Article

# Inclusive Media Education in the Diverse Classroom: A Participatory Action Research in Germany

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**Abstract**
Media literacy has become a key concept for understanding how different citizens develop the capacity to participate in the mediatized society. One key question here is how media literacy education can support people of diverse backgrounds to have equal chances of benefiting from the media. Furthermore, as many schools are characterized by superdiversity, especially in bigger cities (Crul et al., 2013), there is also a need for research on media education and diversity. This article presents the findings of the research project INCLUDED, a participatory action research about media education in a secondary school in Germany. The project aims to analyse the everyday media use of young people with diverse cultural backgrounds living in a socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhood and co-develop teaching modules on media literacy education integrating an intercultural perspective. The fieldwork of the project (January 2020–April 2021) included participatory observations (online and offline), teacher interviews, and focus groups with the students (13–15 years). The article will particularly focus on one teaching module that focused on TikTok and Instagram influencers. The students' presentations in the classroom demonstrated how the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students also shaped the content that they consumed on social media. Analysing this teaching module as an example, this article discusses the benefits and challenges of designing a more inclusive and participatory approach to media education in the context of culturally diverse schools as an alternative to culture-blindness and over-emphasis of cultural differences.

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## 1. Introduction

The integration of media education in schools has become a key topic with the increasing importance of media in our daily lives. Nevertheless, there are still major differences across countries and schools in relation to media education curriculum and there are only limited in-depth studies on how it is being practised in the everyday context of schools. Furthermore, as many schools are characterized by superdiversity today due to increasing migration and diversity worldwide, especially in bigger cities (Crul et al., 2013), there is need for research on understanding how this diversity should be addressed within media education. This article presents

a case study on how media education can become more inclusive by adopting methods and approaches from the field of intercultural education.

The article is based on the participatory action research project INCLUDED (MSCA, University of Bremen, 2019–2023), which aims to analyse the everyday media use of young people with diverse cultural backgrounds in a socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhood and co-develop teaching modules on media literacy education from an intercultural perspective. The fieldwork of the project continued for over a year (January 2020–April 2021). The research design of the project included participatory observations (online and offline), interviews with the teachers and several rounds of focus

groups with the students (13–15 years), as well as development and carrying out of teaching content for intercultural media education together with the teachers of the school. Based on the analysis of the collected data, topics for pilot media education modules were designed and implemented in cooperation with one of the teachers in this school. This article focuses on the teaching module "social media influencers," which was chosen as a teaching topic because it emerged as one of the central topics for the students in the focus groups.

In this article, I first discuss how the interviewed students perceive and relate to social media influencers, especially those who are active on Instagram and TikTok. Then, I present the design and the implementation of the teaching module on influencers. In this module, the students were asked to prepare a presentation about their favourite social media influencer. The students' presentations and discussions in the classroom demonstrated how the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students also shaped the content that they consumed on social media and the presentations partly opened up a space to discuss these specific examples as well as the general dynamics of social media in relation to these examples. Based on this particular case study, I discuss the benefits and challenges of designing a more inclusive and participatory approach to media education in the context of culturally diverse schools. I argue that both an overemphasis of cultural differences leading to singling out and stigmatization of students and a culture-blind approach that leads to a disconnection between students' everyday lives and the school reality can be a problematic pedagogic approach in the context of the diverse classroom. Instead, more engaging project-based teaching methods that allow students to bring in their own perspectives and examples can be used to encourage them to raise their own voice.

## 2. A Bottom-Up Approach to Media Literacy

Democratic participation today is only possible if citizens are able to navigate the information landscape effectively and have the necessary skills to express themselves through (digital) media. Thus, media literacy has become a key skill for the practice of cultural citizenship within democratic societies in order to ensure that everyone has equal chances of participation (Klaus & Lünenborg, 2012). Thus, if and how media (literacy) education should be part of the school curriculum has become a central question in the field of communication and media studies in recent years. There are different approaches to defining media literacy and the requirements of media education (Friesem & Friesem, 2019; Koltay, 2011; Livingstone, 2004). One commonly cited definition of media literacy came out at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy of the Aspen Institute (Aufderheide, 1992). Accordingly, a media literate person is a person who can "access, analyze, evaluate, and produce both print and electronic media"

(Aufderheide, 1992). The report emphasizes the right to become media literate and also adds that "critical autonomy relationship to all media" (Aufderheide, 1992) is the fundamental objective of media literacy education. Citing Masterman (1985), Hobbs (2011) also argues that media literacy education should aim to develop the critical autonomy of the students referring to "self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments to media texts which they will encounter in the future'' (p. 24). Hobbs (2011, p. 426) states that in order to develop such critical autonomy towards media, media education should be "emphatically student-centred and inquiry-oriented, helping students interrogate the process of making meaning through critical investigation using strategies of both close reading (also called deconstruction or decoding) and media production." Thus, media literacy education should not be about the transfer of knowledge and skills, but a dialogic process of reading and producing media that helps participants to develop a critical understanding of the contemporary media environments.

