

Media Literacy in the Age of AI: Evidence and Recommendations

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Outline

- 1. From media literacy to AI literacy**
- 2. Why media literacy matters**
- 3. Evidence about the UK population**
- 4. Provision and policy in the UK**
- 5. Recommendations**



From media literacy to AI literacy



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What is *literacy*?

- Traditionally, “literacy” refers to the ability to read and write
- More broadly – the **skills, knowledge and attitudes** that people need within different **contexts**
- E.g. *cultural* literacy, *financial* literacy, *health* literacy)



What is *media literacy*?

Media literacy

“The ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services”

(Ofcom, 2025)



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Media, digital, or ... ?

- **Media literacy** – both *traditional* media and *digital* technologies/media
- *Umbrella term* – e.g., information, news, digital, data, AI literacies
- **Digital literacy** – *type* of media literacy



My approach to digital literacy

Digital literacy is both
functional *and* **critical**

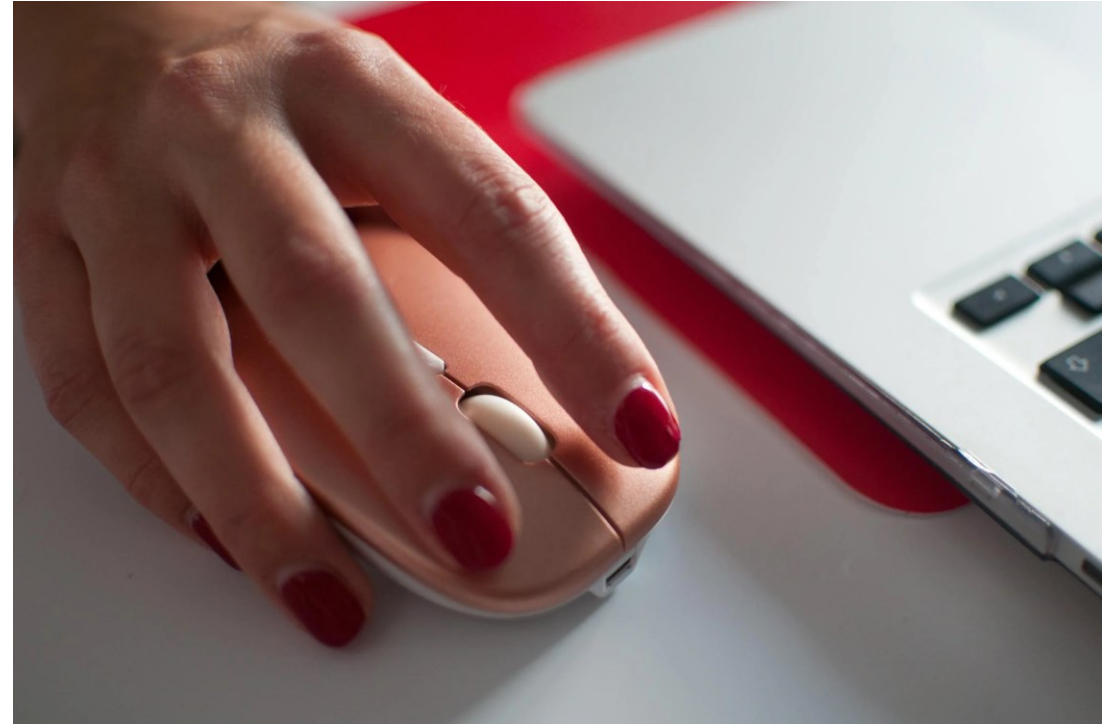
(Polizzi, 2020, 2023, 2025)



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What is *functional* digital literacy?

- **Practical** digital skills
- Knowledge of **digital affordances**
- Understanding of the benefits and downsides of digital technologies for the **individual user**



What is *critical* digital literacy?

- Online content **evaluation** skills
- Knowledge of the broader **digital environment**
- Understanding of the benefits and downsides of digital technologies and media for **society**



Functional and critical digital literacies intersect

E.g., critical content evaluation skills require (Polizzi, 2020, 2025):

1. Contextual knowledge
2. Trust in reputable outlets and use of multiple sources
3. **Functional** skills and knowledge (e.g., search skills, knowledge of search engines)
4. **Functional and critical** understanding (e.g., algorithms, business models, filter bubbles)



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Computers & Education 152 (2020) 103859

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers & Education

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu>

Digital literacy and the national curriculum for England: Learning from how the experts engage with and evaluate online content

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Media education
Media literacy
Digital literacy
Digital experts
National curriculum

ABSTRACT

Educationalists' and policymakers' curriculum work on digital literacy in England has overlooked the expertise of digital specialists such as information, IT and media professionals. Given the lack of evidence, this article draws on semi-structured interviews with experts in the United Kingdom, enhanced by a diary methodology and a conversational approach to the think aloud method, to explore how they engage with and evaluate online content. In doing so, it addresses what digital literacy entails and how to promote it across the national curriculum for England. It is argued that the ability to evaluate online content involves not only reflections on the nature and origin of information, contextual knowledge and the use of multiple sources, but also functional and critical digital skills and knowledge about the internet and the digital environment. Relatedly, it is argued that the Citizenship and Computing curricula should be revised to promote digital literacy as a cross-curricular subject.

