

7.2. Role of MIL in Promoting Respect for Individual Privacy

Data in Table 5 show that the overall average role of MIL in enhancing students’ respect for individuals’ privacy was high. The most prominent of these roles was “Promoting caution in respecting others’ private lives,” with a mean score of (2.85) and a high level. The least prominent of these roles was “Strengthening understanding of the boundaries of sharing and what protects individual privacy,” with a mean score of (2.65) and a high level.

Table 5. Role of MIL in promoting respect for individual privacy.

Item	Mean	SD
Promoting caution in respecting others’ private lives.	2.85	0.358
Promoting the avoidance of publishing photos or data without permission.	2.83	0.379
Developing an understanding of the risks of privacy violations through digital media.	2.77	0.523
Deepening awareness of the importance of protecting personal data.	2.73	0.532
Strengthening understanding of the boundaries of sharing and what protects individual privacy.	2.65	0.585
Overall Mean	2.77	0.475

These results indicate that students perceive MIL as playing a key role in promoting, within their own media conduct, an awareness of the importance of respecting individuals’ privacy. The high overall average reflects strong agreement that this ethical dimension is central to media work and warrants considerable attention when handling personal data and individuals’ rights. This perception is consistent with the goals typically articulated for media literacy programmes in the literature; however, the cross-sectional design of the present study does not allow us to infer that such programmes have actually produced this awareness, since the data capture perception rather than measured attitudinal or behavioural change.

7.3. Role of MIL in Promoting Social Responsibility

Data in Table 6 indicate that the overall average role of MIL in enhancing social responsibility among students was high, and the most prominent of these roles was “Developing understanding of the role of the media in serving society, not harming it,” with a mean score of (2.80) and a high level, while the lowest of these roles was “Increasing awareness of the impact of media in shaping people’s opinions and attitudes,” with a mean score of (2.70) and a high level.

Table 6. Role of MIL in enhancing social responsibility.

Item	Mean	SD
Developing understanding of the role of the media in serving society, not harming it.	2.80	0.417
Clarifying that media can promote positive values such as cooperation and respect.	2.79	0.437
Adhering to avoid sharing and republishing anything that might stir up strife or harm society.	2.77	0.501
Promote a sense of responsibility when publishing or sharing news and content.	2.73	0.474
Increasing awareness of the impact of media in shaping people's opinions and attitudes.	2.70	0.571
Overall Mean	2.76	0.480

These results highlight that students perceive MIL as playing an important role in enhancing their sense of social responsibility, as evident in the high overall average of this dimension. Students strongly agree that media work is not only a recreational or commercial activity but a social and moral activity with potential effects on shaping society's awareness and directing its behaviour. These results further indicate that the participants perceive media literacy programmes and courses as contributing to the development of a spirit of commitment to the public benefit and as enhancing their awareness that media should be used as a tool to serve humanity and society, rather than as a means of personal use or entertainment without regard to its social and humanitarian outcomes. It should nevertheless be noted that this finding reflects perceived role attribution rather than a directly measured change in social-responsibility behaviours, and that the cross-sectional design does not permit us to infer that the observed high agreement corresponds to an actual behavioural commitment observable in media practice.

7.4. Role of MIL in Regulating Ethical Digital Interaction

Data in Table 7 indicate that the overall average role of MIL in regulating ethical digital interaction among students was high, and the most prominent of these roles was "Raising awareness of the need to respect cultural and intellectual diversity on the Internet," with a mean score of (2.77) and a high level, while the lowest of these roles was "Developing interaction across digital platforms in an ethical manner," with a mean score of (2.72) and a high level.

Table 7. Role of MIL in regulating ethical digital interaction.

Item	Mean	SD
Raising awareness of the need to respect cultural and intellectual diversity on the Internet.	2.77	0.461
Commitment to avoiding abuse and cyberbullying.	2.76	0.471
Increased awareness of the risks of unethical online behavior.	2.74	0.516
Encouraging the use of polite language in digital discussions.	2.74	0.523
Developing interaction across digital platforms ethically.	2.72	0.507
Overall Mean	2.75	0.496

This reflects that students perceive MIL as contributing significantly to the establishment of ethical controls for their own digital interaction. In their responses, students report a growing awareness of the importance of responsible and conscious behaviour in digital environments and characterise media literacy programmes as extending beyond the teaching of technical skills into the building of values that govern online communicative

conduct. Students further report recognising the importance of consciously interacting with content and other users, based on ethical standards that respect human beings and cultural differences, and on standards that, in their view, limit manifestations of abuse or negative discourse in cyberspace. As with the other dimensions, these findings represent the participants' own account of what MIL does for them, rather than an externally verified change in their digital ethical behaviour.