Although a guiding definition of the term media literacy is important for studying the phenomenon and developing policies to support media literacies in different contexts, I also believe that a more bottom-up approach to media literacy education is also necessary in order to understand the different media practices around media literacy in diverse contexts. As Bruinenberg et al. (2021) suggest media literacy can be studied as a set of situated media practices that are based on certain norms, conventions, and expectations of involved parts and these shape our understanding of "how we should live with media" (Couldry, 2012, as cited in Bruinenberg et al., 2021, p. 31). Media practices also include rituals and affects around media (Bruinenberg et al., 2021). Based on this definition, the practice of media literacy education should be not only about developing skills to effectively use different media technologies, but also to initiate a critical dialogue around these norms, conventions, expectations, rituals, and emotions that shape our way of appropriating different media technologies.

Such a dialogic and bottom-up approach to media literacy could help to address the different understandings of the concept among teachers and students with diverse backgrounds. One key critique to the mainstream discussions on media education in the academic literature is its Western-centric nature (Melki, 2018). Media literacy education needs to take cultural dimensions of media use and media education into consideration (Neag et al., 2022). Considering the role of culture and cultural differences in media education is important because media use itself is shaped by sociocultural contexts on the one hand and they influence cultures on the other hand (Kellner, 2001; Talib, 2018). Furthermore, many classrooms in big European cities are superdiverse consisting of young people, who themselves or whose parents or grandparents have migrated to a different country than the one that they were born in (Crul et al.,

2013). The media literacy literature has rather recently started to focus more on differences among the target groups of media education in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and ability (Neag et al., 2022). Looking at these different dimensions, we also need a new framework that goes beyond single-axis approaches and acknowledges the intersecting axes of difference including nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and socioeconomic class (Neag et al., 2022).

However, talking about culture and cultural differences more generally—and also in the context of media education more specifically—is not an easy task in the classroom context. Teachers in culturally diverse classrooms often oscillate between culture-blindness and the risk of (over-)culturalization (Ogay & Edelmann, 2016). Whereas culture-blindness refers to ignoring culture and cultural differences, culturalization can be understood as an overemphasis of cultural factors over others in classroom interactions (Ogay & Edelmann, 2016). Teachers often hesitate between praising and minimising—or even ignoring—culture and cultural differences (Ogay & Edelmann, 2016, p. 389). Adapting a participatory research approach, this article addresses the following research question:

How can we develop a more inclusive and bottom-up approach to media literacy education in the context of culturally diverse classrooms without oscillating between culture-blindness and over-culturalisation?

## 3. Developing a More Inclusive Approach to Media Literacy Education

In this article, I argue that adopting a more student-oriented method for media education can enable a more inclusive approach. Inclusion in the context of media education can be realized when students with diverse cultural backgrounds have the open communication space in the classroom to openly express themselves, their culturally diverse media practices, and perspectives. Critical pedagogy enables such an approach and also addresses the power relations in the current media environments and the role of media in constructing our perception of reality (Kellner, 2001; Melki, 2018).

Criticizing the current state of media literacy education for marginalising the experiences of those, who live in non-Western contexts, Melki (2018) calls for "the repurposing, reframing and reinventing media literacy" (p. 8) and also turns to critical pedagogy for this purpose. Melki (2018) proposes the concept of media literacy of the oppressed referring to Henry Giroux's work on critical pedagogy and the pedagogy of the oppressed. Melki (2018, p. 7) defines this concept as follows:

A media literacy of the oppressed reframes existing concepts and competencies, engages local communities in the reinvention of media literacy, integrates

media literacy critical reading and writing/production as well as participatory activism, prioritizes problems of the oppressed communities, and introduces new concepts and issues that address these communities and enriches media literacy as a whole. It critiques and simultaneously borrows from the external. It roots itself in the local without being blind to indigenous problems. It struggles for freedom and social justice at the level of the local as well as the global.