1. Introduction

Defined as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce messages in a variety of forms, media literacy is advocated by academics and educationalists for contributing to well-informed citizens who engage with information critically and autonomously, participating in society and democracy (Aufderheide, 1993; Hobbs, 2010). In the UK, while information is highly mediated by digital technologies, only 2% of primary and secondary school children are able to identify false information online when taking a misinformation quiz. Three in five say misinformation makes them trust the news less, and half are worried about whether they can identify misinformation (National Literacy Trust, 2018). While half of 12- to 15-year-olds find it hard to tell whether content on social media is true, two in five have come across misinformation. Over four in ten think that social media provide trustworthy news. And three in ten aged 8–15 think that "if a website is listed by a search engine it can be trusted" (Ofcom, 2019, pp. 10–11).

Academics and practitioners think that media literacy needs to be embedded within the mainstream curriculum, since small-scale media literacy projects in school are not sufficient (Bazalgette, 2010). But countries like the UK and others in Europe lack a unified

However...

While criticality is crucial to media literacy, some approaches have privileged the **functional over the critical** – e.g.:

- Some digital inclusion research and interventions (digital access and basic skills)
- The current national curriculum for England (Computing, practical and coding skills)
- Focus on employment, the workforce, the economy



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LEARNING, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2025.2572624>

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Media literacy provision from the perspective of policymakers and civil society organisations in five areas of the UK: a case study approach

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ABSTRACT

Despite efforts to promote media literacy provision (i.e., the support provided to develop people's media literacy within and outside formal education) in the UK, this provision remains fragmented, under-supported, and under-evaluated. Employing a case study methodology, this article explores the state of media literacy policy and provision within five areas of the UK: Birmingham and the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland, and Wales. Based on semi-structured interviews with policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations, key findings suggest that government bodies within all five areas have established digital inclusion networks, with media literacy provision piggybacking on these networks. While best practice is often based on forms of collaboration (e.g., to access target populations, co-design/co-deliver initiatives), significant barriers remain, including funding and the lack of an overarching framework for coordinating media literacy provision across the UK. The implications of these findings for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2025
Accepted 28 September 2025

KEYWORDS

Media literacy; education; provision; policymakers; civil society organisations

Introduction

What about the critical?

- Privileged within media literacy research situated in media studies
- **Critical digital literacy** – essential for acting as informed citizens in the digital age
- Critical pedagogy research – criticality (essential to challenging power structures) as conducive to civic action
- How much do we politicise the critical?



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Article



Internet users' utopian/ dystopian imaginaries of society in the digital age: Theorizing critical digital literacy and civic engagement

new media & society
2023, Vol. 25(6) 1205–1226
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sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14614448211018609
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms
SAGE

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Abstract

This article proposes a theoretical framework for how critical digital literacy, conceptualized as incorporating Internet users' utopian/dystopian imaginaries of society in the digital age, facilitates civic engagement. To do so, after reviewing media literacy research, it draws on utopian studies and political theory to frame utopian thinking as relying dialectically on utopianism and dystopianism. Conceptualizing critical digital literacy as incorporating utopianism/dystopianism prescribes that constructing and deploying an understanding of the Internet's civic potentials *and* limitations is crucial to pursuing civic opportunities. The framework proposed, which has implications for media literacy research and practice, allows us to (1) disentangle users' imaginaries of civic life from their imaginaries of the Internet, (2) resist the collapse of critical digital literacy into civic engagement that is understood as inherently progressive, and (3) problematize polarizing conclusions about users' interpretations of the Internet as either crucial or detrimental to their online engagement.

Keywords

Civic engagement, critical digital literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, utopian/

How about *AI literacy*?

