

The mediating role of algorithmic media content awareness in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use

 Beyza Nur Yıldız¹,  Orhan Koçak²,  Najwa Salem Albeladi³,  Murat Yıldırım^{4*}

¹Department of Social Work, Institute of Graduate Studies, Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa, Istanbul, Türkiye.

¹Psychology Master's Program, Institute of Graduate Studies, Haliç University, İstanbul, Türkiye;
beyzanuryildiz.mymy@gmail.com (B.N.Y.).

²Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa, Istanbul, Türkiye;
orhan.kocak@iuc.edu.tr (O.K.).

³Communications Skills Department, Faculty of Science and Arts – Rabigh, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia;
nsalbeladi@kau.edu.sa (N.S.A.).

⁴Department of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Letters, Agri Ibrahim Cecen University, Ağrı, Türkiye

⁴Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Haliç University, İstanbul, Türkiye.

⁴Psychology Research Center, Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan; muratyildirim@agri.edu.tr (M.Y.).

Abstract: This study examines the mediating role of algorithmic awareness of media content in the relationship between new media literacy and social media usage. Data were collected from 511 participants (75.1% female; age range 18–40, $M = 26.36$, $SD = 6.16$) using three validated instruments: the Social Media Usage Scale, the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale, and the New Media Literacy Scale. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed to examine the hypothesised relationships. The analysis revealed a positive and significant association between new media literacy and algorithmic content awareness. However, no direct relationship was observed between new media literacy and social media use. Instead, the effect of literacy on usage was found to operate indirectly through algorithmic awareness. These findings underscore an important role of algorithmic awareness in influencing how individuals engage with social media, suggesting that literacy alone does not directly predict usage patterns. The study highlights the need to integrate digital literacy education with algorithmic awareness training to foster critical engagement with media content. It also contributes to the theoretical development of Agenda-Setting Theory by incorporating algorithmic mediation within digitally networked environments.

Keywords: *Agenda-Setting Theory, Algorithmic content awareness, Digital literacy, Media consumption behaviour, New media literacy, Social media use.*

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of digital technologies, individuals have experienced profound transformations in their daily life practices. In particular, the widespread use of social media platforms has redefined numerous processes, ranging from communication styles to identity construction and from access to information to the formation of opinions [1, 2]. Social media provides an interactive environment in which individuals are not only content consumers but also content creators. However, the algorithmic systems operating behind these digital platforms largely determine what kind of content users are exposed to, which information is prioritised, and what kind of digital experience they will have. This has made the relationship between users and media more complex and highly directed [3–5].

The content offered on social media platforms has evolved into structures that not only reflect user preferences but also actively shape them. In this process, algorithms analyse users' previous interactions

to provide them with a personalised content feed, thereby directly influencing individuals' cognitive agendas [6-8]. This new media environment necessitates a reassessment not only of individuals' content consumption habits but also of their media literacy skills. While traditional media literacy focused on abilities such as questioning the source of news and evaluating its accuracy, new media literacy encompasses the competencies to analyse digital content in a multidimensional manner, think critically, and interpret the complex structures encountered in digital environments [9, 10]. Within this framework, individuals' levels of awareness regarding algorithmic media content, namely, to what extent they recognise how and why certain content is displayed on social media platforms, how this content is filtered, and how algorithms guide information flow, hold critical importance in the digital media age [11, 12]. Therefore, new media literacy plays a crucial role in understanding the relationship between algorithmic media content awareness and social media use and in revealing the extent to which individuals can develop a critical perspective toward the content they encounter in digital spaces.

Within this context, Agenda-Setting Theory provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how algorithm-driven media environments influence individuals' cognitive priorities and media-related behaviours. Originally proposed by McCombs and Shaw [13], the theory argues that the media do not dictate what individuals think but rather shape what individuals think about by prioritising certain issues and information. In contemporary digital environments, this agenda-setting function is increasingly performed by algorithmic systems that personalise content visibility and salience.

From this perspective, individuals with higher levels of new media literacy are expected to be more aware of how algorithmic content curation operates and how such mechanisms shape their information exposure. This awareness, in turn, may influence how individuals engage with social media platforms, not necessarily by eliminating use, but by fostering more selective and critical usage patterns. Based on this theoretical framework, the present study examines the relationships between new media literacy, algorithmic media content awareness, and social media use.

2. New Media Literacy

Media literacy refers to the ability to access media content, critically analyse and evaluate the content accessed, and produce one's own media messages [14]. New media literacy, on the other hand, is defined as individuals' ability to keep pace with the complexity and speed of the digital age, as well as to access, analyse, and evaluate digital content [15]. In today's digitised world, the rapid access of social media users to new information and the necessity of questioning the accuracy of this information have rendered new media literacy a necessity. Particularly, new media literacy, which enables social media users to become more conscious in a digitised world, helps individuals become more resilient against misleading and manipulative content [16].