Accordingly, Melki (2018) proposes that media literacy education should focus on the problems of communities in particular contexts. Through this, media literacy education could build upon existing and emerging knowledge, but should at the same time add new issues and enrich existing concepts and frameworks (Melki, 2018; Zezulkova & Neag, 2019). Such an approach could not only be beneficial for non-Western contexts, but also for minorities and marginalised populations in Western countries (Melki, 2018). According to Freire (2005, p. 54) pedagogy of the oppressed has two distinct stages:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.

The critical pedagogy approach not only aims for an unveiling of existing power relations in the world and our perception of reality, but also a transformation of perceptions and practices in the end. This also requires a critical engagement with culture and media that are considered as forms of pedagogy within the context of critical pedagogy (Kellner, 2001, p. 224). The aim here is to teach students to become critical auto-ethnographers of their own digital lives (Markham, 2019).

Digital media generally, and social media more specifically, have become central pedagogical sources (in the broader sense) for young people teaching them about the state of the world. They also provide resources for meaning-making and identity construction. However, there is a critical and growing gap between what young people do and learn with digital media out of the school context and what they are learning in the school context (Bevort & Verniers, 2008, p. 89). Schools could play a much more important role here teaching students about the structures of the existing digital media environments, offering a more critical perspective, teaching them to be self-critical of their own practices, and to effectively use digital media technologies for cultural, social, democratic, and economic participation. Bevort and Verniers (2008) suggest that more applied research could be beneficial for this purpose helping us

to understand young people's needs better and develop adequate approaches to media education. Participatory action research could offer a plausible methodological approach for this purpose.

## 4. Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative research project that adopts a participatory action research approach. Participatory action research is chosen for this particular project because it not only generates detailed social analysis, but also commits itself to "transformational action to improve things" (Kemmis et al., 2013, p. 12) in cooperation with the people in the field (McIntyre, 2007). Participatory action research is especially used in educational research about gender inequalities and socially excluded groups (Kemmis et al., 2013). The fieldwork was conducted in a secondary school in Bremen, Germany, that is located in a culturally diverse and socioeconomically diverse neighbourhood. The pseudonym Oberschule Bremen will be used in this article to refer to this school. *Oberschule* is a specific type of secondary school in Germany, which enables students to take all three types of paths that are possible in the German education system (*Haupt-*, *Real-* and *Gymnasialschulabschluss*). The students in an Oberschule have the possibility to follow a vocational or an academic (*Gymnasial*) educational pathway after secondary school. The research design included participatory observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus groups with the students in the first part of the field research. In the second part of the field research, the researcher aimed to develop research-driven teaching content on media education in the context of diversity together with the teachers of the Oberschule Bremen.

The participants of the focus groups were chosen from the seventh and eighth graders of the Oberschule Bremen. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling method, meaning that a diverse group of students in relation to their gender, cultural background, school success, and socio-economic background was aimed during the selection of the participants. A total of 42 students participated in the focus groups and two to three rounds of focus groups were conducted with most of the students in September 2020 and February–April 2021. A total of 11 focus groups were conducted and the size of the focus groups varied between four and six participants.

The collected data was analysed and then discussed with the teachers of the school in order to identify topics that were chosen for the teaching modules on media education. The codes were developed partly based on existing literature, on which the focus group guidelines were based, but the majority of the codes were developed inductively through a process of open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The students' participation in the design of the teaching modules was indirect through the analysis of the discussions in the focus groups. Especially the topics that we identified as interesting or problematic for the interviewed students were chosen as the topics of the teaching modules on media education. I worked together with the class teacher Kai (all names of the research participants are replaced by pseudonyms in this article) to identify the topics of the teaching modules. The topics that were chosen as the teaching modules were also presented to the students in the class parliament (*Klassenrat*) that meets weekly to discuss matters of the class and their feedback was asked. Many of them indicated that they find the topics interesting and were willing to participate in the pilot program. The teaching topics included reflection of own media use; time management with digital media, data protection, influencers, netiquette, and "hate" on social media.

The pilot program was developed together by me and Kai, whose expertise lies in media, politics and society, and religion. The participants of the teaching module on media education were the students of Kai's classroom of eighth-graders. There is no compulsory teaching module on media education in Germany. The schools decide themselves if they integrate media education as an elective module in their school's curriculum. Media was one of the elective courses that were offered in the Oberschule Bremen. However, the course was selected only by a small group of students (eight) and the majority were male students (six). Furthermore, the media course focused only on technical media production skills and there was a need for a broader and more critical pedagogical approach to media education. In order to have a broader focus related to media environments and have a larger and more mixed group of students (18 participants), we integrated the teaching modules into the compulsory module of society and politics in the eighth-grade class of the teacher.