- Research and frameworks have **mushroomed since 2020-21**
- “The competencies that enable individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI” (Long and Magerko, 2020)
- Much of the work focuses on educational settings, some on the workplace, and less on the public at large

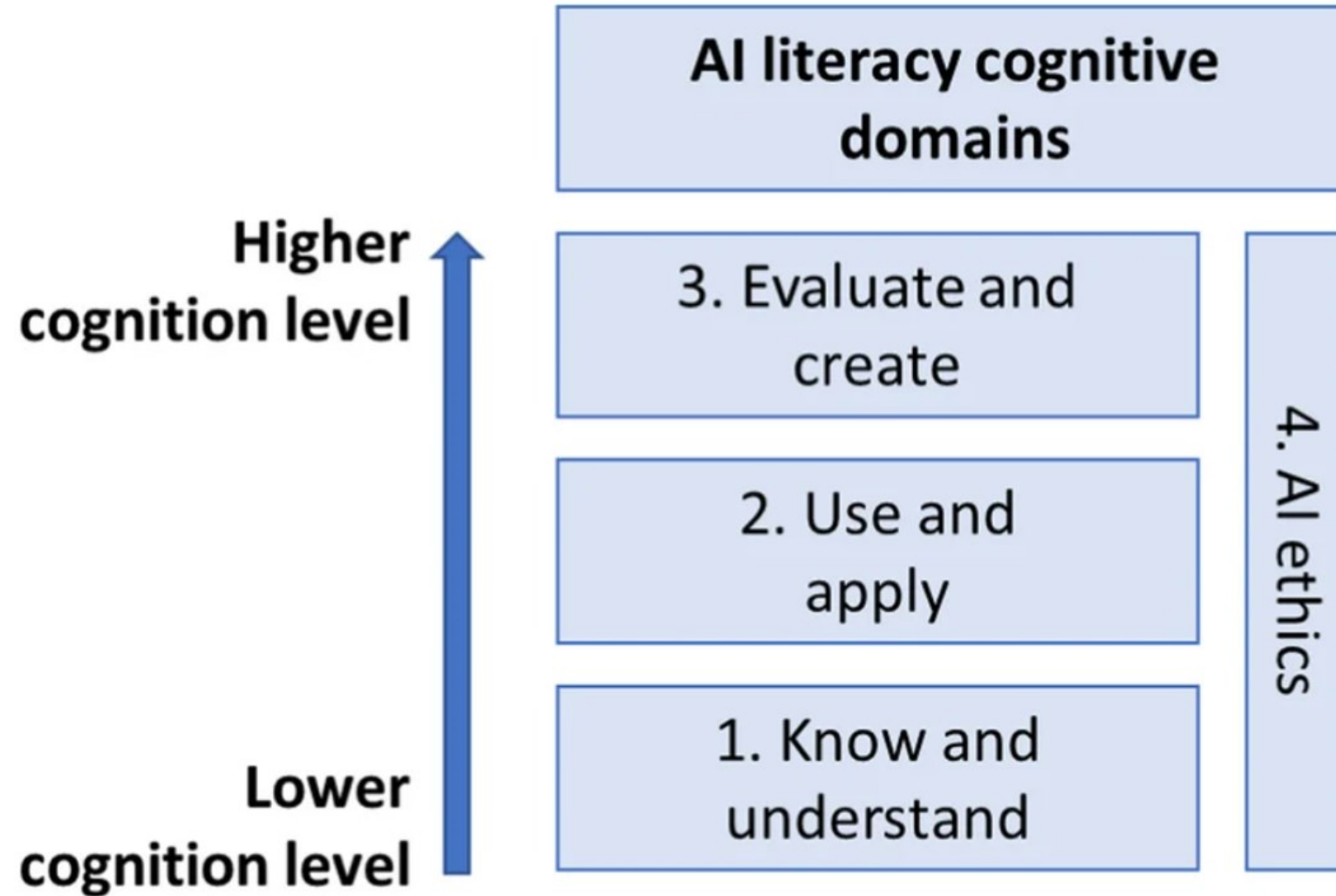


How about *AI literacy*?

- Most approaches privilege **cognitive and individualistic competencies** – including the critical evaluation of outputs in terms of accuracy and bias (Su et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2026)
- Critical questions of **ethics** (and social implications) are increasingly integral (e.g., transparency, accountability, bias, impact) (Ng et al., 2021, Pinski & Benlian, 2024)