7.5. Challenges of Distinguishing Between Reliable and Misleading Content

Data presented in Table 8 indicate that the average of the challenges faced by students when distinguishing between reliable and misleading media content was high, with the most prominent of these challenges being “Inability to distinguish reliable and misleading sources”, with a mean score of (2.40) and a high level, while the least of these challenges was “Poor training in media content verification skills”, with a mean score of (2.22) and a high level.

Table 8. Challenges facing students when distinguishing between reliable and misleading media content.

Item	Mean	SD
Inability to distinguish reliable and misleading sources.	2.40	0.750
The similarity between true and fake news limits the ability to distinguish between them.	2.36	0.783
Difficulty in knowing the goals of the entities that produce media content.	2.28	0.718
It is difficult to verify the credibility of news spread on social media platforms.	2.25	0.818
Poor training in media content validation skills.	2.22	0.830
Overall Mean	2.30	0.780

These results show that students face significant challenges in distinguishing between reliable and misleading media content. The overall average is high, meaning that the ability to verify the credibility of information remains a significant obstacle even in light of the spread of MIL. This result reflects a complex media reality in which the amount of information is increasing, and its circulation is rapid, and in which facts are mixed with rumors and false content (Grain & Moreira, 2026; Ahmad et al., 2025b; Purnat et al., 2023). This makes the process of distinguishing between reliable and misleading content a skill that requires advanced critical awareness and specialized analytical tools (Grain & Moreira, 2026; Orhan, 2023).

A methodological observation is warranted at this point. Across the five dimensions examined, every individual item registered a mean score within the “high” band of the 0–3 rating scale (2.01–3.00). Specifically, the 25-item means ranged from 2.22 (“Poor training in media content validation skills,” Table 8) to 2.85 (“Promoting caution in respecting others’ private lives,” Table 5), with no item falling into the “moderate” (1.01–2.00) or “low” (0.00–1.00) categories. At the dimension level, the four normative dimensions clustered between 2.69 and 2.77, while the fifth—challenges in distinguishing reliable from misleading content—registered a notably lower mean of 2.30.

This concentrated upper-range distribution is consistent with patterns documented for self-report survey instruments administered within an institutional setting, where respondents may adjust their answers in the direction of what they perceive as institutionally expected conduct. Within the present study, that possibility cannot be excluded: students were surveyed in the same university environment where MIL-related content is taught, and the questionnaire items foregrounded statements that align with the curricular vocabulary of media ethics, privacy, social responsibility, and digital civility.

Three features of the present data nevertheless argue against treating the elevated means as the simple product of social-desirability inflation. First, if acquiescence or desirability bias were the dominant driver, all five dimensions would be expected to cluster at a similarly high level; instead, the fifth dimension (challenges in source verification) registered a substantially and uniformly lower mean (2.22–2.40) than the four normative dimensions (2.61–2.85), indicating that students were willing to report meaningful difficulty within a domain that is itself institutionally valued. Second, that same fifth dimension returned the highest Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the five (90.2%, Table 3), suggesting that the recognised difficulty was reported with greater internal consistency than the role-attribution items, not as random acquiescence. Third, the documented variation across academic-year subgroups and the variation between the College of Communication and Media and the College of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences, as shown in the first hypothesis test, indicate sensitivity to differences in curricular exposure, which would not be expected if the elevated means were a uniform artefact of social desirability.

Taken together, the data should be read as documenting a strong and internally structured perceptual orientation towards MIL-related ethical values among the surveyed students—an orientation that coexists with the candid reporting of difficulty in the verification skill component. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that the absolute level of agreement in the four normative dimensions has been shifted upward, to a modest and unquantifiable degree, by respondents’ sensitivity to the institutional expectations of the survey context. Future work in this setting would benefit from pairing the present instrument with a validated social-desirability measure so that the substantive pattern documented here can be statistically disentangled from any residual desirability-driven inflation.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1. *There are statistically significant differences in Emirati university students’ perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in enhancing their understanding of media ethics, attributed to their personal characteristics.*

1. Gender

The results of the *t*-test in Table 9 show that, according to gender, there are no statistically significant differences at the significance level of 0.05 in the role of MIL in shaping students’ understanding of professional standards ($p = 0.774$), promoting their respect for individuals’ privacy ($p = 0.746$), promoting their social responsibility ($p = 0.972$), and regulating their digital ethical interaction ($p = 0.330$). This indicates the convergence of the role of MIL in enhancing male and female students’ understanding of media ethics.