Schools in Germany have varying material sources related to (digital) media, which limits the integration of digital media in the education practice as well as the practice of media education. To improve the digital resources of schools, the German Ministry of Education and Research initiated the project DigitalPakt Schule in 2019 with a budget of five billion euros (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [Federal Ministry of Education and Research], n.d.). These funds can be used by schools upon proposals in order to receive funds for equipment and projects related to the digitalisation of schools. The state of Bremen used these funds to distribute iPads to all students in Bremen's schools during the pandemic in 2021 and the students in Oberschule Bremen also received iPads from the state of Bremen in this context (see Bozdag, in press).

The application of the teaching modules was influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The school decided to ban visitors from the school in October 2021 due to the increasing number of Covid-19 cases in Germany. A total of six weeks was planned for the pilot teaching modules. The first four weeks of the program could be applied in the classroom context, the teacher facilitated

the modules, and the researcher could observe online via Zoom connection. Then, the school shifted to online education completely in the fifth week of the program, and the teaching module was carried out online. Despite these limitations, this case study offers important insights for future practices of inclusive media literacy education as discussed in the next sections.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Influencers in Young Students' Everyday Life

This article will focus on one specific topic that was discussed broadly by the students in the focus groups and that was included as one of the topics in the teaching modules, namely the social media influencers. Social media influencers are defined here as people who professionally engage with content production and self-branding mainly on social media platforms and have a large follower base. The focus groups were based on semi-structured discussion guidelines and the researcher aimed to leave room for bottom-up discussions about digital media during the focus groups. One of the topics that the students often raised and were very engaged with was social media influencers. Names like Firat el Vito, who is a German-Turkish influencer active on TikTok with ca. three million followers (https://www.tiktok.com/@firatelvito) and Instagram with ca. 659 thousand followers (https://www.instagram.com/firatelvito), were mentioned by several students in different focus groups. The JIM (Jugend Information Medien [Youth Information Media]) study, which is based on annual surveys on media use with young people (12–19 years) in Germany, demonstrates that respectively WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are the most used applications among young people (Feierabend et al., 2021). Young people turn to social media generally and TikTok more specifically, not only for entertainment, but also for "information sharing, information seeking, cool and new trend, relaxing entertainment, companionship, and boredom/habitual pass time" (Croes & Bartels, 2021, p. 7). While using social media, young people are also partly frustrated with the content they see on social media—for example, hate speech or racist statements—and express the need to critically engage with such content (Nam, 2020). There is a need for developing critical dialogues around social media and influencers in the school context as these have become quite central in young people's lives, but are often absent from school curriculum (Nam, 2020).

TikTok is especially popular among the age group 12–15 and more popular among girls than boys (Feierabend et al., 2021). TikTok and Instagram also emerged as the most common and longest-used social media application in the focus groups, and was especially popular among the girls. One of the participants, Rojda, explained TikTok's popularity as follows:

Rojda: Yes (laughs)…and…aeh…when there is a trend on TikTok for example a sentence or a word or something like that we say this word or sentence all the time in the school.

Anika: For example "Bebesh."

Rojda: Yes, and the boys are also hearing it and they also say it then, so it is. (Focus Group 8)

TikTok influencers like Firat el Vito provide cultural resources for everyday discussions among young people in the Oberschule Bremen. Based on the stories that these influencers share in their posts on social media platforms, they discuss gender roles, their expectations from friendship, and what it means to be in a relationship, among other topics. One example is from Focus Group 4, where Nazli and others are discussing Firat el Vito's posts about his girlfriend cheating on him with his best friend: "Yes, I find it really stupid, because he is her best friend. You don't cheat with him (your best friend). And then there were rumours and it was really unclear. They wanted to make each other look bad'' (Nazli).

Nazli's comments make it clear that the content of the Firat el Vito's posts and his life stories are a basis for discussing what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in a relationship or in a friendship (e.g., "cheating with your best friend"). But at the same time, there is an underlying discussion about the tactics and strategies that the influencers adopt while they share their stories. Young people also often have a tacit knowledge about the mechanisms through which attention economy functions on social media and, for example, question the authenticity of the stories that influencers share on social media.