Ng et al.'s approach



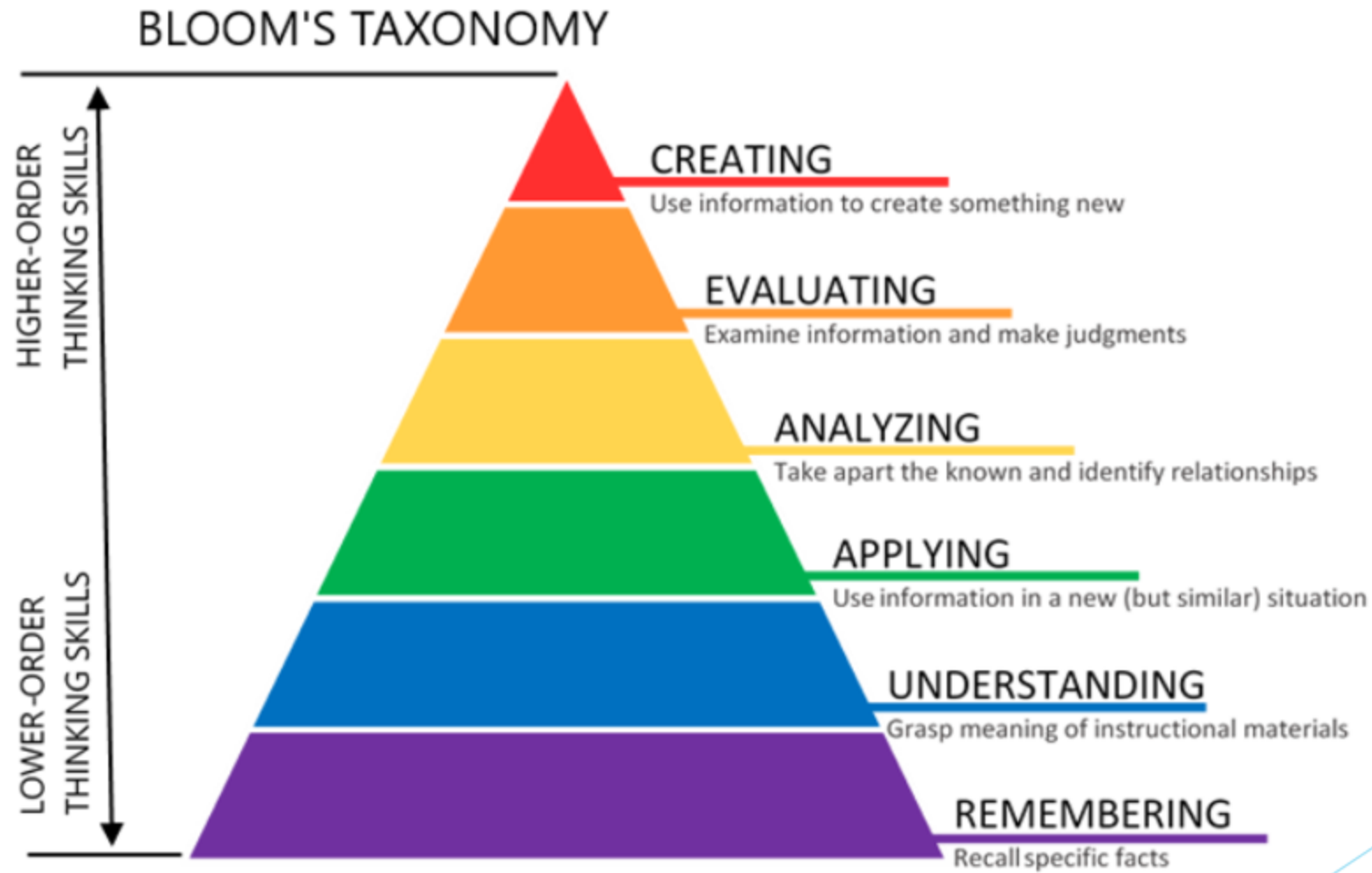
Ng et al.'s approach

Ng, D. T. K., Leung, J. K. L., Chu, S. K. W.,
Qiao, M. S., & Shen, Q. (2021).
Conceptualizing AI literacy: An exploratory
review. *Computers and Education: Artificial
Intelligence*, 2, 100041.