Table 9. Results of the *t*-test to study the difference in the role of MIL in enhancing students’ understanding of media ethics by gender.

Role	Gender	Mean	SD
Shaping the understanding of professional standards.	Male	2.6840	0.774
	Female	2.6973	
Promoting respect for individuals’ privacy.	Male	2.7587	0.746
	Female	2.7720	
Promoting social responsibility.	Male	2.7587	0.972
	Female	2.7573	
Regulating digital ethical interaction.	Male	2.7253	0.330
	Female	2.7653	

These findings indicate that male and female students do not differ significantly in their perceptions of the role of MIL in shaping their understanding of media ethics across any of the four dimensions. With *p*-values of (0.774) for professional standards, (0.746) for privacy, (0.972) for social responsibility, and (0.330) for digital ethical interaction, the *t*-test results show no statistically significant differences at the (0.05) level. In their responses, both genders perceive MIL as playing a comprehensive and balanced role in shaping media and ethical awareness, and both genders perceive themselves as sharing the professional and human values associated with media ethics. What remains untested by the present design, however, is whether these shared perceptions translate into comparable behavioural outcomes between the two groups, since the data capture perception only and do not enable a direct comparison of actual media-ethics conduct between male and female respondents.

2. College

The results of the *t*-test in Table 10 showed that, according to the college variable, there are statistically significant differences at the significance level of 0.05 in students' perceptions of MIL's contribution to understanding professional standards ($p = 0.000$), respecting individuals' privacy ($p = 0.000$), social responsibility ($p = 0.000$), and ethical digital interaction ($p = 0.000$). The arithmetic means indicate that students at the College of Communication and Media report higher levels across all four dimensions than do students at the College of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences: professional standards ($M = 2.8493$ vs. 2.5320), privacy ($M = 2.9027$ vs. 2.6280), social responsibility ($M = 2.8893$ vs. 2.6267), and ethical digital interaction ($M = 2.8653$ vs. 2.6253). All four inter-college differences were statistically significant ($p = 0.000$) in each case.

Table 10. Results of the *t*-test to study the difference in the role of MIL in enhancing students' understanding of media ethics at the college.

Role	College	Mean	SD
Shaping the understanding of professional standards	Comm & Media	2.8493	0.000
	Edu, Hum & Soc Sci	2.5320	
Promoting respect for individuals' privacy	Comm & Media	2.9027	0.000
	Edu, Hum & Soc Sci	2.6280	
Promoting social responsibility	Comm & Media	2.8893	0.000
	Edu, Hum & Soc Sci	2.6267	
Regulating digital ethical interaction	Comm & Media	2.8653	0.000
	Edu, Hum & Soc Sci	2.6253	

These results indicate that students at the College of Communication and Media report a higher level of perceived awareness of, and interaction with, the concepts of MIL than do students at the College of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences. This difference can be tentatively explained by the fact that students in communication and media specialisations are likely to encounter media-ethics content more frequently and in greater depth than their peers, which may account for their stronger perception of MIL's role. The data, however, do not allow us to conclude that these students have internalised ethical media values more deeply than their counterparts; what they show is a self-reported gap in perception that may reflect differences in curricular exposure to media-ethics content rather than in actual ethical commitment. Furthermore, integrating media education with MIL is perceived, in the participants' responses, as enhancing the ability to engage with media content and communication practices in the digital age more consciously and responsibly, although the present cross-sectional design does not permit us to confirm this perceived enhancement as a measurable change in conduct.

3. Academic year

The results in Table 11 showed that there are statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level in the role of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in shaping the understanding of professional standards ($p = 0.001$), promoting respect for individuals' privacy ($p = 0.006$), enhancing social responsibility ($p = 0.018$), and regulating digital ethical interaction ($p = 0.019$), by academic year. To identify the sources of these differences, the post hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD) test was conducted, as presented in Table 12.

Table 11. Results of the One-Way ANOVA to examine the differences in the role of MIL in enhancing students' understanding of media ethics according to academic year.