Influencers like Firat el Vito are different from typical celebrities that appear on German mainstream media. Firat el Vito himself has a German-Turkish background and posts mainly in German language with some Turkish words and phrases. He also shares instances from his family life, for example, his relationship with his mother (a picture kissing her hand) or a picture of his siblings (see Figure 1). In this regard, Firat el Vito's TikTok representation diverges from the mainstream representations of Turkish people on German media, in which people with a migrant background are underrepresented and often represented through stereotypes. The lifestyle he presents on social media offers an alternative source of identification for young people with a Turkish migration background beyond these stereotypes. Firat el Vito's Instagram account is carefully curated and feeds his followers with a balanced picture of his love life following a storyline, his family life, and his sponsored posts (Figure 1).

The content that students follow on social media is not limited to lifestyle influencers, but also includes topics that are central to their own lives, such as the
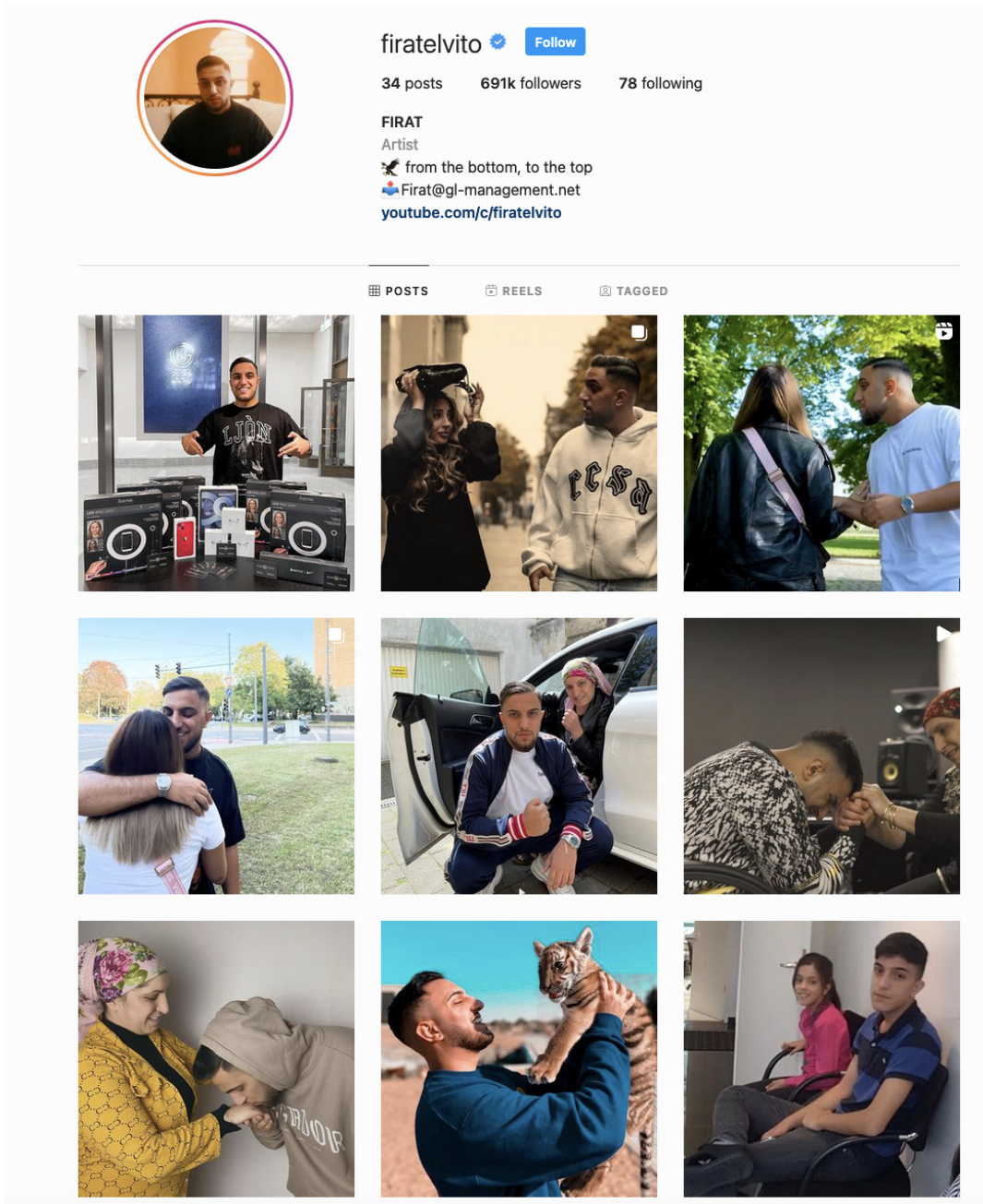
**Figure 1.** Screenshot: Instagram account of Firat el Vito (2021).