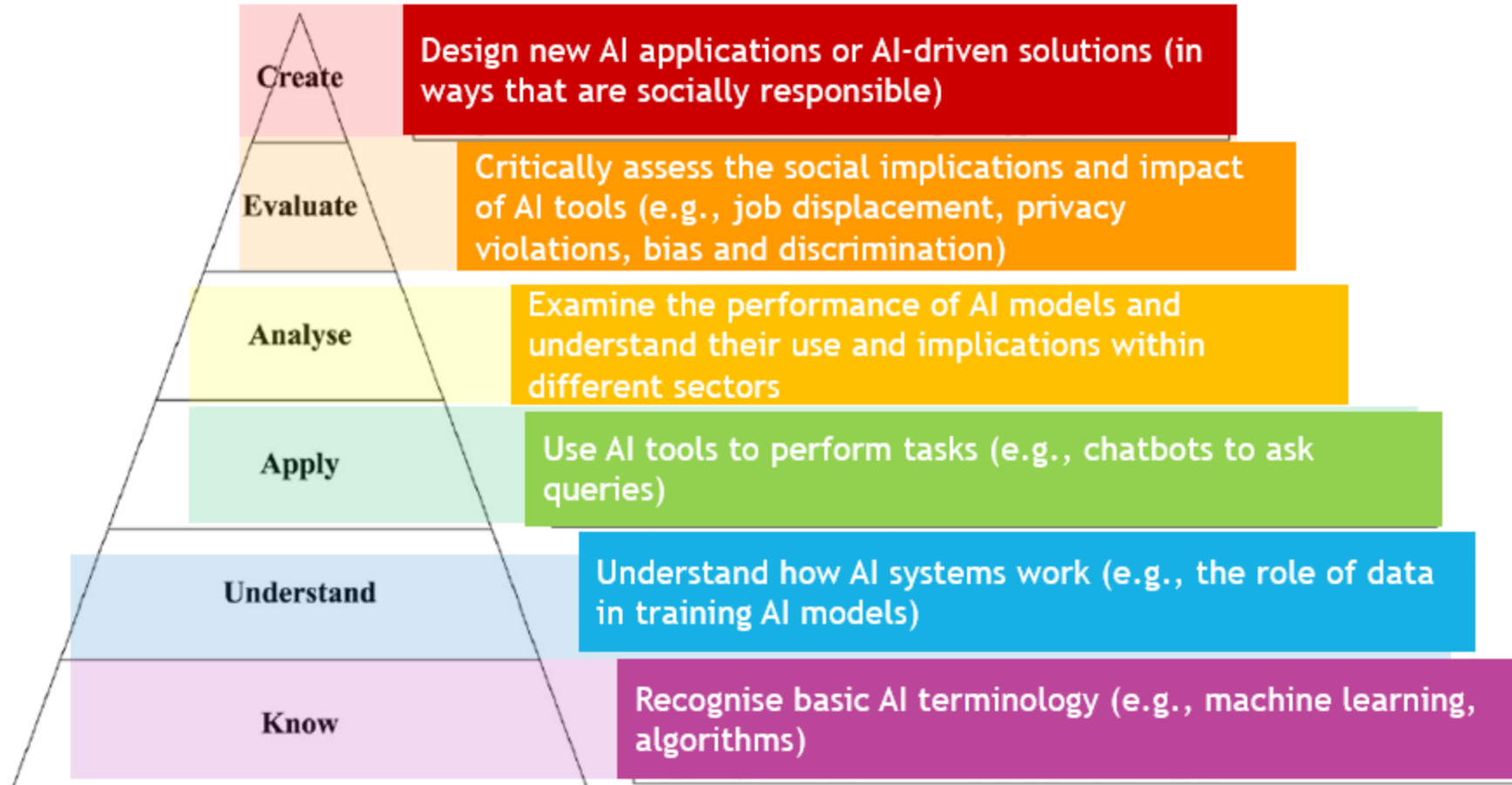
AI literacy	Definitions
Know & understand AI	Know the basic functions of AI and how to use AI applications.
Use & Apply AI	Applying AI knowledge, concepts and applications in different scenarios.
Evaluate & create AI	Higher-order thinking skills (e.g., evaluate, appraise, predict, design) with AI applications.
AI ethics	Human-centered considerations (e.g., fairness, accountability, transparency, ethics, safety).



Ng et al.'s approach



Ng et al.'s approach



Why media literacy matters



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Two complementary paradigms

Protection

Participation



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Protection from...

- **Online risks**
- Internet safety
- If you know how to identify these risks, you may be able to find ways to **cope with or avoid them**



Participation in...

- **Society**
- All areas of life
- Digital (and social) inclusion
- **Empowerment**



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Two sides of the same coin – case study 1

For example, for **survivors of modern slavery**, it is essential for

- **Safety** (scams, misinformation, re-trafficking)
- **Digital inclusion** – participation in every area of life (communicating with friends and family, accessing support services)



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JOURNAL OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2024.2393969>

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Survivors of Modern Slavery and Their Digital Inclusion: A UK Qualitative Study from the Perspective of Survivors and Organizations That Support Them

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how to better support the social inclusion of survivors of modern slavery using digital technologies. As such, it explores the under-researched views and experiences of survivors themselves and representatives of civil society organizations supporting them, in relation to how they access and use digital technologies in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 survivors and 18 organization representatives, and the data collected was thematically analyzed. Key findings suggest that, to support survivors' (re)integration, it is essential to provide them with access to technology and the digital skills to be safe and pursue opportunities online. However, while survivors value digital technologies to access support and undertake everyday activities, funding for the provision of such technologies is both limited and inconsistent. Meanwhile, in terms of digital skills and safety training, balance between individualized, tailor-made support and formal training is often lacking. Bridging research on survivors of modern slavery with broader digital inequalities work, this paper argues that digital access and digital literacy are crucial to survivors' material and socio-cultural (re)integration in the UK. Recommendations are provided for research, practice, and policy aimed at facilitating the social and digital inclusion of survivors.

