

Dimensions of Media Literacy from the Intercultural Perspective of Digital Transformation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 20 Dec 2024 Accepted: 05 May 2025	This paper explores the multifaceted intersection of media literacy (ML) and intercultural communication (IC) within the rapidly shifting digital landscape. ML/IC overlap with the socio-cultural, economic, political, and socio-political tendencies, dimensions, and discourses of the globalized interconnected world. In these fluid digital ecosystems, understanding their synergy is essential for navigating complex media environments, where media users necessitate a guiding “orientation”, as conceptualized by Stegmaier, due to high, ubiquitous media exposure throughout individuals, social structures, and cultures. Employing a semi-systematic narrative review and thematic coding, this study introduces a Four-Dimensional Framework—comprising access and participation, representation and identity, interpretation and meaning-making, and ethical engagement—that illuminates the convergence of ML and IC and their implications in the digital era. Building on these dimensions, a Three-Layer Model is proposed, integrating foundational capabilities, interpretive competencies, and ethical-collaborative practices into a cohesive whole. Reframed through Stegmaier’s orientation philosophy, orientation is elevated to a cross-cutting meta-dimension, empowering media users to navigate—and shape—complex socio-cultural, economic, and political discourses on the global stage. Thus, this paper advocates a reflective, “alternative-thinking” approach to IC within fluid cultural contexts, highlighting the need for critical self-awareness and deeper inter-, intra- and cross-cultural understanding in a media-saturated world. Keywords: Media Literacy/Media Competence, Digital Transformation, Orientation, Socio-and Intercultural Context of Media Literacy, Intercultural Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Media technologies now permeate every aspect of society, prompting a need for tailored media competence (MC) across diverse populations. As “mass-self-communication” (Castells, 2007) redefines interaction, media and technology occupy a correlative role to socio-cultural influences rather than a deterministic one (Jarren & Klinger, 2017). Digital platforms, increasingly shaped by both producers and users, transform cultural consumption and public discourse from micro-level interactions to macro-level societal shifts (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013).

In this evolving landscape, Homo Loquens have unprecedented access to information—rendering critical reflection and active participation indispensable. Therefore, among its key objectives, contemporary society should, on the one hand, focus on raising the level of media literacy (ML), and on the other hand, establish intercultural literacy, while supporting their continuous development and perfection.

The relevance of ML and its implications becomes particularly pronounced in light of pressing global challenges, including the exertion of soft power, the proliferation of hybrid warfare, the strategic use of propaganda, the spread of disinformation, and the intensification of polarization, fragmentation, social isolation, and digital inequality or division. These phenomena are not monolithic; rather, they unfold unevenly across different regions, shaped by geopolitical, economic, and cultural asymmetries. Notably, their manifestations in the

Global South often diverge significantly from those in the Global North, revealing deeper structural imbalances in media access, critical engagement, and participatory agency within an increasingly interconnected yet unequally mediated multicultural world.

These global shifts have exposed media vulnerabilities and accelerated changes in communicative practices, especially with increased digital reliance.

In the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the mastery of digital communication methods has become increasingly pertinent, as the crisis has markedly accelerated the adoption and reliance on digital content. According to Global Web Index (2020), the pandemic has significantly influenced the proliferation of digital communication practices on a global scale. Nguyen et al. (2020) further argue that the communication patterns that emerged during this period carry important implications for future developments, as “the motivations unique to the time of the pandemic may result in habits that outlast the outbreak itself” (pp. 4-5).

Bridging ML and IC: Towards an Integrated Three-Layer Perspective

This study pursues two primary objectives: First, it seeks to outline the key dimensions of ML as a pervasive competence in contemporary society. Second, it aims to reconceptualize ML within an interdisciplinary and intercultural framework by bridging the concept of “orientation” with the ML-concept.

While there is a significant corpus on ML, as this issue has enticed numerous scholars, policymakers, educators, institutions, and civic activists, this paper distinguishes itself through its focus on the intercultural dimensions of digital practices. By synthesizing insights from media studies, communication, sociology, education, and intercultural theory, the proposed theoretical framework elucidates the dynamic interplay between ML and intercultural communication (IC) within the context of a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Although ML and IC each boast extensive literature, their inquiries have largely proceeded in parallel, leaving absent a coherent framework—one that weaves together foundational capabilities, interpretive competencies, and ethical-collaborative practices. While foundational ML models (e.g., Potter, 2004) and intercultural-competence frameworks (e.g., Byram, 1997) have laid essential groundwork, an integrated perspective that bridges both within the context of digital transformation remains underdeveloped. Anchored in Stegmaier’s (2008) notion of “orientation,” the proposed Three-Layer Model addresses this lacuna by demonstrating how these layers interrelate in intercultural digital contexts, and how ML adapts across cultural boundaries.

This study addresses the identified lacuna by focusing on three fundamental questions:

RQ1: Which main dimensions of ML are pivotal to the intercultural context of digital transformation?

RQ2: How does this context extend the ML-concept?

RQ3: What challenges does the complex process of transferring and sharing ML pose?

This work adopts a very broad perspective of ML and IC. ML should: a) involve all forms of media and information sharing; b) not only focus on developing and refining skill-set, but building knowledge as argued by Potter (2013), for “the cooperative development of knowledge, skills, and a personal locus, which is the combination of drive energy and emotional commitment” (p. 420); and c) as an interdisciplinary topic, it should fuse political, social and cultural activities and practices to guarantee the enhancement of participation culture and application of knowledge into practice. Likewise, IC is not restricted exclusively to the communication patterns of representatives of different ethno-cultures. However, each type of interpersonal communication is considered as IC, for each individual represents his/her own unique culture beyond ethno-culture, as far as “culture” as a non-static notion “acknowledges intra-cultural differences and multiple memberships” (Avgousti, 2018, p. 839).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

To explore the intersections of ML, IC, and digital transformation—and to address the research objectives—this study adopts a semi-systematic narrative literature review. This methodological approach is particularly appropriate for synthesizing diverse sources and is well-suited to interdisciplinary research, as it enables a comprehensive and integrative analysis of complex, overlapping themes. As Snyder (2019) notes, when the aim is “to summarize or evaluate a large field of research or even several research areas, a strict systematic review approach may not be suitable or even possible” (p. 336). Moreover, the semi-systematic review is specifically designed for topics that, as Snyder (2019) explains, “have been conceptualized differently and studied by various

groups of researchers within diverse disciplines” (p. 335). Accordingly, this approach is well-positioned to trace the evolution of research over time and to illuminate the development of a topic across distinct scholarly traditions.

The research design unfolds across three phases: data collection, data screening and selection, and thematic analysis.

Data Collection: Rationale for Database Selection and Categorization

Databases were selected based on scope, credibility, and thematic relevance, prioritizing peer-reviewed and subject-specific sources. Searches, conducted between December 2020 and March 2025, targeted interdisciplinary and education-focused repositories. The inclusion of multiple databases and a bilingual literature scope (English and German) thereby reinforced the global perspective. **Table 1** presents database categorization.