*Abitur* (the state exam that students take at the end of high school for university entrance in Germany). Nazli explains this as follows:

> Nazli: Aeh…not only people, who show their faces, but also for example let´s say people, who show school stuff and so on. How they do their things and so on. [People] who are doing the Abitur exam or are studying at the moment. I like to look at them. Because then I can imagine [how it is], when I do it and so on.

Nazli is looking for influencers, who share similar experiences like her and are preparing for the *Abitur* exam,

in order to get insights about their experiences. But she also adds that you can find any kind of information on TikTok, for example, related to beauty, health, or legal matters:

> Nazli: Aeh, there are really some people there, for example, a lawyer, who is called Mr. Lawyer [Herr Anwalt], he calls himself so. And that is really a lawyer. And…aeh…he became famous because he has always received questions asked, so, for example, "Am I allowed to drink sixteen Energy [drinks]?" as an example. And [he] answered them and…

> Nevin: One minute law [*Eine Minute Jura*].

Besides legal advice, the students explained that they can find information about health-related issues, like the Covid-19 pandemic, or lifestyle advice on TikTok. In this regard, platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become central resources for them as a source of information and as a cultural platform that presents key resources for everyday negotiations about culture, gender, relationships, and identity building.

*5.2. Teaching Module on Influencers*

The topic of influencers was identified as one of the key topics that could be part of the teaching modules on media education based on the field notes during the participatory observations and the initial analysis of the focus groups. The topic was chosen also because it allows a multi-level critical discussion around digital media environments and issues related to media production, commercial interests, identity representations, and (para-)social interactions on social media. We decided to thematize the topic in a bottom-up manner allowing students to present their favourite influencers and what they find interesting about them. The aim was not only to help students develop media production skills by using their newly attained iPads, but also to initiate a critical dialogue around the topic of influencers. For this purpose, we designed a presentation assignment, in which the students were expected to use the iPads that they received due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bozdag, in press). They were asked to prepare a brochure and present their favourite influencer on one of the social media platforms including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter. After the assignment was introduced, they could work on their assignments in class in a two-hour block and ask questions to the teacher. After this block, they were expected to finish their assignments within a week on their own. The students were given some initial guiding questions for their presentations:

- Why did you choose this particular influencer? What is it that makes this person particularly great?
- Which special competences and skills does this person have?
- Can everybody be so successful?
- Do we know how much money he earns or what kind of a life he has?
- Which risks and negative aspects could his success have for this person?
- What does this person do professionally in five years?

The questions were thought as a guideline for students to self-reflect and think about the influencers that they follow, and also to think about the dynamics of the platforms in which these influencers are active.

One of the interesting discussions on influencers took place as the teacher presented the topic and the presen-

tation assignment. The teacher introduced the concept of the influencer as follows: "An influencer is someone, who posts things on social media platforms and is a successful person." Then one of the students asked the following question about "being successful":

S1: What does it mean to be successful?

T: So that you know him/her and I know him.

S3: Do you know Knossi?

T: Of course, I know Knossi.

S4: Firat el Vito? [giggles] Do you know [him]?

T: [smiles] Again?

S4: Firat el Vito.

T: I don't know him.

[Students laugh]

T: Now this is a great opportunity that I also learn a bit of something new [smiles].

As the teacher argues that a successful person is a person that everybody knows including him and the students, the students start challenging this by asking the other students several names that are famous as influencers and that they follow. One of these influencers is Firat el Vito, who was mentioned quite often in the focus groups, and appears to be a quite well-known influencer among the students in the classroom. As the teacher admitted not knowing him, the students started laughing and the teacher eloquently replied that this assignment might be an opportunity for him as well to also learn something from the students. However, this moment of recognition did not turn into a discussion about Firat el Vito or what makes him special in the eyes of the students, or why the teacher might not know him although he is quite familiar among the students. In this sense, this moment of openness did not lead to a big transformation in their perception of influencers although it had the potential for opening up a discussion about the order of visibility and power in the (German) mediascape and on social media platforms.