At this point, individuals' ability to recognise, understand and evaluate algorithm-driven content such as sponsored recommendations, search engine prioritisation, and social media feed manipulations has become a fundamental pillar of media literacy [17]. To the best of our knowledge, there is a limited number of published studies that investigate the relationship between new media literacy and awareness of algorithmic media content. Nevertheless, some studies emphasise the importance of individuals taking an active role in digital media environments, developing awareness of media tools, accurately interpreting content and approaching it with a critical perspective [18, 19]. The existing literature suggests that the primary condition for individuals to access complete and accurate information amidst an intense bombardment of disinformation is digital media literacy [20, 21]. In this context, it is expected that individuals with a high level of digital media literacy will also possess a higher level of awareness regarding the processes through which algorithmically delivered content is selected, ranked, and recommended. Based on this body of evidence, we propose the following hypothesis concerning the relationship between these two factors:

H₁: Individuals with higher levels of new media literacy exhibit higher levels of awareness of algorithmic media content.

New media literacy is a multidimensional competence that encompasses individuals' abilities to critically evaluate, verify, produce, and share digital content [22]. Individuals with a high level of this competence tend to question the source and intent of the content they are exposed to on digital platforms [23]. In this context, some studies have shown that as new media literacy increases, individuals become more selective toward social media content. Individuals with developed critical awareness tend to perceive social media not merely as a passive entertainment space, but also as a potential tool for manipulation [24]. This awareness can serve as a protective factor that limits social media use. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis regarding the relationship between new media literacy and social media use:

H₂: As new media literacy increases, social media use decreases.

Some studies show that there is no direct and significant relationship between new media literacy and social media use [25, 26]. According to this view, an individual's high level of digital literacy does not necessarily determine the frequency of their social media usage. Particularly among young users, even those who are media-literate may continue to use social media platforms intensively. This suggests that an individual's awareness of media does not automatically translate into changes in usage behaviour. Therefore, new media literacy may have indirect effects on social media use but may not function as a direct determinant. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H₃: New media literacy does not directly affect social media use.

2.1. Algorithmic Media Content Awareness

Algorithmic media content awareness refers to the ability to recognise, understand, and critically evaluate the algorithms that determine how and why certain content appears to users, especially in the context of increasing digitalisation and the widespread use of new media technologies [27]. As this awareness increases, individuals realise that the content presented on social media is not neutral and random, but rather filtered based on personal preferences and user behaviour [28]. This realisation can foster a more critical attitude and lead to a decrease in the frequency of social media use. Particularly among adult users, recognising the manipulative effects of algorithms may result in a tendency to limit their engagement with such platforms [29].

In this context, individuals with a high level of algorithmic content awareness may engage with social media more cautiously and in a more restricted manner. Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis regarding the relationship between algorithmic content awareness and social media use:

H₄: As algorithmic content awareness increases, social media use decreases.

2.2. Social Media Usage

Social media use is a multilayered phenomenon that has led to profound transformations in numerous domains today, including communication, culture, the economy, education, and psychology [30, 31]. Emerging with the development of computer and internet technologies, social media has deeply influenced traditional communication tools and has become an integral part of individuals' daily lives [32]. Many processes, such as accessing information, establishing communication, and constructing identity, are now being reshaped through social media [2, 33]. This transformation is not limited to content production and consumption; it is also guided by invisible digital structures and algorithms [34]. The algorithms used on social media platforms determine which content individuals encounter, how frequently this content appears, and which information is prioritized [35]. This directly affects users' levels of awareness, opinion formation processes, and their ability to access accurate information [36]. Therefore, in today's media literacy discussions, both individuals' social media usage habits and their level of awareness regarding the functioning of algorithms are of central importance.

Today, social media has become a common meeting ground for different generations. In particular, members of Generation Y and Generation Z use these platforms intensively and feel more competent in digital environments [37]. However, evaluating social media use solely through quantitative indicators

such as duration and frequency is not sufficient. The relationship that users establish with social media, their level of content selectivity, and their awareness of the content deeply affect the way they use it [38]. In this regard, how and for what purposes individuals use social media is directly related to their level of new media literacy and their awareness of algorithmic content [39]. Individuals with high media literacy are more capable of critically evaluating the content they encounter on social media platforms, more easily recognising algorithmically shaped content flows, and thus using these platforms in a more strategic, conscious, and selective manner [40].