KEYWORDS

Survivors of modern slavery; organizations supporting survivors; digital inclusion; digital literacy; (re)integration

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a study exploring the views and experiences of survivors of modern slavery, and representatives of civil society organizations supporting survivors, in relation to how they access and use digital technologies in the UK. This study was conducted in response to a funding call from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC) looking at support systems and procedures for survivors of modern slavery specifically in the UK and on the role of digital technologies as part of these systems and procedures. Based on semi-structured interviews with both

Two sides of the same coin – case study 2

For children aged 9-11, it is essential for

- **Safety** (scams, misinformation)
- **Civic engagement** – civic awareness, community involvement, volunteering, disposition towards future participation



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COGENT EDUCATION
2026, VOL. 13, NO. 1, 2616869
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2026.2616869>

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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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News literacy education and civic engagement among primary school children: a mixed-methods evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Developing children's news literacy skills to critically engage with news is crucial to their development as informed and engaged citizens. Yet, primary school children remain largely overlooked by research and practice, which have focused primarily on older cohorts. This article draws on the mixed-methods evaluation of NewsWise – a news literacy programme for UK primary school children aged 9–11 – to explore the effectiveness of the programme and what aspects of NewsWise were perceived to work better than others. A randomised controlled trial with pre-, post-, and follow-up surveys revealed that NewsWise was effective in developing children's ability to spot misinformation, and that there was a positive relationship between their news literacy and civic engagement. Focus groups with pupils and semi-structured interviews with teachers further indicated that the programme developed pupils' interest in the news and news literacy skills, motivated them to be more involved in civic life, and was well received but could be improved for future delivery. We argue that media and news literacy education should be embedded more robustly in the UK school curriculum, and that future research and practice should focus more closely on primary school children's development of news literacy and civic engagement.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 May 2025
Revised 13 November 2025
Accepted 10 January 2026

KEYWORDS

News literacy; media literacy; civic engagement; school intervention; mixed-methods

SUBJECTS

Social Sciences; Education; Classroom Practice; Assessment & Testing; Social Sciences; Education; Classroom Practice; Social Sciences; Education; Classroom Practice; Teaching & Learning

Introduction

Developing children's news literacy, defined as the skills and knowledge required to critically engage with news and the broader news ecosystem (Tully et al., 2022), is essential if we are to support the development of citizens who can evaluate the validity of news and make informed decisions to participate in society. A well-informed citizenry is crucial to the functioning of a healthy democracy. However, we live in an age in which digital technologies – including the internet, digital devices, and artificial

Two sides of the same coin – case study 3

For **activists and political advocates**, it is essential for

- **Overcoming risks** like misinformation, privacy violations, surveillance (*strategic disengagement*)
- **Political participation** – engagement with news stories, accessing and sharing political content, campaigning



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INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2452282>

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Digital literacy and strategic (dis)engagement: examining how functional and critical digital literacy shapes participation

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ABSTRACT

Employing semi-structured interviews enhanced by think aloud and diary methods, this article explores how digital experts (e.g., information/IT/media professionals) and civic advocates (e.g., political party candidates, activists) deploy digital literacy to participate in society. These groups – who are digitally savvy and civically active, respectively – are ideal for exploring the intersection of digital literacy and participation in public, community, and/or political life. This study found that their practices (e.g., reading news, sharing political content, campaigning) are informed by a wealth of functional *and* critical digital skills and knowledge. These enable them to strategically overcome bias, misinformation, and their own privacy concerns, and to navigate both the potentials and limitations of the internet in line with different ideologies. Their practices, furthermore, often involve what this article refers to as *strategic disengagement* (i.e., the deliberate withdrawal from engaging with online content and/or platforms). This article shows how functional and critical dimensions of digital literacy can be deployed in tandem to make strategic decisions to participate. In doing so, it problematises the assumption that critical digital literacy is inherently progressive and that online disengagement results necessarily from poor functional digital literacy. The implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 August 2024
Accepted 7 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Digital literacy; functional digital literacy; critical digital literacy; participation; civic engagement; strategic (dis)engagement

Introduction

Digital technologies – including the internet, digital devices, and artificial intelligence (AI) – present opportunities for participation in society and risks such as misinforma-

Evidence about the UK population



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Gaps in children's media and AI literacy