After the introduction, the students worked on their assignments in class and kept asking questions about who an influencer could be. As it can also be seen in the exchange between the students and the teacher above, the term "influencer" is not necessarily a commonly used term among the students although it was a taken-for-granted term for the involved teacher and me as the researcher. This discrepancy shows that the terminology between the students and the teachers referring to digital media environments might diverge from

each other. This confusion in terminology has also led to some confusion in the choice of the people that students decide to present. For example, some of the students chose to present rather classical celebrities, for example, German TV celebrities such as Knossi, international football players like Messi, or pop singers such as Dua Lipa, who are famous outside of social media as well, but also have a social media appearance. Others chose influencers from different cultural contexts including influencers from Turkey, Germany, or the US. The top-

ics also varied from football, pop music, and humour to lifestyle. Two examples of the brochures that the students prepared can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. The majority of the male students chose males and the female students chose females to present as their famous influencers (and celebrities). There was only one exception to this trend in the classroom, a black girl who presented a black male singer in her assignment. Students related to the influencers that they presented concerning multi-layered aspects of their identities including age,



**Figure 2.** Brochure (Markiplier, YouTuber).



**Figure 3.** Brochure (Addison Rae, TikToker).

gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and migration background. As I argued in earlier sections of the article, an intersectional approach is needed to understand these connections as a single-axis approach to identity and its influences on digital media use would miss these multi-layered dimensions.

Before presenting their brochures in the classroom, the students were asked to upload their presentations in the e-learning platform itslearning, which is a widely used learning platform in schools in Bremen. Two examples of the first pages of the students' brochures that were prepared and uploaded by the students of Oberschule Bremen are presented in Figures 2 and 3. As it can be seen in these examples, the students have put together visuals and general information about the influencers in their brochures, for example, they explained what kind of content they produce. The first example is Markiplier (Figure 2), who is an internationally famous YouTuber. The student wrote that he is well-known for "flipping out" and because he is "funny and cool." He added that he makes a lot of jokes as well especially when he plays games, specifically horror games. The student also wrote on the brochure that everybody can become as successful as him and that he earns 18 million dollars from YouTube and his shop. He added that Markplier (https://www.youtube.com/c/markiplier) has a girlfriend and pets.

The second example is Addison Rae (https://www.tiktok.com/@addisonre), who is one of the influencers with the highest number of followers on TikTok that focuses on dance, music, and cosmetics. Two different female students chose her as their favourite influencer in their brochures. The student, who prepared the brochure in Figure 3 has described Addison Rae as a famous TikToker, who is 20 years old and has over 68 million followers. She added that Addison makes dance videos on TikTok, most of which have more than one million likes. She described Addison as talented and beautiful, and adds that she has a nice figure. The student added that people can become successful quickly on TikTok if they produce videos that other people like. But she also indicated that Addison Rae earns around five million dollars and others, who also try as hard to be successful with their TikTok videos, do not even earn anything that compares to what Addison earns. The student also explained that Addison's fame has a negative side for her as well, because she receives so much "hate." Hate on social media was a central topic that the students discussed in the focus groups as well. Many found "hate," mostly referring to negative and offensive comments on social media, very disturbing and raised concerns about being the target of hate themselves.

During class, when students were going to present their brochures, several students had to stay at home and attended the class online, via Zoom, because they had Covid-19, or had contact with people with Covid-19 and had to self-quarantine. As class began, the teacher briefly recaptured the discussions from the week before

and started opening the presentations of the students on the smart board one by one. The students were not asked to do long presentations about their brochures. Instead, they could introduce the brochures and their favourite influencer with a few sentences. After the short presentations, other students were invited to ask questions. However, during class, it was mostly the teacher asking questions and steering the discussions. His questions mostly focused on the professional lives of the influencers, asking for example how they earn their money and if they have a particular talent. This led to a discussion about the economic structures and power relations that shaped the platform dynamics and the influencers' appearances on these platforms. Some of these questions were also implicitly leading to make the students question if being an influencer is as attractive as it seems. This has partly started an engaging discussion about the professional character of the influencers' activities, what kind of a "product" or "service" they provide to earn money, and if this will still be relevant in a period of five or 10 years from that point onwards.

Overall, the students' comments about the influencers on their brochures and in the classroom remained at a descriptive level, especially in comparison to what they have revealed and discussed in the focus groups about different influencers like Firat el Vito. Questions like why the students personally liked the people that they presented or what they get from following them were not raised. This was also partly due to the hybrid setting in the classroom, which hindered the effective interaction among the students, the teacher, and the researcher. Nevertheless, the participatory observations before the implementation of the teaching modules also show that the students have a tacit understanding of what can be discussed in the classroom context and what does not belong to the school context. These topics that are rather excluded from the school context but seem to be central and related to students' everyday lives include not only social media content, but also issues related to culture, cultural differences, ethnicity, race, and gender. In this regard, the students recognize and internalize the dynamics and the tacit rules of the overall school culture. And these rules also determine the boundaries of classroom discussions about media content and media use.