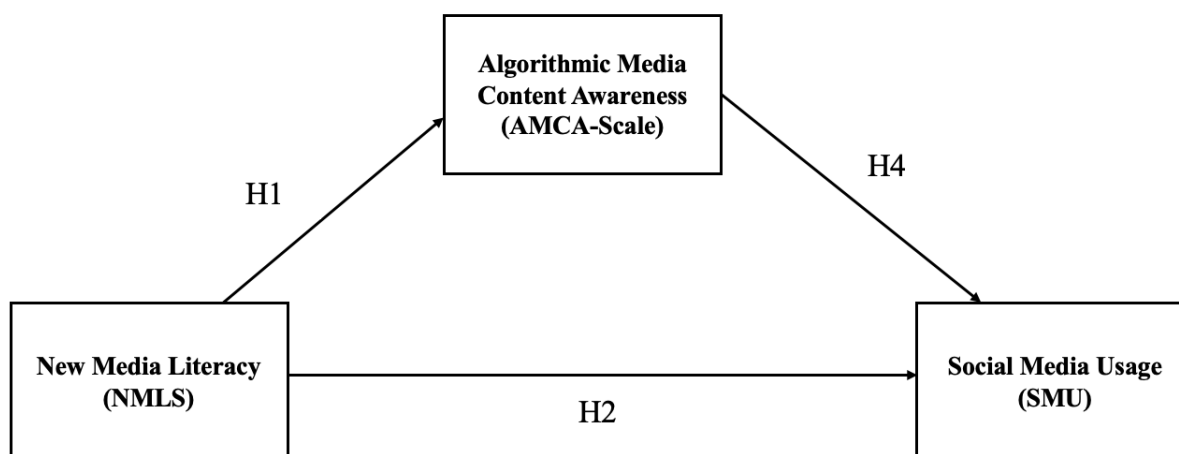
In this study, based on findings from the literature, it is anticipated that new media literacy may enhance algorithmic media content awareness and that this awareness may indirectly influence individuals' social media usage behaviours. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₅: Algorithmic content awareness has a mediating role in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use.

2.3. Current Research

This study aims to examine the relationships among social media usage, new media literacy, and algorithmic media content awareness among adults. Building on the theoretical framework and empirical evidence presented in the preceding sections, the study investigates whether individuals' levels of new media literacy are associated with their awareness of algorithmic media content and how this awareness relates to patterns of social media use.

The central assumption of the research is that higher levels of new media literacy are linked to greater awareness of algorithmic content curation processes, which may, in turn, influence social media usage behaviors either directly or indirectly. Accordingly, the study specifically tests the mediating role of algorithmic media content awareness in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use. By considering not only quantitative aspects of social media use but also qualitative dimensions such as content selectivity and user awareness, the study adopts a holistic perspective to better understand how individuals engage with digital media environments. Figure 1 presents the proposed research model.



H3: New media literacy does not directly affect social media use.

H5: Algorithmic content awareness has a mediating role in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use.

Figure 1.

Conceptual model of the research for SEM analyses.

3. Method

3.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted using a snowball sampling method and a correlational research design. The inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 18 and 40. Considering the frequency of social media use among young and adult individuals, a total of 511 participants aged 18 to 40 were included in the study ($M = 26.36$; $SD = 6.16$). Of the participants, 75.1% were female, and 24.9% were male. The majority of participants were students from the faculties of health sciences, which resulted in a predominantly female and young demographic profile. The participants' average daily social media usage duration was 4.07 hours ($SD = 2.51$). To obtain this information, average daily social media usage duration was assessed using a single self-report, open-ended question: "On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?" Participants provided their estimates in numerical format, which were subsequently summarised using descriptive statistics.

Data were collected in May and June 2025 via the online survey platform SurveyMonkey. At the beginning of the online form, the purpose of the study was explained, and participants' consent was obtained. To protect privacy, no personal information or IP addresses were collected, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The average response time for the survey ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa under protocol number 2025/271. Demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Level	N	%	Mean	SD
Gender	Female	384	75.1		
	Male	127	24.9		
Age				26.3	6.16
Marriage			1.79	0.47	
	Married	124	24.3		
	Single	372	72.8		
	Divorced	15	2.9		
Education					
	Elementary	2	0.4		
	Middle	12	2.3		
	High school	54	10.6		
	University	332	65		
	Master's or PhD.	111	21.7		
Daily social media usage time (in hours)				4.07	2.51

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. The New Media Literacy Scale (NMLS)

To measure participants' levels of new media literacy, we used the New Media Literacy Scale (NMLS) developed by Koc and Barut [15]. The NMLS consists of 35 items and is divided into four sub-dimensions: functional consumption, critical consumption, functional prosumption, and critical prosumption. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In this study, only the critical consumption sub-dimension of the scale was utilised. This methodological choice was driven by the study's core focus on how individuals critically evaluate digital content and recognise the algorithmic mechanisms shaping information exposure. As algorithmic media content awareness primarily involves cognitive and evaluative processes, the critical consumption dimension, reflecting individuals' ability to question the source, intent, and accuracy of digital media messages, was considered the most theoretically relevant indicator within the proposed research model. Furthermore, this subscale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.935$).