Table 1. Categorization of Selected Databases

Nº	Databases	Scope / Thematic Coverage	Defining Aspects
1.	Google Scholar	Interdisciplinary scope; academic papers and grey literature	High number of hits; broad preliminary scan of literature
2.	Scopus/Elsevier	Comprehensive interdisciplinary scope	Peer-reviewed literature
3.	ScienceDirect	Peer-reviewed full-text articles	Empirically based studies; direct access to Elsevier/Scopus archives
4.	ERIC	Specialized database for educational research	Practice-relevant, education-related literature; broad insight into the topic due to integrated educational reports
5.	T & F Journals	Broad portfolio of social science and humanities journals	Peer-reviewed articles; targeted research in relevant subject areas
6.	Sage Journals	Theoretical and empirical contributions	Peer-reviewed articles; intuitive search interface and a strong focus on critical, theoretically sound cross-disciplinary approaches
7.	Wiley Online Library	Multifaceted journals in various academic domains	Peer-reviewed literature; empirically grounded studies
8.	SpringerOpen	Freely accessible peer-reviewed articles	Open scientific discourse
9.	DNB	Comprehensive catalogue of German publications	Collection of German field-specific literature
10.	Fachportal Pädagogik	Specialized platform for educational research with a focus on MC in education	Integration of theoretical and empirical studies, as well as grey literature specifically addressing educational issues; practice-relevant reports and empirical studies
11.	DiVa Portal	Platform for Swedish and Nordic scientific publications	Regional studies and interdisciplinary approaches; insights into specific Nordic approaches
12.	Oxford Research Encyclopedia/Communication	Encyclopedic access to theoretical and conceptual contributions	Contributions from renowned experts; theoretical overviews

Search term specification: To refine the search terms, the following key word combinations, via the use of Boolean Operator AND, were employed: “media AND literacy”; “media literacy AND intercultural communication”; “media literacy AND intercultural literacy”; “digital transformation”; “dimensions of media literacy”; and “socio AND intercultural context of media literacy.”

The Selection Criteria of the Body of Literature

The following criteria were applied for the actual selection of the corpus.

Inclusion criteria: Publication date: studies from 1970 onwards, as in the 1970s, research on the theoretical foundations of ML and IC had been introduced; b) language: publications in English and German; c) material type: conceptual papers, peer-reviewed articles, institutional works, books, and book chapters/contributions.

Excluded were studies: Considering “media” in a narrow perspective and focusing either on only one medium

or on a media type; b) addressing acquisition of intercultural literacy exclusively in the context of second/foreign language education; c) focusing on only one of the many purposes of media; d) drawing primarily on one culture.

Owing to the narrative approach’s inclusion of diverse source types over an extended timeframe (December 2020–March 2025), a succinct summary table of final source categories (**Table 2**) in lieu of the classic systematic-review flowchart is presented.

Table 2. Overview of Final Source Types (n = 65)

Source Type	n
Books (monographs and edited volumes)	14
Book chapters/contributions	15
Peer-reviewed journal articles	25
Institutional publications (edited books and chapters published by BPB, Clearinghouse, GMK.)	7
Institutional reports (reports and policy papers GlobalWebIndex, UNESCO)	4

Thematic Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken through a three-step coding process:

- 1. Open coding: Extracting key concepts.
- 2. Axial coding: Grouping of related concepts into broader thematic categories.
- 3. Selective Coding: Synthesis of overarching narratives that capture how digital change and cultural diversity shape ML research.

The analysis was conducted manually to allow for a more nuanced, context-sensitive interpretation of the material, in line with the interpretive goals of the study.

Tables 3 and **4** outline key concepts, and the corresponding thematic groupings that emerged from the review process.

Table 3. Key Categories and Concepts

Key Categories	Concepts
ML and education	ML and MC: contextualization; definition; media education/media pedagogy; new literacy; cultural adaptation in ML
IC and competence	Intercultural competence; sensitivity; multicultural education; intercultural dialogue
Digital transformation and technology	Digital communication; algorithm awareness; digital inequality; big data; network society
Media and Information Literacy (MIL)	MIL definition; curriculum development; digital MIL
Social, political, and critical perspectives	Civic online reasoning; empowerment through media; public discourse; critical thinking

Table 4. Axial Thematic Categories and Grouped Concepts

Axial Thematic Categories	Grouped Concepts	Key References: Indicative Samples from Scholarly Discourse
Intercultural dimensions in ML	Intercultural competence, sensitivity, and communication; multicultural education and intercultural dialogue	Álvarez Valencia and Michelson (2022); Arasaratnam (2016), Bennett (1986); Belousa and Stakle (2010); Byram (1997); Chen and Starosta (2005); Deardorff (2006); Fantini (2009); Heringer (2014); Jacquinot-Delaunay, Carlsson, Tayie, and Pérez Tornero (2008); Lopez (2008)
Digital transformation and ML	digital communication changes, algorithm awareness, digital inequality, big data challenges; transformations of media practices in the digital era	Castells (2007); Hilbert and López (2011); Hofer, Hargittai, Büchi, and Seifert (2019); Global Web Index (2020); Nguyen et al. (2020); Lanier (2013); Ochs (2015); Robinson (2009)

Axial Thematic Categories	Grouped Concepts	Key References: Indicative Samples from Scholarly Discourse
Educational frameworks and pedagogical approaches	Curriculum development, media pedagogy, teaching strategies, empowerment through education; cognitive and psychological bases of literacy	Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992); Baacke (1996, 1997); Hobbs and Jensen (2009); Frau-Meigs (2015, 2019); Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, and Seigle (2004); Mackey and Jacobson (2011); Potter (2004, 2013); Schorb, Hartung-Griemberg, Dallmann, and Hüther (2017); Theunert (1999)
Theoretical and critical perspectives on literacy	critical theories, mediology, historical perspectives on literacy, theoretical frameworks	Debray (1999); Papacharissi and Easton (2013); Potter (2004, 2013); Scribner and Cole (1981); Stegmaier (2004, 2008); Thomas (2013)
Social and political contexts of ML	Civic engagement, public discourse, social empowerment, digital ethics	Gapski, Oberle, and Staufer (2017); Jarren and Klinger (2017)

Limitations

While this semi-systematic approach provides rich interpretative depth, its theory-driven and context-dependent nature inherently limits reproducibility and may introduce subjective bias in literature weighting. Particularly at the intersection of ML, IC, and educational research, the focus is on interpretative depth rather than completeness, which implies that subjective biases cannot be fully excluded.

RESULTS

This section first delineates ML from MC, treating ML in a digitally transformed society, MC within a broader communication framework, evolving interdisciplinary ML discourses, and the extension from information literacy (IL) to media and information literacy expansion (MIL^x). It then examines core challenges in media education—integrated ML practices, conceptual tensions in media literacy education (MLE), the multifaceted trajectory of MIL development, and its intersections with intercultural literacy, IC, and sustainable development.