## 6. Conclusion

This article started with a discussion about the concept of media literacy arguing for a bottom-up approach to media literacy defining it as a set of media practices that are based on norms, conventions, expectations, rituals, and emotions that define the ways we deal with media in our everyday lives (Bruinenberg et al., 2021). Based on this definition, media literacy education should not be about the transfer of knowledge about the media, but about a critical dialogue around the media in order to help students develop critical autonomy in their engagement with the media environments (Aufderheide, 1992;

Hobbs, 2011). Through a participatory action search in a secondary school in Germany, I discussed the possibilities of practicing such an approach to media literacy education in the context of diverse schools. One of the main aims of the presented project was to develop a more inclusive teaching approach to media education that would open up a space for young people in culturally diverse societies to express their experiences with media from different cultural contexts.

Furthermore, I argued that such an inclusive approach can be possible through the adoption of critical pedagogy and student-centred approaches. This can enable teachers to go beyond culture-blindness or (over-)culturalization in their teaching practices. A pedagogical approach focusing on the needs of young people in specific local contexts has the potential to open up a space for discussing the influences of culture and other factors such as age, socioeconomic background, gender, race, and ethnicity that influence media use.

With this approach to media education, I focused on the exemplary topic of influencers in this article. Firstly, I presented findings from the field research demonstrating the relevance of influencers on platforms like Instagram and TikTok in the everyday lives of young people with diverse backgrounds. Secondly, I critically evaluated the implementation process of the teaching module on Influencers in the classroom context discussing the potential of adopting a more student-centred approach for discussing media-related topics in culturally diverse classrooms.

The teaching module on influencers was designed around a presentation assignment in which the students were asked to present their favourite influencers and explain how they relate to them. The students chose a diverse range of influencers from different cultural contexts including those from the country of origin, those with a migration background, and others who became worldwide celebrities. On the one hand, doing this assignment, students experimented with using the digital tools on their iPads to produce media content themselves with the support of their teacher. On the other hand, they were also invited to reflect on the phenomenon of influencers and their own relationship with them.

The discussions during the introduction of the assignment in the classroom focused on the definition of influencers. These discussions were quite interesting as they revealed the discrepancy between the students' and the teacher's perspective of influencers and their knowledge about the people who are famous on these platforms. This was a learning moment for the teacher himself, who also openly told the students about this. Such an in-class discussion about how students themselves use and perceive digital media (content) has the potential to bridge the gap between school topics and topics that are related to social media and central for students in their everyday lives. Following a bottom-up approach and allowing the students to bring in their own examples has the potential for creating new ground in the classroom and

transforming both teachers' and students' perspectives. The in-class discussions following the presentations on students' favourite influencers mainly focused on the commercial interests of the influencers and how they do advertisements for brands for a living. However, there was little discussion about issues related to gender and cultural background as discussed in the next paragraph.

Students' choices of the influencers that they presented reflected the diversity of their own backgrounds and interests as they varied from people with a migration background in Germany, internationally famous influencers, to football players and television stars. Despite this diversity of people and topics that were presented in the students' brochures, the discussions that followed the brief presentation of the brochures, unfortunately, did not address this diversity. This was partly due to the context of the study, which was carried out in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the discussions about influencers, almost half of the students were participating online only. However, the participatory observations in this particular hour and also at other times in the school also show that students implicitly perceive certain topics as topics to be discussed outside of the classroom context. These topics include social media content and also topics related to gender, race, or cultural background.

Participatory action research has a great potential for analysing and addressing the needs of particular local communities especially when it comes to under-represented and under-served communities like young people in culturally diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The presented research also attempted to understand how young people in such a context in Bremen, Germany, related to digital media and how schools could address their needs and interests through media education. There were limitations in the implementation of the teaching modules as addressed focusing on one particular topic above. However, during the evaluation session of the course, the students expressed that they were happy to have talked about a topic that was quite interesting and relevant to them.

Overall, a key take-away from the presented case is recognizing that it is not very easy to overcome the dominant school cultures through singular teaching programs, even when these projects are designed with the aim of being participatory, student-centred, critical, and innovative. Hence, developing a more inclusive media education framework requires more than focusing on media-related courses in the school context. For this purpose, we also need to address the more general question about how schools can create a more open school culture and address cultural differences without falling into cultural blindness and over-culturalization.

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**Conflict of Interests**

No conflicts of interests to declare.

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