3.2.2. *The Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale (AMCA-Scale)*

To measure algorithmic content awareness, we used the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale (AMCA-Scale), originally developed by Zarouali et al. [27] and adapted into Turkish by Ak and Arslantaş [41]. The AMCA-Scale consists of 13 items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not aware at all (1) to fully aware (5). In the Turkish adaptation, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as 0.90. In the current study, the internal consistency coefficient for the AMCA-Scale was calculated as 0.890.

3.2.3. *The Social Media Usage Scale*

To measure participants' levels of social media use and competencies, the Social Media Usage Scale, developed by Deniz and Tutgun-Ünal [42], was employed. The scale consists of eight items, with responses given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not suitable for me at all (1) to completely suitable for me (5). Sample items from the scale include statements such as "I feel incomplete and uneasy when I am away from my smartphone" and "I always check my social media accounts right before sleeping and immediately after waking up." In the current study, the scale was found to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.851$).

3.2.4. *Data Analyses*

After the data were organised in SPSS, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using IBM AMOS 24 to assess the adequacy of the measurement model and construct validity. There were no missing data in the dataset. Following the establishment of the measurement model, regression-based factor scores for each latent construct (New Media Literacy, Algorithmic Media Content Awareness, and Social Media Use) were estimated in AMOS. These factor scores were exported to SPSS, and a new dataset including these variables was created. Descriptive statistics, including reliability coefficients, means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis, were computed in SPSS using these factor scores, which were treated as observed variables for preliminary analyses. Subsequently, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was performed in AMOS using latent variables specified by their observed indicators. To ensure the quality of the measurement model, convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Convergent validity was established by examining factor loadings, CR, and AVE values, while discriminant validity was verified using the HTMT ratio, which is considered a more rigorous criterion than the traditional [43] method [44]. Indirect effects were examined using a bootstrapping procedure with 2,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

To further evaluate the stability of the findings, in addition to the main SEM analyses, supplementary robustness analyses were conducted to examine whether the observed relationships were consistent across basic demographic groups. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were performed in SPSS using the regression-based factor scores to test for mean differences across gender, marital status, education level, and age categories. These additional analyses were conducted to assess whether the identified patterns in the mediation model reflected a general cognitive mechanism rather than being specific to a particular demographic group.

Since all variables in the present study were measured using self-report instruments, the data may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects, which could potentially lead to common method bias and threaten the validity of the findings. To assess this possibility, Harman's single-factor test was conducted using an unrotated exploratory factor analysis including all measurement items. According to this approach, if a single factor emerges or one general factor accounts for 50% or more of the total variance, common method bias is considered a serious concern [45]. The results showed that the first factor explained 30.64% of the total variance, which is well below the threshold of 50%. This finding indicates that common method bias is unlikely to pose a threat to the validity of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary Analyses

The construct validity of the scales used in the study was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This analytical method is important for demonstrating the validity of the measurement model, as it allows for the direct testing of hypothesised relationships between variables [46]. The model fit indices obtained from the analysis were found to be consistent with the criteria proposed by Kline [47]: CMIN/DF < 5; TLI, IFI, CFI, GFI, and NFI > 0.90; RMSEA < 0.08. Based on the findings, it was determined that the measurement model demonstrated a high level of fit according to the evaluation criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Measurement model and SEM path analysis values.

Measure	Measurement values	Path values	Cut-off criteria
CMIN/DF	1.968	1.968	<5
CFI	0.948	0.948	>0.90
SRMR	0.048	0.048	<0.08
RMSEA	0.044	0.044	<0.08
NFI	0.901	0.901	>0.90
GFI	0.902	0.902	>0.90
IFI	0.949	0.949	>0.90
TLI	0.942	0.942	>0.90

The measurement model was further evaluated for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. As presented in Table 3, the internal consistency of the constructs was confirmed, as both Cronbach's alpha coefficients (ranging from 0.851 to 0.935) and composite reliability (CR) values (ranging from 0.838 to 0.933) were well above the generally accepted threshold of 0.70.

Standardized factor loadings for all items were statistically significant and ranged from 0.464 to 0.798. Although a small number of items exhibited factor loadings slightly below the conventional 0.50 threshold, these items were retained due to their theoretical relevance and contribution to content validity, particularly given the multidimensional and cognitively complex nature of the constructs examined. Previous methodological research suggests that factor loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 may be retained when composite reliability is adequate, and the construct is theoretically well established [48].

While the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the AMCA-Scale (0.517) exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, the AVE values for NMLS (0.422) and SMU (0.400) were slightly below this level. However, according to the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker [43], convergent validity can be considered adequate when CR exceeds 0.60, even if AVE values fall below 0.50. Given the high CR values observed across all constructs, the measurement model demonstrated sufficient convergent validity.

Table 3.
Measurement model assessment results.