Role		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Shaping the understanding of professional standards	Between Groups	2.552	3	0.851	5.529	0.001
	Within Groups	45.542	296	0.154		
	Total	48.094	299			
Promoting respect for individuals' privacy	Between Groups	1.553	3	0.518	4.237	0.006
	Within Groups	36.166	296	0.122		
	Total	37.719	299			
Promoting social responsibility	Between Groups	1.101	3	0.367	3.428	0.018
	Within Groups	31.690	296	0.107		
	Total	32.791	299			
Regulating digital ethical interaction	Between Groups	1.241	3	0.414	3.362	0.019
	Within Groups	36.422	296	0.123		
	Total	37.663	299			

Table 12. Results of the LSD post hoc test to examine the differences in the role of MIL in enhancing students' understanding of media ethics according to academic year.

Role	Academic Year (I)	Category (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	p
Shaping the understanding of professional standards	First Year	Second Year	−0.15556 *	0.010
		Third Year	−0.23795 *	0.000
		Fourth Year	−0.16362 *	0.013
Promoting respect for individuals' privacy	First Year	Second Year	−0.10476 *	0.050
		Third Year	−0.19160 *	0.001
		Fourth Year	−0.11712 *	0.047
Promoting social responsibility	First Year	Second Year	−0.09907 *	0.047
		Fourth Year	−0.16959 *	0.002
Regulating digital ethical interaction	First Year	Third Year	−0.14021 *	0.012
		Fourth Year	−0.16163 *	0.006

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The LSD post hoc comparisons reported in Table 12 suggest that students at different stages of undergraduate study do not report MIL in the same way. Across the four dimensions, the patterning of the arithmetic means, when read jointly, suggests a stage-specific yet non-linear trajectory of ethical awareness that accompanies academic progression of ethical awareness that accompanies academic progression, although the cross-sectional design does not enable us to confirm that this trajectory reflects a real cognitive consolidation; it captures perception at a single point in time.

In the first and second dimensions, which pertain to the role of MIL in shaping the understanding of professional media standards and in promoting respect for individuals' privacy, third-year students recorded the highest mean, followed in descending order by fourth-, second-, and first-year students. In the LSD output, first-year students registered significantly lower mean differences than second-year (-0.156 , $p = 0.010$), third-year (-0.238 , $p = 0.000$), and fourth-year (-0.164 , $p = 0.013$) students in dimension 1, and a similar pattern emerged in dimension 2 (first-year vs. second-year -0.105 , $p = 0.050$; first-year vs. third-year -0.192 , $p = 0.001$; first-year vs. fourth-year -0.117 , $p = 0.047$). Students at

this stage attribute the higher reported mean to what they describe as the cumulative effect to what is described as the cumulative effect of discipline-specific coursework, applied training modules, and structured exposure to media-ethics content that they perceive as consolidating their grasp of professional norms and of the ethical imperative to safeguard personal privacy, while the relatively lower scores registered among first-year students are explained by these respondents in terms of their recent entry into the university system and their correspondingly limited curricular exposure to specialised content.

In the third dimension, which concerns the promotion of social responsibility, fourth-year students again obtained the highest mean, followed by second-year students and then first-year students, while third-year students did not exhibit statistically meaningful differences from any of the other groups in the LSD output. In their responses, fourth-year students relate this position to what they perceive as the cumulative effect of applied projects, internships, and capstone experiences that foreground the social implications of media practice, and they describe civic and professional accountability as becoming most visible, in their own perception, in the final year, while the absence of a clearly distinguishable position for third-year students suggests that perceived social responsibility does not evolve in a strictly linear manner across the years of study but appears to consolidate most visibly in the final year once sufficient thematic reinforcement has, in their view, been accumulated.

In the fourth dimension, which concerns the regulation of ethical digital interaction, fourth-year students once again ranked at the top, followed by third-year students and then first-year students, while second-year students did not differ significantly from the remainder of the sample. In the LSD output, first-year students returned significantly lower means than third-year (-0.140 , $p = 0.012$) and fourth-year (-0.162 , $p = 0.006$) students. Students at the senior levels describe this pattern, in their responses, as reflecting what they perceive to be the cumulative effect of sustained engagement with digital platforms in advanced academic and professional contexts, and they characterise the gradual emergence of mature ethical reflexes in online conduct as the product of experiential exposure rather than of any single curricular moment; the lack of meaningful differentiation among second-year students, in turn, suggests, based on their own framings, that perceived competencies in this domain evolve in a non-uniform fashion across cohorts and require the accumulation of specific curricular and experiential catalysts before they become clearly established in the students' own view.