Conceptual Foundations and Extensions

Defining ML in the Digital Age

The outlook and discourse on the importance of the ML-concept are defined by the media technology-induced change processes in society (Gapski et al., 2017). The ML-concept substantially defines an adequate skill-set for using all media subtypes to define, assess, and orient oneself vis-à-vis ongoing changing events actively occurring in the world, as well as related human communication and activity repertoires.

Scholars have conceptualized ML through various lenses. There are different complementary definitions of ML depending on what ideas these definitions underline or what scholarly traditions they represent, starting with McLuhanesque speculation (Gordon, 1971) as a pedagogical tool (Houk & Bogart, 1974) or as an anthropological tradition (Scribner & Cole, 1981) to critical cultural issues (Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992) or even forming ML's own culture (Lopez, 2008). For a comprehensive analysis of the ML literature, see Potter (2004, 2013).

Despite the plurality of definitions, a universal formulation remains elusive. This paper adopts the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2004) broad conception of literacy as a foundational reference, while recognizing that subsequent frameworks extend and recalibrate this baseline. Potter's (2004) model elaborates ML through cognitive skills and knowledge domains, whereas Pembecioğlu (2019) redefines it in light of participatory media environments.

Building on UNESCO's operational definition, ML is understood here as:

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using written and printed (and visual) materials associated with various contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in the wider society (p. 13).

Potter's (2004) framework further refines ML by outlining seven cognitive skills—analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction—situated across five knowledge domains: media effects, media content, media industries, real-world contexts, and self-reflection.

More recent scholarship, exemplified by Pembecioğlu (2019), emphasizes the need to reconceptualize ML in

response to the affordances and challenges of participatory media.

Conceptualizing MC within the Broader Communication Framework

“Media competence” (MC) is a special layer of a holistic, anthropologically founded concept of competence with educational and normative implications. Moreover, MC itself is a construct of mass media, where active changes in the contemporary, functionally-differentiated media and information society structure determine its conjuncture (Gapski, 2017).

On the one hand, MC is an integral part of communication competence (CC). On the other hand, it is intrinsic to have the competence to act, which is a prerequisite to the sovereign rule of living and encompasses vectoring one’s life through and with the media.

The basic aspects of the traditional approaches to the theoretical concept of competence can be reconstructed from the Language Theory of Chomsky, and Theory of Communicative Action of Habermas.

In Germany, the concept of MC was first introduced in the 1970s by Baacke, who linked it with the anthropological icon-picture of an active civilian acting out of his/her own will (*sui juris*), which at the time constituted a truly unique point of view, all the more so during the period when media pedagogy was still a discipline in formation.

Baacke’s action-oriented concept emphasized that individuals are not mere passive recipients of media influences but active agents who shape their environments. He shifted the debate from the question, “What influence does media have on humans?” to “How competently does a human being use media?” Baacke’s perspective integrates CC and action competence (AC) into four dimensions: media critique, media science, media usage, and media formation (Baacke, 1996, 1997, 1974).

During the 1990s, further refinements emerged. Theunert (1999), for example, delineated subject competence (knowledge of media), reception competence (critical use), and participation competence (self-determined media production).

Recent studies have accentuated the meaning of habitual forms of media use and media socialization in MC development. Scholars draw from Bourdieu’s prominent theory of *habitus*, for it offers a theoretical basis that incorporates the internal and external construction of acquired and developing dispositions.

The *habitus* of the new is the *habitus* of information, which contains cultural and linguistic hybridity (Robinson, 2009). According to Papacharissi and Easton (2013), “the *habitus* of the new, as convergence, situates the user as social actor by inviting and producing certain practices that dominate online behaviour” (p. 177). A *habitus* is formed through a set of embodied dispositions, and in the context of convergent architectures, these dispositions take the form of a networked public. The authors identified three dominant practices to be characteristic of the *habitus* of the new: authorship (afforded through platforms of expression and connection, which in turn involve the production of performances and social awareness), listening (how networked publics are socialized to communicate attention), and redaction (simultaneous or subsequent editing of the mentioned performances). Papacharissi and Easton (2013) use the term “redactional acumen” and argue that individuals with redactional acumen may be able to manage the structural affordances of convergent environments fluently. Production and redaction rest on digital literacy and fluency, which are essential for agency in the *habitus* of the new. Digital fluency, in turn, supports online performative fluency across all fields of interaction and permits individuals to cultivate redactional acumen.

Informed by these core concepts, the subsequent analysis traces how various scholarly communities delineate the ML discourses.

Interdisciplinary ML Discourses

Owing to the actors’ divergent perspectives, different aspects of ML have come to be discussed from one discourse to another.

In the media-technology discourse, ML is closely linked to technical capacities, the innovation cycle of which is increasingly shortening due to exponential effects. Along with technological autonomy, informational self-determination and trust towards technical systems have come to acquire more weight and importance in modern society. Four medial substrata for structuring media technology basis—digitalization, networking, sensorization, and algorithmization—are only in the initial stage of the process, and therefore imply continuation, in particular, embracing the contexts of operations, interactions, and socio-cultural usage (Debray, 1999).

In terms of the media-political discourse of ML, economic, educational, and socio-political dispositions have come to be discussed and envisaged as the target objectives of the educational system. In the ongoing digital transformation, the requirements for citizens’ competence in educational political discourse are defined by

autonomous, responsible, and participatory approaches that are grounded in the reflections of media, information technologies, data, and information flows in general.

In the socio-political discourse, ML indicates central democratic values such as liberty, self-determination, and equal opportunities operating in a mediatized, fragmented society, wherein living revolves around a technology-based era of monitoring. From this perspective, in a digital society, ML is considered a prerequisite for political participation. Consequently, it is viewed as a dimension of democratic competence (Gapski et al., 2017). Modern citizens' ML requirements are based on socio-political participation, consumer readiness, and commitment to personal growth.

In the economic discourse, the ability to competently handle new media is a vital employment skill. Modern workplaces demand that employees navigate informational asymmetry in an era often characterized as a "surveillance economy" (Lanier, 2013), where data transfers and opaque processing practices have significant consequences for individual agency.

In the legal discourse, an important factor is that against the background of increased individual media use, legal regulations or media statutes differ across domestic legislation; consequently, globally operating platforms fail to offer unified, effective, and operational decisions regarding problems. This, in turn, raises the issues of the responsibility of network users for their own digital sovereignty, which presupposes all-inclusive ML-affinities. Social forums are innovative forms of publicity in which discourse values and rules are actively discussed. The maintenance of a deliberate quality remains a challenge, implying the need for argumentative communicative action based on mutual respect. In this context, complex topics come into play: hate-speech, manipulation, "fake-news" flows, as well as regulatory mechanisms that should not infringe the freedom of speech and expression. This multifaceted controversy encompasses the elements of personal responsibility/irresponsibility and covers the issues of social network influence and hegemony. From this perspective, the transparency and proactive attitude of networks themselves are eminently significant, given that, through algorithms, social network companies hold tremendous information regarding individuals, thereby possessing leverage to influence the network user mood, general internet taste, and/or development of specific/targeted political tastes.