Constructs	Total No of Item	Remain Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
NMLS	11	NMLS1	0.647	0.935	0.422	0.888
		NMLS2	0.647			
		NMLS3	0.730			
		NMLS4	0.684			
		NMLS5	0.632			
		NMLS6	0.625			
		NMLS7	0.601			
		NMLS8	0.716			
		NMLS9	0.674			
		NMLS10	0.688			
		NMLS11	0.464			
AMCA-Scale	13	AMCA1	0.715	0.890	0.517	0.933
		AMCA2	0.764			
		AMCA3	0.798			
		AMCA4	0.683			
		AMCA5	0.764			
		AMCA6	0.684			
		AMCA7	0.748			
		AMCA8	0.707			
		AMCA9	0.736			
		AMCA10	0.702			
		AMCA11	0.689			
		AMCA12	0.668			
		AMCA13	0.680			
SMU	8	SMU1	0.467	0.851	0.400	0.838
		SMU2	0.528			
		SMU3	0.519			
		SMU4	0.552			
		SMU5	0.737			
		SMU6	0.775			
		SMU7	0.752			
		SMU8	0.650			

Note: NMLS (New Media Literacy Scale), AMCA-Scale (Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale), SMU (Social Media Usage Scale).

Descriptive statistics and inter-construct correlations are presented in Table 4. New media literacy was moderately and positively correlated with algorithmic media content awareness ($r = 0.581$, $p < 0.01$), while its correlation with social media usage was weaker but statistically significant ($r = 0.195$, $p < 0.01$). Algorithmic media content awareness also showed a positive association with social media usage ($r = 0.282$, $p < 0.01$). The skewness and kurtosis values for all constructs were within acceptable limits (± 1.5), indicating that the distributions did not deviate substantially from normality.

Table 4.
Correlations, means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis.

Variable	1.	2.	3.
1. New media literacy	1		
2. Algorithmic media content awareness	0.581**	1	
3. Social media usage	0.195**	0.282**	1
Mean	3.27	3.60	1.59
SD	0.45	0.72	0.43
Skewness	-0.19	-0.55	0.10
Kurtosis	0.09	0.10	-0.38

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As presented in Table 5, all HTMT values were well below the conservative threshold of 0.85 [44], with the highest value being 0.501 between NMLS and AMCA-Scale, confirming that the constructs are statistically distinct.

Table 5.
Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT).

	NMLS	AMCA-Scale	SMU
NMLS			
AMCA-Scale	0.501		
SMU	0.167	0.229	

4.2. Testing the Mediation Model

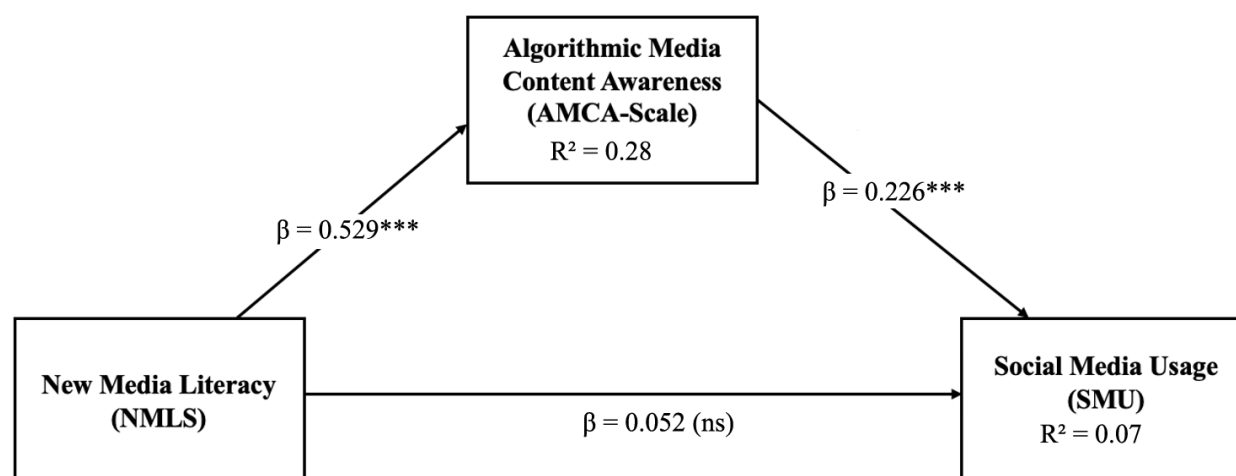
Following confirmation of the measurement model's adequacy through normality and reliability tests, a structural equation modelling (SEM) path analysis was conducted to examine direct and indirect relationships among the study variables.

Table 6.
Direct, total and indirect effect SEM analyses.

Direct effects			St. Est.	S.E.	C.R.	p
New media literacy	-->	Algorithmic media content awareness	0.529	0.09	9.262	< 0.001
Algorithmic media content awareness	-->	Social media usage	0.226	0.039	3.539	< 0.001
New media literacy	-->	Social media usage	0.052	0.059	0.857	0.391
Total effect	St. Est.	Lower	Upper	S.E.	P-Value	
New media literacy--> Social media usage	0.172	0.077	0.271	0.050	0.001	< 0.001
Indirect effect						
New media literacy--> Algorithmic media content awareness--> Social media usage	0.119	0.060	0.186	0.033	0.001	< 0.001

As presented in Table 6, new media literacy had a statistically significant positive effect on algorithmic media content awareness ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, algorithmic media content awareness significantly predicted social media use ($\beta = 0.226$, $p < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of new media literacy on social media use was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.052$, $p = 0.391$).