Taken together, these three patterns indicate the importance, as perceived by the participants themselves, of weaving MIL content across the entire span of the undergraduate program, rather than confirming that MIL has directly produced this developmental trajectory, since the cross-sectional design of the present study captures perception at a single point in time and does not permit attribution of the reported patterning to any specific curricular mechanism.

Hypothesis 2. *There is a statistically significant positive correlation between Emirati university students' perceptions of the role of media and information literacy in shaping their understanding of media professional standards, their perceptions regarding respect for individuals' privacy, and their perceptions regarding regulating ethical digital interaction with others.*

The Pearson correlation coefficients in Table 13 indicate a strong and statistically significant positive association at the 0.05 level between students' perceived role of MIL in shaping their understanding of media professional standards and three further perceived outcomes: respect for individuals' privacy ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.734$), social responsibility ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.518$), and regulation of ethical digital interaction ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.581$).

Table 13. Testing the second hypothesis.

Role of MIL in Shaping Understanding of Media Professional Standards		
Respect for Individual Privacy	Pearson Correlation Coefficient 0.734	<i>p</i> 0.000
Promoting social responsibility	Pearson Correlation Coefficient 0.518	<i>p</i> 0.000
Regulating Ethical Digital Interaction	Pearson Correlation Coefficient 0.581	<i>p</i> 0.000

These results indicate that the more strongly a student perceives MIL as shaping their understanding of professional media standards, the more strongly they also tend to perceive MIL as shaping their respect for individuals' privacy, their social responsibility, and their ethical conduct in digital interactions. It is important to emphasise, however, that Pearson correlation coefficients describe associations between perception variables only and should not be interpreted as evidence of a causal effect of MIL on students' ethical attitudes or behaviour. The direction of influence could plausibly run in the opposite direction, with students who already hold stronger ethical positions reporting MIL as more central to them, and the cross-sectional design does not permit us to adjudicate between these and other possible explanations.

In their responses to the open-ended component of the survey, students who exhibited response patterns associated with the observed correlations tended to explain the link in terms that they themselves described as theoretical and aspirational rather than behavioural—describing MIL, in their own words, as extending beyond the acquisition of professional rules and technical knowledge to encompass the development of ethical values and social awareness that ought to guide media conduct. In particular, the inclusion of social responsibility suggests, in the participants' framings, that MIL is associated not only with individual ethical awareness but also with a broader sense of civic and societal accountability in media use.

The strength of the correlation coefficients ($r = 0.734, 0.518, 0.581$) is consistent with this perceptual association and is broadly aligned with what prior work has hypothesised about the structural coupling between professional, privacy-related, social, and digital ethical competencies in MIL theory. This alignment should nevertheless be read as a conceptual corroboration of what students perceive, rather than empirical confirmation of what MIL actually produces at the level of ethical conduct or attitude change. The present design allows us to document the association; it does not allow us to demonstrate that exposure to MIL is the cause of the variation reported.

8. Discussion

As a result of this research, the evidence shows that students perceive MIL as playing a significant role in shaping how Emirati university students understand media ethics across the four dimensions examined in the study. Specifically, the results demonstrate that students view MIL as an important basis for interacting responsibly with media—as reflected in the high mean scores reported for professional standards, privacy, social responsibility, and ethical digital interaction—because, in their own framings, MIL is perceived as supporting their ability to think critically, reflectively, and ethically about media. What the present design permits us to confirm is the perception of role attribution; what it does not permit us to establish is the actual development of that ability as a result of MIL exposure. Potter's cognitive theory of media literacy, which indicates that media literacy is associated with one's ability to go beyond being passively exposed to media and become a critical, reflective, and ethical consumer of the media, is consistent with these perceptual findings. The findings align with current scholarship that considers MIL

to be a three-dimensional competency as perceived by both researchers and the participants, in that it links knowledge, critical evaluation, and responsible participation in the digital world.

Students' perception of MIL's strong effect on professional standards is consistent with literature connecting media literacy to credibility assessment, identification of deceptive content, and critical evaluation of news sources (Ajibade, 2025; Ali, 2024; Jashari, 2025). These findings, however, reflect participants' own perceptions of MIL as an ethical cognitive structure guiding their interpretation of media, rather than direct evidence of their real cognitive processing.