In response to these converging concerns, UNESCO has merged MC and digital competence into media and information literacy (MIL)—a holistic reform strategy for democracy that fosters critical, active citizens (Carlsson, 2019).

According to the holistic vision of MIL, the interaction and synergies of different actors and their activities contribute to the development of involved, critical, and active citizens oriented towards self-reflection, which in turn enhances media diversity and inclusiveness, and establishes communication, including a new culture of IC, thereby contributing to civil society empowerment and democracy building.

Expanding the Horizon: From Information Literacy (IL) to MIL Expansion (MIL^X)

In 2002, digital data surpassed analog on a global scale, heralding the digital era (Hilbert & López, 2011), while big data and AI have begun to shape political communication, and digital ecosystems challenge individual sovereignty (Ochs, 2015). Furthermore, the advent of multimedia web content and interactive applications with Web 2.0 has introduced multimodal communication, reshaping the social and cultural dimensions of multicultural societies, with search engines serving as key gateways to knowledge.

Recent theoretical contributions, such as those by Grizzle and Hamada (2019), propose an innovative theory of social change: MIL Expansion, MIL^X, and Media-Information-Communication (MIC) Next Standard. These authors consider MIL to be currently concentrated on the development of individual competencies, while the purpose of MIL^X is to broaden MIL and integrate it into other social competences through interventions at the societal, group, and/or institutional levels, the objective of which is to develop new approaches, policy frameworks, and theories on media, information, and communication for future generations.

MIL^X is based on Augmented MIL (Frau-Meigs, 2015), which like many other concepts, e.g., "Metaliteracy" (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011), "Transliteracy" (Thomas, 2013) and "Educommunication" (Gozálvez & Contreras-Pulido, 2014), concentrate on MIL content and different types of media, occasionally covering pedagogic implications. These emerging frameworks similarly seek to extend MIL beyond individual skills.

MIL^X is a kind of bridge between MIL and social life—socio-emotional competences (Kress et al., 2004), intercultural and interfaith competences, freedoms of expression and information, global citizenship, education, academic research, and other social competences.

Informed by these conceptual distinctions, the ensuing analysis critically explores their articulation within the context of media education practice.

Media Education Challenges

Integrated Practice in ML Education

Media literacy education (MLE) builds essential skills for learners at every stage of life through integrated, interactive, and sustained practice (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

Establishing and nurturing ML skills is a continuous educational process—beginning in early childhood and extending through formal and informal education settings. Understanding how children and youth navigate the convergent media landscape and acquire critical skills to interpret digital information is fundamental to designing effective MLE programs.

Conceptual Tensions in MLE

Gapski (2017, pp. 111-112) outlines seven conceptual theses that capture the MLE's inherent tensions:

1. Tool use versus environmental behaviour: Living in networked digital worlds involves more than simply using media as a technical tool. It requires a shift from temporary, goal-specific usage to continuous media-ecological thinking and purposeful engagement.
2. Inexperience versus concernedness: While global surveillance and information asymmetries in a “data-capitalistic” world remain abstract for many individuals, their tangible impacts are often revealed through concrete cases. Dystopian narratives may obscure the present's political relevance and urgency for meaningful action.
3. Assumption of omnipotence versus accomplishment: The perception that internet corporations and news services hold unlimited power fosters fatalism. Phrases like “any communicator has nothing to hide” have morphed into a resigned acceptance that individual privacy is unattainable.
4. Self-defence versus comfort zone: To protect personal space, alternative search engines, anonymization, and encryption are recommended. The use of these techniques presupposes trust in services, and with consistent digital self-defence, leads to communicative isolation and exit from the comfortable digital ecosystems of internet corporations.
5. Data frugality versus data overload: Recommendations aimed at minimizing data generation appear outdated in an era where data is generated automatically and abundantly. Overzealous efforts to limit data may result in disengagement from social participation.
6. Abstraction dynamics versus non-reflectivity: The complexity and opacity of algorithms and machine learning systems challenge deep understanding. The “black box” nature of these systems, which integrate environmental data and metadata, renders it difficult to manage or fully reflect upon the significance of every digital datum.
7. Suspicion of manipulation versus trust in algorithms: Traditional media criticism has focused on exposing manipulation. Yet, data-driven and self-optimizing algorithms can engender a paradoxical mix of skepticism and trust. This dual stance complicates efforts to counteract algorithmic biases and polarization.

MIL Development Trajectories and Pedagogy

Developing MIL involves more than acquiring technical skills; it requires individuals to master study skills that promote lifelong learning, self-expression, and self-orientation within a diverse media landscape. MIL is a dynamic competence that continuously evolves alongside technological innovations.

Successful media skills projects are rooted in the lived experiences and everyday realities of participants. They must be designed in a participatory manner, allowing learners to actively shape their educational experiences. This topic-centered approach (Schorb & Keilhauer, 2010) emphasizes addressing individual and social issues while progressing from basic knowledge of media functions to a critical reflection on media intent and ultimately to active participation and co-creation.

Hartung-Griemberg (2017, pp. 166-174) argues that MIL projects, especially in adult education, must extend beyond mere technical proficiency. Instead, they should foster “thinking in alternatives” (*Denken in Alternativen*)—a process that expands self-perception and broadens one's understanding of the world. This critical, reflective approach is essential for adapting to complex global challenges.

Development of a coherent and holistic MIL curriculum, according to Frau-Meigs (2019), requires a set of prerequisites, including a common vision of MIL at global and regional levels, considerable resources, consensus over different competencies, and roles of MIL educators, but most importantly, recognition of MIL among the competencies of the 21st century. Frau-Meigs considers such epistemic maturity and reflective distancing from learning processes (less grounded in knowledge substance and more oriented towards validation schemes or

content-based recommendations) to be attainable if MIL becomes a competence established within the digital citizenship framework.

Interconnections: MLE, Intercultural Literacy, IC, and Sustainable Development

The paramount importance of IC education in the 21st century has already been pointed out (Banks & McGee Banks, 2019).

Intercultural education has traditionally been operationalized in terms of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Various theoretical models/propositions/frameworks of IC, ICC, and intercultural literacy have been discussed for more than five decades, whereby “in communication literature, IC and ICC are used interchangeably” (Arasaratnam, 2016, p. 4): Bennett’s (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Byram’s (1997) Model of ICC, Heyward’s (2002) Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Literacy, Dearsorff’s (2006) Pyramid Model of IC, Fantini’s (2009) Model, and IC Framework by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) (to mention just the most prominent).

Although these models differ in focus—some emphasizing sensitivity, others performance or reflection—they converge on the need for both attitudinal openness and communicative strategy.

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) define IC as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7).