The tested structural model, including standardised path coefficients and the explained variance (R^2) for each endogenous construct, is illustrated in Figure 2.



$$\text{NMLS} \rightarrow \text{AMCA} \rightarrow \text{SMU} = \beta = 0.119***$$

Figure 2.

Results of the tested structural equation model with standardized estimates.

Note: Standardized path coefficients are reported. ns = non-significant. Indirect effect based on bootstrapped estimates. *** $p < 0.001$.

The structural model explained 28% of the variance in algorithmic media content awareness and 7% of the variance in social media use. Gender and education level were included as control variables in preliminary analyses; however, neither variable showed a statistically significant association with social media use, nor did their inclusion alter the direction or significance of the direct and indirect effects in the mediation model.

While new media literacy did not have a direct effect on social media use, the inclusion of algorithmic media content awareness as a mediating variable revealed a statistically significant indirect effect. Specifically, the mediation analysis demonstrated an indirect-only mediation pattern, indicating that new media literacy influenced social media use exclusively through algorithmic media content awareness. The indirect effect was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.119$, $SE = 0.033$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that did not include zero [0.060, 0.186].

These findings provide empirical support for the proposed theoretical model and highlight the central role of algorithmic media content awareness as an intermediary cognitive mechanism linking new media literacy to social media use. Overall, the results supported Hypotheses H1, H3, and H5, while Hypotheses H2 and H4 were not supported (see Table 7).

Table 7.
Hypothesis results.

Hypotheses	Results
H1: Individuals with higher levels of new media literacy exhibit higher levels of awareness of algorithmic media content.	Accepted
H2: As new media literacy increases, social media use decreases.	Rejected
H3: New media literacy does not directly affect social media use.	Accepted
H4: As algorithmic content awareness increases, social media use decreases.	Rejected
H5: Algorithmic content awareness has a mediating role in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use.	Accepted

5. Discussion

In this study, the relationships between new media literacy, algorithmic media content awareness, and social media usage were examined in a multidimensional manner. In addition to direct effects, the

mediating role of algorithmic awareness was also tested. The findings revealed results that are both consistent with the existing literature and offer novel contributions in certain aspects.

5.1. Direct Effects

According to the research findings, as individuals' levels of new media literacy increase, their levels of algorithmic media content awareness also rise. This finding supports Hypothesis 1 (H1) and clearly demonstrates the positive effect of new media literacy on algorithmic media content awareness. This result aligns with many studies in the existing literature. According to Güner [9], digital media literacy requires individuals to understand the transformation of technology and to critically examine the mechanisms behind content production processes. This finding indicates that individuals are not merely passive consumers of content, but also conscious users who understand how and why certain content appears in their digital feeds. For instance, when a person repeatedly encounters a specific type of content on platforms like YouTube or Instagram, their realisation that this is due to their behavioural history and the platforms' recommendation algorithms is an indicator of their level of algorithmic awareness. This observation is consistent with previous studies in the literature suggesting a strong relationship between media literacy and the ability to analyse algorithmic systems [49, 50]. The observed positive path coefficient further confirms that new media literacy provides the foundational cognitive skills necessary for individuals to decode invisible algorithmic structures. Rather than leading to platform avoidance, this literacy level fosters a form of 'digital empowerment' [51] where users feel more capable of navigating complex information environments.

On the other hand, the direct effect of new media literacy on social media use was found to be non-significant. In other words, individuals with high levels of media literacy do not necessarily use social media more or less. This result led to the rejection of Hypothesis 2 (H2) and the acceptance of Hypothesis 3 (H3). The finding suggests that an individual's engagement with digital platforms is not solely determined by their level of literacy knowledge but may be shaped through intermediary mechanisms, particularly algorithmic media content awareness. In Görmez [52] study, it was found that students who had taken a media literacy course were better at analysing media content; however, their relationship with media did not diminish. This is not surprising, especially considering that even university graduates who are capable of critical thinking may still spend significant amounts of time on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Being media literate does not necessarily influence the quantity of media use but instead emerges as a determinant of the quality of media engagement [14, 53].