A finding that warrants fuller analytical attention emerges from a comparison between the four normative dimensions of MIL's role—professional standards ($M = 2.69$), privacy ($M = 2.77$), social responsibility ($M = 2.76$), and ethical digital interaction ($M = 2.75$)—and the fifth dimension that registered the lowest overall mean among the five: challenges in distinguishing reliable from misleading media content ($M = 2.30$). Although this latter figure still falls within the upper ("high") band of the 0–3 scale, the difference of approximately 0.4 points between this dimension and the cluster of the four normative dimensions constitutes a perceptible gap within the overall pattern of the data. Importantly, this is also the dimension with the highest Cronbach's alpha coefficient among the five (90.2% in Table 3), suggesting that students answered the challenge items with greater internal consistency than the role-attribution items, and this is a pattern that argues for taking the reported difficulty seriously rather than treating it as the residual of acquiescent responding.

The five items of this dimension together document, in the students' own perceptions, a structured difficulty in moving from normative MIL awareness to operational verification practice. The strongest reported obstacles—"Inability to distinguish reliable and misleading sources" ($M = 2.40$) and "The similarity between true and fake news limits the ability to distinguish between them" ($M = 2.36$)—concern precisely the moment at which MIL competences are tested against actual content, while the relatively lower items—"Difficulty in knowing the goals of the entities that produce media content" ($M = 2.28$), "Difficulty in verifying the credibility of news spread on social media platforms" ($M = 2.25$), and—most pointedly—"Poor training in media content validation skills" ($M = 2.22$)—locate the deficit, from the respondents' perspective, in the curriculum and the training environment rather than in individual cognitive capacity. This latter interpretation is consistent with Mrah, who reported that 55% of Moroccan university students acknowledged weaknesses in their own critical-evaluation skills despite valuing MIL as a concept, and with Orhan, who found that students' self-reported critical-thinking dispositions did not always translate into measured misinformation-detection accuracy.

Read jointly, the four normative dimensions and the challenge dimension allow the data to articulate a distinction that is theoretically meaningful and that students themselves appear to recognize: MIL is perceived as a useful conceptual framework for organising ethical understanding, but the application of that framework in concrete verification situations is perceived, by the same respondents, as a practice in which their training has been less adequately developed. This distinction does not contradict the strong positive correlations reported in Table 13 between professional-standards attribution and the other role dimensions; rather, it complements them, since what the correlations describe is the coherence of MIL's perceived role across normative ethical fields, while the challenge dimension points to the gap between that coherence and the operational skills required to enact it.

For Potter's cognitive theory, this pattern is consistent with the analytical position that media literacy is structured by separable but interlocking components (personal status, cognitive structures, and media literacy skills), and that the perception of role

attribution—the predominantly attitudinal component captured by the first four dimensions of the present study—does not by itself entail proficiency in the skill component. The participants in the present study, in line with that theoretical position, appear to be reporting a strong normative commitment to MIL while simultaneously identifying the verification skill component as the area in which their education has been least effective. Whether this self-reported gap can be addressed through curricular restructuring is a question that the present cross-sectional perceptual design cannot answer on its own; longitudinal designs that measure verification behaviour in addition to MIL perception would be needed to evaluate whether the gap between normative mindfulness and operational skill is, in practice, narrowed by targeted instructional intervention.

9. Conclusions

This study concludes by presenting an analytical perspective on the role of Media and Information Literacy as a fundamental pillar in shaping the ethical awareness of university students in the United Arab Emirates. The findings indicate that, in the eyes of the participants, possessing media and information skills extends beyond the technical or superficial cognitive dimension to encompass what the students themselves describe as an integrated framework of values and behaviours that guides their engagement with the digital sphere. The study shows that students perceive MIL as playing a substantial role in promoting (in their own view) a deep understanding of professional standards, reinforcing respect for individual privacy, fostering social responsibility, and regulating patterns of ethical digital interaction. What the present data do not allow us to conclude is the extent to which these perceptions correspond to verified changes in actual ethical conduct, a limitation that follows directly from the cross-sectional, perception-based design of the study.