- **56%** of 8-17-year-olds have used AI
- **4 in 10** would trust AI-generated news articles as much as or more than those written by humans
- **31%** are confident but unable to assess the trustworthiness of a social media profile
- **6 in 10** struggle to identify paid adverts on search engines
- **25%** of 13-17s are confident but unable to identify an AI-generated image



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Gaps in adults' media and AI literacy

- **54%** of adults report using AI tools
- **37%** are confident but unable to identify paid advertising online, with younger adults performing less well than older adults
- More than **25%** are unable to spot fake social media profiles
- Almost **20%** believe that if a website appears in search results it will contain accurate information
- Only **44%** feel confident deciding whether online content is produced by a person or AI, with **24%** not feeling confident



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Supporting Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Age of AI

- Funded the **Institute for Data and AI (IDAI)**
- Co-led with Dr Dorothy Butchard and Dr Roxana Baiasu (UoB)
- Explores benefits and risks of **AI chatbot use** for 18-25-year-olds' mental health and wellbeing
- Develops evidence-based policy and practical **recommendations** for safe and ethical AI use



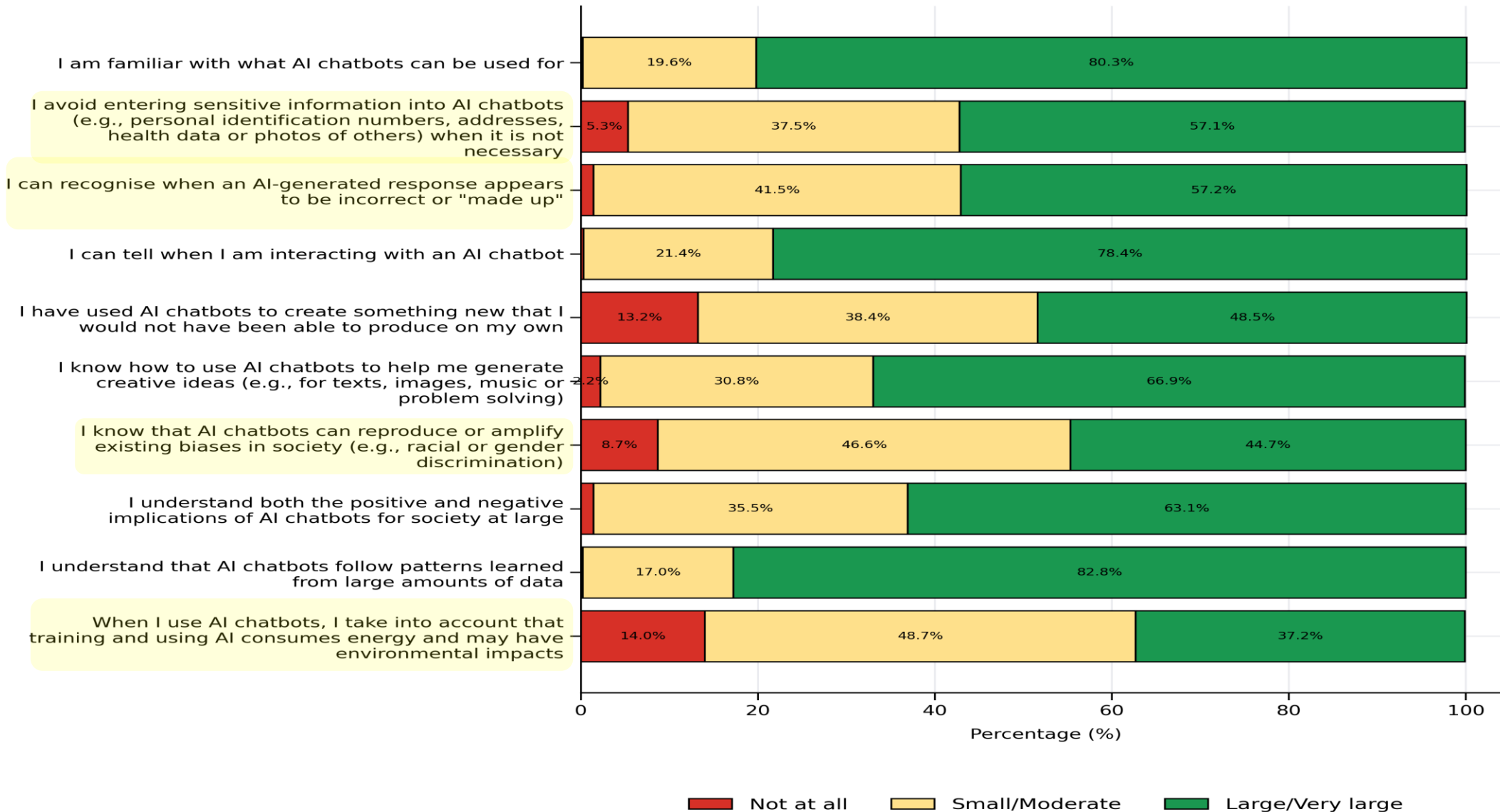
Supporting Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Age of AI