Álvarez Valencia and Michelson (2022) assert that a social semiotic approach to communication aligns with the contemporary, dynamic notions of IC. Drawing on Kress’s multimodal social semiotic approach, they argue for interculturality as a meaning-design process brought about through multimodal semiotic resources. An interculturally sound individual is versed in reading micro- and macro-level signs, has “a certain degree of discourse community-specific knowledge, and a general intercultural stance of openness to listening exquisitely in the communication moment for clues into how and why a speaker or text author, express themselves in a particular way” (p. 407). Thereby, the nuanced view of “design” implies inherent dynamism, as agentive sign-makers steadily select within the process of message generation. Individual selection of appropriate representational resources for meaning-making is culturally shaped through socialization, history, experiences, orientations, and the current context. The spectrum of available resources is “never simply of one culture but of the many cultures in their lived experience; the many layers of their identity and the many dimensions of their being” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 204, as cited in Álvarez Valencia and Michelson, 2022, p. 409).

Globalization, along with web domination, does not imply homogenization; thus, the focal mandates of intercultural pedagogy/education should promote intercultural dialogue, understanding and inclusiveness, and deconstruction and prevention of stereotypical attitudes.

At the pedagogical level, MLE and IC education share a central goal—raising awareness of, and developing expertise in, global challenges—which resonates with the parallel structure of Byram’s (1997) five *savoirs* and Potter’s (2004) ML knowledge domains. Recognizing these as meta-content educational issues is crucial in a multicultural, mediated society. As Belousa and Stakle (2010) assert, integrating knowledge with the development of skills, attitudes, and values leads to purposeful learning. Moreover, aligning MLE with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners to address interconnected global challenges (UNESCO, 2023).

Contemporary research, building on these intercultural frameworks, has begun to explore how MLE can operationalize IC across pedagogical and digital contexts, with recent scholarship highlighting the crucial role of ML in fostering effective IC. For example:

Digital activism and inquiry-based learning: Dooly and Darvin (2022) advocate for critical digital literacy that exposes how power and ideology shape online behaviour, suggesting that inquiry-based learning can foster more inclusive and equitable digital environments.

Combating disinformation: Melo-Pfeifer and Dedecek Gertz (2022) propose integrating intercultural competence with news literacy to create a “critical intercultural news literacy” framework, which employs disinformation as a pedagogical tool to counter hate speech and promote diversity.

Innovative pedagogical practices: Practices such as digital storytelling and co-creative methodologies, as noted by Cruz and Miranda (2022), highlight the role of media technology in shaping social memory and networking, making MLE an essential aspect of cultural dialogue.

Higher education trends: Farias-Gaytan, Aguaded, and Ramirez-Montoya (2023) identify gaps in training programs aimed at digital competencies, pointing to the need for a stronger focus on ML within higher education.

Philosophical lenses: Udoudom, George, Igiri, and Aruku (2023) analyze ML through epistemological, ontological, and phenomenological lenses to assess its role in shaping perceptions of truth in a post-truth society.

Acculturation through digital literacy: Cai and Lai (2024) find that critical digital literacy moderates psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

Bridging the digital divide: Khan (2025) underscores the transformative potential of comprehensive media education in the Global South.

Concluding Reflections

The distinctions revealed between ML and MC reflect a broader shift toward recognizing the multidimensionality of media engagement in the digital age. While ML emphasizes critical thinking and awareness of media messages, biases, and influences, MC embodies a holistic integration of knowledge, critical analysis, and practical application. **Table 5** distinguishes key conceptual nuances between ML and MC, clarifying their respective emphases.

Table 5. Core Distinctions between ML and MC

Term	Defining Aspect	Focus
ML	Ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media	Critical thinking and awareness of media content
MC	Holistic concept combining both—communicative rationality (Habermas) with embodied dispositions (Bourdieu)—integrating knowledge, critical analysis and practical application	Integration of understanding and application

The interdisciplinary discourse—spanning technological, political, socio-cultural, economic, and legal perspectives, extending information literacy (IL) into MIL^x, and exploring pedagogical and intercultural intersections—provides a robust framework for rethinking ML today. As digital environments grow increasingly complex, integrating these competences becomes essential for cultivating informed, empowered, and critically engaged global citizens. These conceptual foundations illuminate how evolving understandings of ML and MC intersect with the intercultural challenges of a digitally transformed society, laying a critical groundwork for addressing the research questions regarding the pivotal dimensions, extensions, and complexities of ML transfer.

DISCUSSION

Building on the preceding empirical findings, this section advances a coherent narrative that articulates a structured framework linking ML and IC, highlights the fragmentation of existing media-education paradigms, integrates Stegmaier’s philosophy of orientation to deepen intercultural engagement, and reinterprets the Three-Layer Model through this philosophical lens. The thematic structure and interpretive connections developed here result from an interdisciplinary synthesis of the literature, guided by the research questions (RQ1–RQ3).

Interconnected Dimensions of ML and IC in the Digital Era: A Structured Framework

The rapid evolution of digital media reshapes the ways in which information is produced, shared, and interpreted. In this context, ML underpins effective IC by fostering global connectivity and critical engagement. At the same time, ethical challenges in digital participation demand responsible and inclusive approaches. In the following, a conceptual framework is presented—first, as a four-dimensional model outlining the direct interactions between ML and IC, and then as an integrated Three-Layer-Model that demonstrates how foundational, interpretive, and ethical competencies interconnect.

Four-dimensional framework for ML-IC interaction

Table 6 summarizes four key dimensions at the intersection of ML and IC—Access and Participation, Representation and Identity, Interpretation and Meaning-making, and Ethical and Responsible Engagement—along with their implications for the digital era.

Table 6. Interaction of ML and IC in the Digital Era

Interconnected Dimensions	ML-aspect	IC-aspect	Interaction of ML and IC	Implications for the digital era
Access and Participation	Access navigate critically evaluate	Engagement with diverse cultural perspectives	Digital inclusion allows for intercultural engagement. NB. Digital divide can limit exposure to varied viewpoints	Shifting landscape of media engagement: a) ubiquity and democratization of information b) algorithmic influence: Awareness in shaping cultural perspectives
Representation and Identity	Awareness of how media constructs cultural narratives, stereotypes, and biases	Understanding how individuals/communities represent themselves and are represented across cultures	Critically access cultural representations, challenge stereotypes, promote intercultural dialogue	Digital citizenship: Responsibility of individuals in ethically engagement in intercultural online arenas
Interpretation and Meaning-making	Deconstruct messages, and recognize implicit cultural codes in media	Appreciation of how cultural backgrounds shape the interpretation of messages	Nuanced, respectful cross-cultural exchange	Polarization vs. pluralism: The potential for cultural division as well as cross-and intercultural understanding in digital environment(s)
Ethical and Responsible Engagement	Discern misinformation, fake news, propaganda, and ethical concerns in digital communication	Cultural sensitivity, ethical storytelling, respectful engagement in digital spaces	Fostering intercultural respect, reducing misinformation, promoting constructive global dialogue for a better world	Accountability and transparency including both digital and user responsibility. Privacy, data security and consent.