However, the study reveals persistent critical challenges, most notably the difficulties students encounter in distinguishing between reliable and misleading content. This reality demands more than mere theoretical awareness; it necessitates the development of advanced critical tools capable of confronting the complexities of rapidly evolving digital content, particularly that supported by artificial intelligence technologies. Furthermore, the results indicate that students enrolled in the College of Communication and Media demonstrate higher levels of this awareness than their counterparts in the College of Education, suggesting that academic specialization plays a pivotal role in refining these competencies and underscoring the imperative to extend such expertise across all university disciplines.

Finally, the study concludes that the integration of Media and Information Literacy into the educational fabric of higher education institutions is described, in the literature and in the present perceptual data, as constituting an urgent necessity. Such integration is described, in the participants' framings, as essential for empowering students to exercise their right to expression and communication within a framework of responsibility and ethical commitment. Investment in MIL is described in the literature as potentially transcending a purely academic endeavour and as constituting a potential safeguard for digital society and a possible route towards cultivating a conscientious generation capable of engaging positively with the ethical challenges posed by the digital age—claims that the present cross-sectional perceptual design cannot confirm on its own and that future longitudinal work will be needed to test. These directions are aligned with the national objectives of promoting the values of tolerance, responsibility, and societal awareness in the United Arab Emirates.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrating MIL across a wider range of university majors in response to the training gap reported by students in relation to media-content verification. MIL could be introduced as a compulsory university course for students across all disciplines.
2. Developing curricula and training programmes that combine theoretical and practical components through field-based activities, applied exercises, and verification tasks designed to strengthen critical-thinking skills and information-verification competencies.
3. Organising integrated programmes comprising workshops, training courses, and applied modules on the ethics of digital interaction, with a unified emphasis on the values of respect, responsibility, and cultural diversity in social-media and digital-platform environments. Such programmes should also incorporate evaluation mechanisms that enable institutions to document both the perceptual and behavioural outcomes associated with participation.
4. Strengthening partnerships between universities and media institutions to provide authentic training opportunities that foster responsible professional conduct and facilitate the translation of media-education concepts into practical application.

11. Limitations

Four limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings:

First, the instrument captured students' perceptions of MIL's role rather than their actual MIL proficiency or any directly measured ethical conduct: the 25-item closed Likert-format scale (0–3) was designed to elicit agreement with role-attribution statements and items addressing difficulties in source verification, and it did not include a parallel measure of students' demonstrated ability to evaluate news credibility, to discriminate between ethical and unethical media practices in concrete scenarios, or to act in accordance with the values they reported. The high overall mean (2.22–2.85) and the high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 91.7\%$ overall, with the five-dimension α values ranging from 71.8% to 90.2% (Table 3) therefore signal a coherent perceptual pattern rather than a confirmation of actual competence, and the two should not be conflated.

Second, the cross-sectional design does not permit attribution of the perceptions reported to any specific MIL programme, since no pre-test, control group, or longitudinal follow-up was implemented; the patterning of means across academic years documented in Tables 11 and 12 is read as a description of the cohort configuration at a single point in time, not as evidence of an individual developmental trajectory.

Third, the sampling was restricted to a single institution and employed non-probability quota sampling (300 students, balanced 150/150 by gender and 50/50 across two colleges, distributed across the four undergraduate years; Table 1)—a design that supports the within-institution college contrast foregrounded in Section 6.2 but that limits the external validity of the findings to the specific institutional and curricular configuration described here, and that will require replication across additional UAE universities before any inference about the national higher-education sector can be supported.

Fourth, the questionnaire did not collect age data, and Table 1 accordingly reports only gender, college, and academic year. Because the surveyed cohort was bounded by the bachelor's-degree population—ages 18–24 at the institutional level, with the great majority in the narrower 18–22 range of the four undergraduate years—the residual age variance not absorbed by academic year was judged too narrow to generate reliable differences in the perceptual measures, and academic year was retained as the principal cross-cohort axis. The cross-cohort patterning documented in Tables 11 and 12 supports this design choice, confirming in analytic practice that academic year functions as a proxy for accumulated curricular exposure rather than for chronological age per se. Age is flagged as a priority variable for future replications.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Our study involves human participants through an anonymous survey designed to assess Emirati university students' understanding of media ethics. No identifying personal data, clinical data, or biological samples were collected. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained in an implied manner at the beginning of the questionnaire, where participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. In line with this, and according to the confirmation from the Deanship of Scientific Research at Al Ain University, the study does not require formal ethical approval due to the absence of sensitive data or clinical involvement.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to institutional policy and legal restrictions regarding data sharing.

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