Moreover, the hypothesis suggesting that algorithmic media content awareness reduces social media use (H4) was rejected. Although this may seem contradictory at first glance, it suggests that awareness does not necessarily drive users away from social media but instead may guide them toward more conscious and strategic usage. For instance, when a user becomes aware of how TikTok's algorithms rank content, they may begin to use the search and explore features more intentionally to access content that aligns with their personal interests, rather than simply consuming what is presented. While this may not reduce the duration of use, it reflects a shift in the quality of engagement toward more selective and mindful interaction. One concept in the literature that helps explain this phenomenon is "digital mindfulness," which refers to an individual's ability to manage their time and interactions in digital environments with conscious awareness [54]. Furthermore, the positive nature of this association suggests that increased awareness may lead to a more rewarding user experience. Contrary to protectionist assumptions, users who understand algorithmic curation may perceive social media platforms as more relevant and useful because they possess the cognitive competencies required to interpret and navigate curated content [55]. This awareness does not deter use but may promote a more intentional and competent form of engagement, potentially explaining why users continue to spend significant time on platforms they critically understand.

5.2. Mediating Effect

One of the most significant findings of this study is that algorithmic media content awareness plays a mediating role in the relationship between new media literacy and social media use (H5 accepted). In other words, individuals do not use social media differently simply because they are media literate; rather, it is through the development of the ability to recognise algorithmic systems as a result of their media literacy that their usage patterns change. For example, an individual who is aware that their news feed is personalised may become more conscious of their digital network and feel the need to seek out alternative sources. In the study by Çalışır and Sönmez [56], students who had taken a media literacy course reported being able to distinguish media content based on its intended use and perception, emphasised the need for a practice-oriented curriculum, and indicated behavioural changes after the course. Moreover, it was noted that these students tended to evaluate media content more critically and that the education helped foster a critical perspective specifically toward algorithmically generated content.

In this context, algorithmic awareness makes individuals more critical, selective, and strategic in their engagement with content [57]; thus, it indirectly mediates the effect of media literacy on social media usage behaviour. The fact that the mediating effect is statistically significant and strong indicates that social media behaviours are multidimensional. It also highlights that, beyond possessing media knowledge, the degree to which this knowledge is internalised at the levels of perception and awareness is equally important.

However, these findings should be interpreted in relation to the characteristics of the study sample, which may also help explain their consistency with previous research. The predominance of female participants and students from health sciences faculties aligns with earlier studies showing that gender and educational background are closely associated with digital literacy and online skills [58]. Prior research suggests that women and individuals in health-related disciplines often demonstrate heightened sensitivity to information quality, credibility, and potential psychological impacts of digital media, which may foster stronger links between media literacy, algorithmic awareness, and patterns of social media use [59]. From this perspective, the significant mediating role of algorithmic content awareness observed in the present study may reflect a population that is particularly attuned to how digital platforms curate and shape information. At the same time, this contextual specificity indicates that the strength of the observed pathways may vary across more heterogeneous populations, and future studies should examine whether similar mediation patterns emerge in samples with different gender distributions and educational backgrounds.

Moreover, to examine whether the identified mediation mechanism varied across demographic subgroups, additional robustness analyses were conducted using gender, marital status, and age categories. Supplementary analyses (t-tests, ANOVA, and moderated mediation models) indicated that none of these demographic variables significantly moderated the relationships among new media literacy, algorithmic media content awareness, and social media use. Interaction terms were non-significant, and the indirect effect of new media literacy on social media use through algorithmic awareness remained statistically significant across groups. Although minor fluctuations in effect size were observed across age and marital status categories, these differences did not reach statistical significance. This suggests that the mediation mechanism identified in the present study reflects a relatively stable cognitive process rather than a subgroup-specific pattern. Similar findings have been reported in prior research, indicating that while demographic factors influence overall levels of digital engagement, the cognitive processes underlying critical media use and algorithmic awareness tend to operate in comparable ways across social groups [60, 61].

5.3. Discussion of Findings in the Context of Agenda-Setting Theory

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the transformative impact of algorithmic power on modern agenda-setting dynamics. Traditional Agenda-Setting Theory argues that the media have the capacity to tell people “what to think about” (first level) and “how to think about it” (second

level) [62]. However, our findings indicate that this process is no longer shaped solely by human-centred editorial decisions but is now largely driven by algorithmic systems. In particular, individuals' levels of awareness regarding algorithmic content production and distribution mechanisms enable them to shift from being passive recipients of media messages to active participants who question content selection and engage critically with the agenda.

The support of Hypothesis 1 (H1) reveals that individuals with higher levels of new media literacy are better able to understand the mechanisms by which algorithms select and filter content. This directly relates to the second level of Agenda-Setting Theory: such individuals are not only aware of which topics are emphasised but are also capable of questioning and analysing why and how those topics are placed on the agenda (e.g., algorithmic bias, commercial objectives, and data manipulation) [63]. The “construction of reality” process originally proposed by McCombs and Shaw [13] is now increasingly shaped not by media professionals but by the invisible hand of algorithms. In this context, new media literacy enables individuals not only to comprehend media content but also to decode the artificial agenda by understanding the algorithmic logic behind the flow of digital content.