These four dimensions directly identify the main ML dimensions pivotal to intercultural digital transformation, thereby resolving RQ1.

Integrated Three-Layer Model: ML and IC Synergy

Building on the four dimensions, **Table 7** advances the discussion by presenting a Three-Layer Model that captures the dynamic interplay among foundational capabilities, interpretive competencies, and ethical, collaborative practices.

Table 7. Integrated Three-Layer-Model

Layer	Key Competencies and Components	Core Role	Interconnection
Layer 1: Foundational Capabilities	Digital and technological skills	Equip individuals to navigate digital tools and platforms.	Supports access and participation by enabling engagement with digital environments.
	Adaptability and digital resilience	Foster the capacity to adapt to emerging technologies.	Reinforces access and participation and ethical engagement through continuous learning.
	Access and Participation	Ensure equitable opportunities to engage in digital and intercultural environments.	Acts as an enabling condition across all layers, especially for inclusion and participation.
Layer 2: Interpretive and Analytical Competencies	ML skills (critical thinking, media analysis, interpretation of content)	Enable individuals to assess credibility, bias, and media context.	Supports interpretation and meaning-making through deeper media analysis.
	IC skills	Promote respectful dialogue and understanding across cultures.	Enhances representation and identity by enabling cultural sensitivity.
	Interpretation and Meaning-making	Encourage individuals to relate media content to personal and cultural experiences.	Works synergistically with critical thinking and IC.

Layer	Key Competencies and Components	Core Role	Interconnection
Layer 3: Ethical, Collaborative and Participatory Practices	Representation and Identity	Encourage analysis of how identities and cultures are portrayed in media.	Informs ethical engagement by challenging biases and promoting diversity.
	Ethical and responsible media use	Promote principled behaviour in content creation, sharing, and consumption.	Sets norms that guide ethical engagement across platforms.
	Participatory and collaborative skills	Empower individuals to contribute meaningfully to digital communities.	Strengthens access and participation and collective responsibility.
	Ethical and Responsible Engagement	Ensure digital interactions are respectful, transparent, and culturally aware.	Serves as the ethical anchor for all layers and competencies.

Interconnections within the Model

From foundational to interpretive competencies: Robust digital and technological skills facilitate deeper critical analysis. Without a solid foundation, individuals cannot effectively engage in nuanced interpretation or cross-cultural understanding.

From interpretive to ethical engagement: The capacity to critically evaluate media content informs ethical decision-making. As learners become adept in interpretation, they are better positioned to engage responsibly and challenge biases.

Ethical practices as guiding principles: Ethical and participatory practices are interwoven throughout all layers. These practices not only guide access and interpretation but also foster a culture of collaboration and accountability in digital and intercultural spheres.

By elucidating the interdependencies among foundational, interpretive, and ethical practices, the integrated Three-Layer Model extends the traditional ML-concept and thus addresses RQ2.

Orientation as a Meta-transversal Dimension for Supporting ML Transfer

Stegmaier's philosophy of orientation (2004, 2008) conceptualizes orientation as the flexible capacity to navigate unfamiliar situations by identifying viable options for action and achieving situational coherence. This process involves drawing on both consciously and unconsciously acquired information—from media, social values, and individual motivations—as sources of guidance (Schorb et al., 2017). Crucially, Stegmaier highlights the value of “foreign reason” (*die fremde Vernunft*), arguing that engagement with unfamiliar perspectives fosters reflection, reorientation, and the emergence of new possibilities for thought and action.

In a mediatized society, orientation involves not only the critical assessment of media but also the capacity to integrate diverse informational inputs into coherent perspectives. This process is vital for forming a basis for self-determined, critical action.

Visualization/comprehension of the social environment, understanding the requirements for self-development, and assessment of historical events are largely grounded in media reflection.

In an utterly complex, mediatized world, orientation implies the knowledge of this world, which in turn encompasses knowledge as the foundational basis for relations with media as technologies. The formation of structural knowledge in parallel with such functional knowledge is paramount, since such knowledge constitutes the basis upon which the subject can rely to give meaning to divergent, mutually exclusive information, thereby comprehending the prerequisites and requirements for individual thought, consideration, or action in this complex media world, that is, correctly identifying the various forms and actors of media manifestation, as well as the primarily political and economic interests linked with them.

The ability to assess media provides subjects with opportunities not only to sum up, gather, and categorize information received from media according to formal criteria, but also to select information based on assessment criteria—critically assess, reassess, re-categorize [information], and what is more important—stimulate thinking in a new context. This reflection of the media creates a basis for criticism. In societies where there is a significant danger of instrumentalizing media, media criticism is an essential resource for self-determined and competent action and the formation of the orientation of one's personal world (Niesyto, 2017).

“Situation” is the correlate of “orientation.” Each individual situation requires orientation while simultaneously encompassing it [orientation]. Orientation precedes all cognition and action. With the help of

their internalized (adopted/digested) perceptions, individuals construct an iconic and conceptually-phenomenal picture of themselves and the world in their natural and social environment, which then defines their thinking, judgment, and action (Stegmaier, 2008).

Bridging Media Education Discourse and Orientation

Challenges of Segmentation in Media Education

The rapid evolution of cultural, intercultural, media and societal norms has challenged traditional age-based segmentation in media education. In the context of these ongoing cultural and societal transformations, defining “adult” remains crucial. The term is based on a differentiating marker between individuals still in the process of maturing and those who have reached a stage characterized by a conscious understanding of life’s distinct phases (Marotzki, Nohl, & Ortlepp, 2006). However, due to the drastic changes and erosion in the public and social order, the aforementioned differentiation is fundamentally demolished.

Traditionally, in the structured modern world, age boundaries are strictly defined. Cultural models encompass concrete perceptions of manifestation, behaviour, and predefined social roles applicable to a given age. Cultural models are created, adult age inclusive, and trustworthy orientation frameworks are used for the processes of subjectification. With changes in age conferment, adult/adulthood roles have also changed. It has become impossible to define them using the stereotypical palette of traditional cultural models. Adults are increasingly seen not as fully “grown up”, but as continuously evolving in their development. Consequently, the landmarks of a person in the process of development are readily accessible. If a person’s identity is not considered to have been formed or developed at any moment in time, the problem of “dissolution/blurring of age boundaries” naturally stands out. In the same context, one needs to consider the problems related to overcoming the challenges in life and searching for a life orientation (Marotzki et al., 2006). Thus, it is appropriate to problematize the challenges of segmentation in media education, since traditional segmentation across all age groups can no longer satisfy the requests for a permanent search for life’s orientation points. The dissolution of age boundaries complicates the ML transfer, since learners at different life stages require fluid orientation points rather than rigid curricular demarcations. This fragmentation reveals a key challenge in RQ3.

Intergenerational Transfer and the Digital Divide

Due to their distinct media socialization practices, older generations face significant challenges in transformed media landscape and culture because through modern IT “a new intellectual, semiotic, communicative and cultural climate” emerged (Jacquinot-Delaunay et al., 2008, pp. 22-23). Furthermore, as Hofer et al. (2019) note, digital inequality now centres less on Internet access and more on how it is used and its effects. This global issue of the societal gap and disconnection must be solved by bridging the digital and/or knowledge divide.

Hartung-Griemberg (2017) builds on Stojanov’s (2006) perspective of intercultural pedagogy, which, grounded in theoretical concepts and institutionalized practices, engenders disregard by fixating on “between two cultures” paradigm (p. 198). Hartung-Griemberg extends this critique to inter-generational media projects, where “inter-” often highlights disparities in media-related knowledge and experiences. The transfer of knowledge, techniques, and skills, while intended to bridge these differences, often lacks a shared focus, resulting in a unilateral, asymmetric learning process that fails to resonate with participants’ lived experiences.

Unilateral, asymmetric learning in intergenerational media projects often neglects participants’ lived experiences, undermining effective ML sharing—another critical barrier identified by RQ3.

As cultural identities and societal roles become increasingly fluid, media education must transcend these conventional categorizations, and address learner’s evolving affordances. In this context, contemporary MLE strategies must embrace the lifelong need for orientation and ML as a core pedagogical goal, ensuring that all adults have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a continuously transforming media landscape. This necessitates anchoring of “orientation” as a transversal meta-dimension—a reflective compass guiding individuals through pervasive and habitual media engagement.

In-depth Reception of the Intercultural Context

IT has come to change not only the notions of distance and time, but also approximate cultures, life philosophies, traditions, and values. Rapid information exchange enables constant mutual influence, creating new structures within established cultural contexts. This compact perspective signifies the existential need for mutual receptiveness and understanding. Web domination has evolved consecutive internet tastes, giving new individual strokes to ethno-cultures, resulting in them developing into modern cultural codes.

The modern sociology of cultural studies defines processes at different analytical levels within the prism of interdisciplinary studies. The locus of culture lies within the consciousness of its bearers. Language, as a mode of

thinking, is the major element of culture that reflects the perceptions of the world, mirroring the image conceived by its bearers (Tsintsadze, 2017).

An important aspect of the in-depth reception of the intercultural context should broaden the multifaceted understanding of IC itself: IC should not be restricted only to global communication between representatives of different social, racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or linguistic groups. From a philosophical perspective, any type of interpersonal communication should be considered IC, since each individual has his/her unique perception of the world, idiolect, experience, thesaurus, and hence his/her multi-layered culture.

In Heringer's (2014) terms, culture is the combination of potential, performance, and manifestation, and it encompasses different subsystems and subcomponents; for example, potential implies knowledge, language, and values, performance signifies realization and activation, and manifestation embraces artifacts, philosophy, technologies, etc.

According to Chen and Starosta (2005), competent intercultural listeners change the complexity of narratives and broaden their repertoire of world opportunities, where curiosity, openness, and empathy are foundational elements. In harmonious discourse, the bearers of different cultures are able to retain their voices, which implies a combination of individual thoughts and general discourse (the so-called meta-narrative), as well as consistency and a logical chain.

As already mentioned, the different cultural backgrounds and heritages are not limited to just the ethnic ones, for culture is regarded as a broad, dynamic notion and cultural identities are not exclusively grounded in ethnic affiliation and social homogenization. Furthermore, it is premised that cultural identities are multi-layered, including interests, values, social roles, life experiences, dispositions, and orientation. An individual's cultural identity is shaped and reshaped by different characteristics such as nationality or ethnic belonging, language, religion, system of values, gender, age and generation, norms, attitudes, social roles and class, interactions, and last but not least, the various discourses in the media environment. With the premise of fluid cultural realities, everyone is multicultural, and any type of interpersonal communication is regarded as IC.

This complexity underscores the final challenge of RQ3: designing ML programs that are sufficiently flexible and context-sensitive to support deep intercultural engagement.

In response to RQ3, the Three-Layer Model is reconceived through orientation—a transversal, meta-dimension that permeates all three layers, shaping media interpretation, intercultural engagement, and ethical agency as both a reflective process and an embodied stance.

Reframing the Three-Layer Model in the Light of Core Premise of Orientation Philosophy

The integration of extended ML-concept with Stegmaier's orientation philosophy enriches understanding of ML and IC in several complementary ways:

1. Foundations in active agency: ML emphasizes development of skills to critically analyze, evaluate and create media content, empowering individuals to navigate complex media environments. Stegmaier's orientation philosophy emphasizes that a well-developed sense of personal and social orientation is essential for purposeful action. This foundational orientation directs individuals to pursue platforms and tools that amplify diverse voices and ethical practices.

2. Navigating digital complexity: While ML provides cognitive tools to interpret a vast array of media messages, orientation philosophy offers a framework for sustaining a stable direction amid digital complexity. Both perspectives stress informed, reflective decision-making: ML focuses on how media messages are evaluated, whereas orientation philosophy centres on why and toward what values such evaluations are made.

3. Educational implications: Incorporating orientation into MLE expands curricula beyond technical proficiency to engage broader existential and ethical questions. Linking ML's analytical capacities with orientation's value-based insights enables learners to reflect on their cultural positioning and personal identity. Moreover, by embedding orientation into MLE, educators can address the fragmentation and asymmetry of knowledge transfer, fostering reflective reorientation and alignment with individual values. This orientation-driven strategy directly mitigates the challenges posed in RQ3 by providing stable guidance across diverse learner profiles. Ultimately, this holistic approach cultivates not only critical thinking but also a grounded sense of purpose, thereby enriching both ML and IC.

4. Empowerment in a dynamic environment: Both ML and orientation philosophy are fundamentally empowering. While ML equips individuals with the skills needed to interpret and utilize media effectively, orientation philosophy embeds these skills within a context of ethical, cultural, and social responsibility. Together, they foster individuals' abilities to engage meaningfully with digital change and societal transformation.

The interplay of these dimensions ensures that technical expertise, critical analysis, and ethical engagement are not only acquired but are continuously aligned with an individual's cultural and ethical identity. The expanded framework thus underscores that, in the rapidly evolving digital ecosystem, being oriented involves actively shaping a responsible, inclusive, and reflective digital society.

Revised Three-Layer Model with Orientation as the Guiding Meta-dimension

Layer 1: Foundational Capabilities informed by orientation:

Digital and technological skills equip individuals to access and navigate digital spaces, while technical skills are meaningful only when guided by a clear sense of direction and purpose. For instance, a culturally informed orientation encourages seeking platforms and tools that support diverse voices and ethical practices.

Adaptability and digital resilience enable continuous adaptation to technological change. A well-formed orientation empowers individuals to view digital disruptions as opportunities for growth, anchoring their responses in core values rather than reactive behaviour.