The rejection of Hypothesis 2 (H2) necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional assumptions based on Agenda-Setting Theory. While the literature suggests that individuals with high levels of media literacy would be less exposed to social media [64], our findings indicate that those with higher levels of new media literacy do not use social media less in quantitative terms. This suggests that algorithmic media content awareness may play a role in transforming an individual's relationship with media content, even if it does not directly reduce social media usage. Users with higher algorithmic media content awareness may actively seek information to bypass algorithmically imposed filter bubbles, engage in multi-source verification behaviours to counteract agenda manipulation [65], and use social media more selectively and consciously. Therefore, the absence of a significant change in social media usage duration (rejection of H2) should not be interpreted as passive agenda absorption, but rather as an indication that users are critically engaging with media agendas and navigating content flows with heightened awareness.

The acceptance of Hypothesis 5 (H5) is highly significant in terms of the evolution of Agenda-Setting Theory in the digital age. While the traditional agenda-setting approach assumes a linear and dual interaction between media institutions and audiences [66], the findings of this study reveal that algorithms have emerged as a third and decisive actor within this relationship. The results show that new media literacy does not directly influence social media use; rather, this effect becomes meaningful only when individuals develop algorithmic media content awareness. This suggests that users are no longer passive consumers of the digital agenda but active participants who engage critically and consciously in the formation of that agenda by decoding algorithmic systems. Therefore, algorithmic media content awareness stands out as a fundamental cognitive tool that enables individuals to move beyond being mere recipients in digital media environments and to become users who strategically navigate and influence content flows.

The rejection of Hypothesis 4 (that algorithmic content awareness reduces social media use) introduces a new conceptual dimension to the agenda-setting literature and highlights the relevance of the “algorithmic resistance” approach. The research findings indicate that when individuals become aware of the power algorithms exert in shaping agendas and directing content flow, they do not necessarily disengage from platforms. While the current study does not directly measure usage tactics, this result may be interpreted, within a theoretical context, as suggesting that users develop a more conscious relationship with algorithmic systems rather than simply reducing their screen time. As discussed within the framework of 'algorithmic resistance' [67], users are not merely passive consumers; they may function as active agents in digital environments. Within the context of Castells [68] counter-power strategies, this potentially indicates that agenda setting is not a one-way imposition but a complex process in which user awareness plays a critical role in negotiating with algorithmic structures.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted with consideration of several limitations. Although the sample size was sufficient for the analyses conducted, the composition of the sample constrains the generalizability of the results. Participants were predominantly female (75%), and a large proportion consisted of students from health sciences faculties. This demographic concentration may have introduced selection bias and limited the extent to which the findings can be extended to the broader population of individuals aged 18–40. Gender and educational background are known to shape digital literacy skills, technology-related competencies, and patterns of social media use; therefore, the observed associations, particularly those involving new media literacy, algorithmic content awareness, and social media use, may manifest differently in more gender-balanced samples or among non-student and non-health-related populations.

Another limitation concerns the operationalization of new media literacy. Although new media literacy is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, the present study focused exclusively on the critical consumption subdimension of the New Media Literacy Scale. This choice was theoretically grounded in the study's emphasis on cognitive and evaluative processes related to algorithmic media content awareness; however, it also implies that the findings reflect a specific critical dimension of new media literacy rather than the construct in its entirety.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts causal interpretation of the observed relationships. As all variables were measured at a single point in time, the temporal dynamics between new media literacy, algorithmic content awareness, and social media use cannot be conclusively determined. Longitudinal or experimental designs would allow future studies to examine how these constructs evolve over time and whether their effects on social media use are stable or context-dependent.

Taken together, these limitations highlight the need for future research to adopt more inclusive and representative sampling strategies, such as stratified or probability-based designs, and to further investigate how socioeconomic, educational, and cultural factors interact with algorithmic awareness in shaping social media use.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals the radical transformation that Agenda-Setting Theory has undergone in the digital age. The findings demonstrate that new media literacy is not merely the ability to access information or produce content but also involves developing a more conscious and critical relationship with content by understanding how digital platforms operate. Therefore, new media literacy should be considered not only an individual competency but also a societal necessity, especially in today's world, where algorithms shape the flow of content. Individuals' ability to comprehend these processes enhances their resilience against manipulation.

Moreover, this study contributes to the growing body of research that examines how algorithmic mechanisms influence public discourse and user behaviour, thereby expanding the theoretical reach of agenda-setting into algorithmic environments. In this context, it is crucial to integrate media literacy education into the formal education system, particularly targeting young individuals, and to update its content with topics such as algorithmic awareness, data traces, and digital ethics. In doing so, individuals can become not just consumers of content but also conscious, critical, and active participants in the digital world.

The indirect-only mediation effect found in this study underscores the importance of considering intermediary cognitive variables when modelling the impact of media literacy on user behaviour. It also opens new theoretical avenues for exploring how awareness-based variables can shape digital engagement in subtle yet powerful ways.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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