Meta-cognitive Orientation: Beyond mere technical competence, orientation acts as an affective and meta-cognitive base that informs why—and how—individuals develop digital literacy. It motivates users to seek equitable digital inclusion and to approach media environments with a value-oriented mindset.

Layer 2: Interpretive and analytical competencies shaped by orientation:

ML skills: Critical thinking and media analysis empower users to deconstruct media messages and assess biases. Orientation philosophy enriches this process by advocating active questioning of dominant narratives and aligning interpretive efforts with cultural values.

IC Skills: Effective IC demands an awareness of one's own cultural bearings and openness toward others. A strong orientation enhances these skills, fostering respectful dialogue and a shared meaning space that bridges cultural divides.

Interpretation, representation and identity: The ability to derive personal and collective meaning from media is contingent on recognizing how identities are constructed. Orientation supplies a reference point for evaluating representations, prompting individuals to challenge stereotypes and advocate for authentic portrayals that resonate with their cultural and ethical ideals.

Layer 3: Ethical, collaborative, and participatory practices guided by Orientation:

Ethical and responsible media use: Establishing norms for media creation, consumption, and sharing is rooted in a deep awareness of self and communal well-being. Orientation ensures that ethical behaviour is not an afterthought but a core principle woven into every digital interaction.

Participatory and collaborative skills empower active engagement and collective dialogue in digital spaces. By aligning participatory actions with one's cultural and ethical orientation, individuals contribute to a digital ecosystem that values transparency, inclusivity, and respect for diversity.

Holistic ethical engagement: The highest layer of the model integrates ethical deliberation into everyday digital practices. Orientation serves as the ethical anchor that informs not only personal actions but also collective efforts to build accountable, culturally sensitive, and ethically sound digital communities.

Transversal Role of Orientation across all Layers

Orientation, as conceptualized by Stegmaier (2008), operates as an overlay across all layers of the framework. It:

1. Informs skill acquisition: Guides the development of both technical skills and critical interpretative competencies by anchoring them in cultural and ethical self-awareness.
2. Shapes analytical processes: Ensures that media analysis and intercultural dialogue are not neutral but are instead driven by a conscious effort to align with one's values and cultural heritage.
3. Enhances collaborative efforts: Strengthens community engagement by fostering a shared commitment to ethical practices and mutual respect in diverse digital settings.

By explicitly mapping each discussion element to RQ1–RQ3, the structured framework demonstrates how it (1) identifies pivotal dimensions of ML (RQ1), (2) extends the ML-concept through intercultural digital dynamics (RQ2), and (3) addresses core challenges related to the ML transfer and sharing (RQ3). In the reframed Three-Layer Model, ML articulates the “how” of media engagement, while Stegmaier's orientation lens explicates the “why” and “where,” forging a deeper, more reflective foundation for action. This integration substantially ramifies the extended ML-concept (RQ2) and facilitates its practical deployment (RQ3), thereby fulfilling orientation's

dual function. Integrating Stegmaier's philosophy of orientation thus proves essential for overcoming segmentation and transfer barriers, ensuring that media education remains responsive to lifelong and intercultural learning needs.

CONCLUSION

As discussed in this article, the ongoing digital transformation requires individuals' introspection, self-assessment of their own responsibility, critical reflection, openness, receptivity towards novelty, and readiness for continuous development and growth. In a global multicultural society, ML-IC is a significant factor in transforming the new challenges into new opportunities. Stimulation of thinking in alternatives (Hartung-Griemberg, 2017) should be an expansion of perspectives on the self and world through the encounter of different orientations (Stegmeier, 2008), which could serve as an impetus to rethink/reframe or even expand ML through the prism of IC. This is because, within the huge cultural domain of the world-wide-web, the intercultural encounters between international representatives also at the intra-national and intra-group level have already become communicative habitualness. Therefore, there is a synergistic promotion of interculturality, along with ML, via the development of intercultural competences for intercultural encounters in the digital world of paramount importance. Intercultural awareness-raising should focus on the receptivity of differences in orientations, the latter implying the respect for differences as a value, together with an interest towards cultural differences. The multi-layered construct of ML, MC, and IC as interdependent and interrelated competencies should be regarded as a combination of social, cognitive, and communicative skills with regard to acting in culturally overlaying situations, paired with general and culture-specific knowledge and the ability to reflect on oneself, the partner culture(s) involved, and their contextual reference, whether in the real world or on the web. The impartment of ML-IC should critically engage with all the relevant phenomena of our multiple multimodal realities, and the manner in which they are reflected in and constituted by different discourses assure a sophisticated entrée into an understanding of one's own orientations and world perceptions. To do so, ML-IC impartation should be target-group-tailored and topic-centered (Schorb & Keilhauer, 2010) at all educational levels, including formal and informal education. Exploring new life modes, fostering a critical stance toward different ML-related discourses, deconstructing stereotypical mindsets, improving meta-awareness, and developing an inclusive open society are the intended goals of a multi-stakeholder approach at both the national and global levels.

To shed light on these inter-relationships, there is a need for further theoretical and empirical foundation that systematically looks at media-related learning and educational processes against the background of plural lifeforms, within the broad understanding of the intercultural context, and with due regard to the different milieus and life situations. Such systemic analyses of the transdisciplinary reflections of pedagogy link the knowledge–education–experience triple, a perspective requiring fundamental and comprehensive anchoring of ML-IC in the general education system.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in the Orientation-based Three-Layer Model, the following strategic priorities aim to strengthen responsible digital engagement and intercultural literacy across education, media practice, and policy.

Cultivate Hybrid Competencies

Design holistic curricula and lifelong-learning initiatives that integrate ethical reflection, cultural self-awareness, and critical media analysis alongside technical skills. Embed these “meta-content” dimensions—such as value-based decision-making and intercultural empathy—into both formal schooling and community programs.

Promote Transparent Media Practices

Advocate for media outlets and platforms to disclose algorithms, editorial standards, and data-handling protocols. Support independent fact-checking bodies and open-data initiatives that enhance accountability and build public trust.

Empower Intercultural Dialogue

Launch educational programs that interweave ML and IC by highlighting how cultural narratives are constructed and circulated online. Encourage learners to critically reflect on media messages—examining their historical, political, and social underpinnings—to navigate digital spaces responsibly and collaboratively.

Establish International Dialogue Platforms

Leverage digital tools to create transnational projects where diverse communities share narratives and solve problems together. These platforms should emphasize shared values, mutual respect, and creative co-creation across cultural boundaries.

Address Digital Inequalities

Close the digital divide by ensuring underserved populations have both access to technology and the educational support needed to use it effectively. Invest in infrastructure, community training, and inclusive policies so that all voices can participate in intercultural exchanges.

Advance Ethical Policy Frameworks

Encourage governments and international organizations to enact and enforce policies that protect digital rights, guard against technological abuse, and promote ethical IT use. Foster collaboration among public institutions, private sector actors, and civil society to build a digital ecosystem founded on intercultural understanding and shared responsibility.

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