- **Systematic literature review**
- **Online survey** – administered via Prolific, using stratified quota sampling to mimic UK 18-25-year-old population (age, gender, ethnicity, education), N = 946
- **Focus groups** with 18-25-year-olds
- **Co-design workshops** with 18-25-year-olds and with practitioners



Preliminary findings

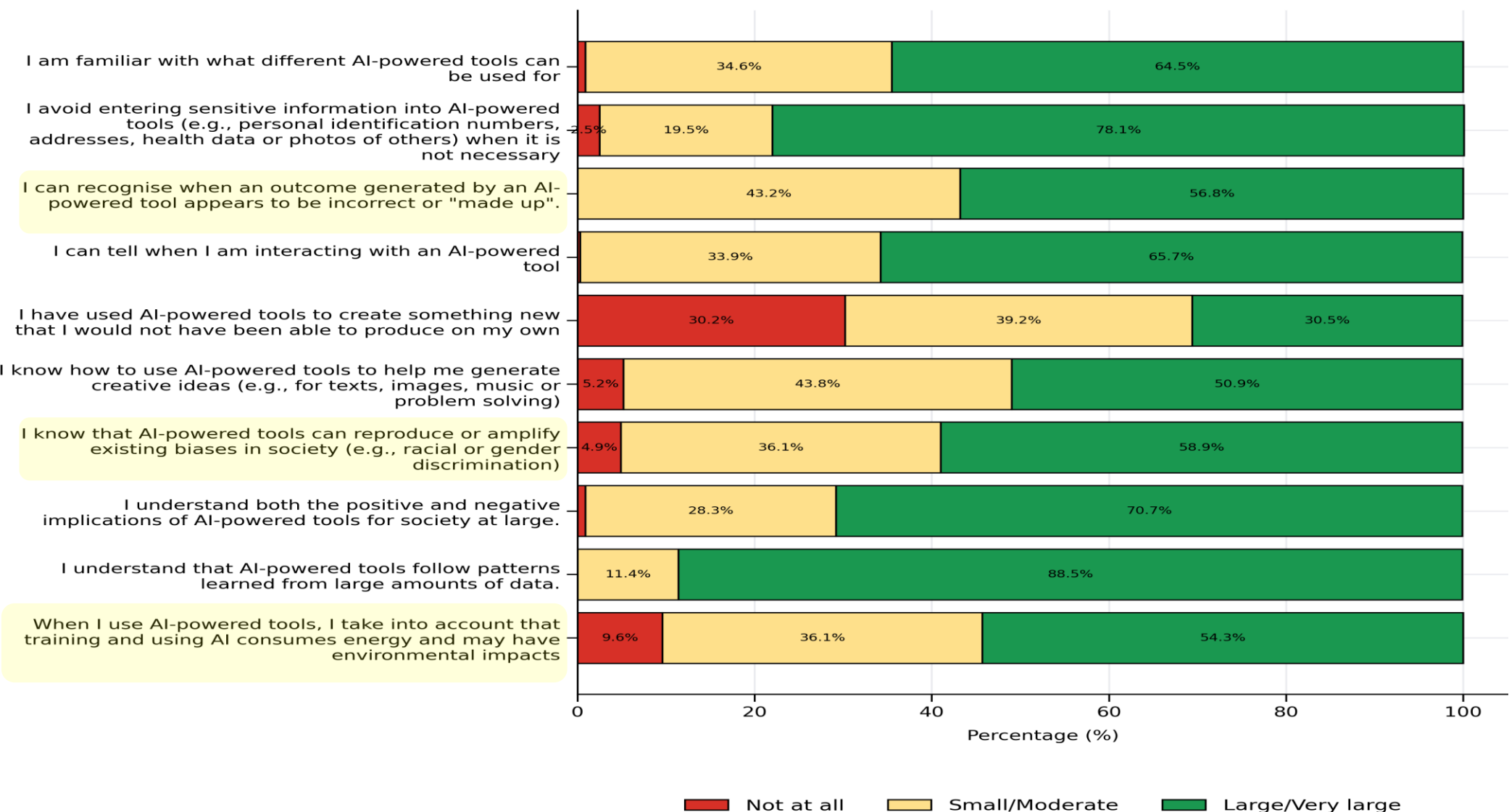
AI Chatbot Literacy (N = 623)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your understanding of, and ability to engage with, AI chatbots?

Preliminary findings

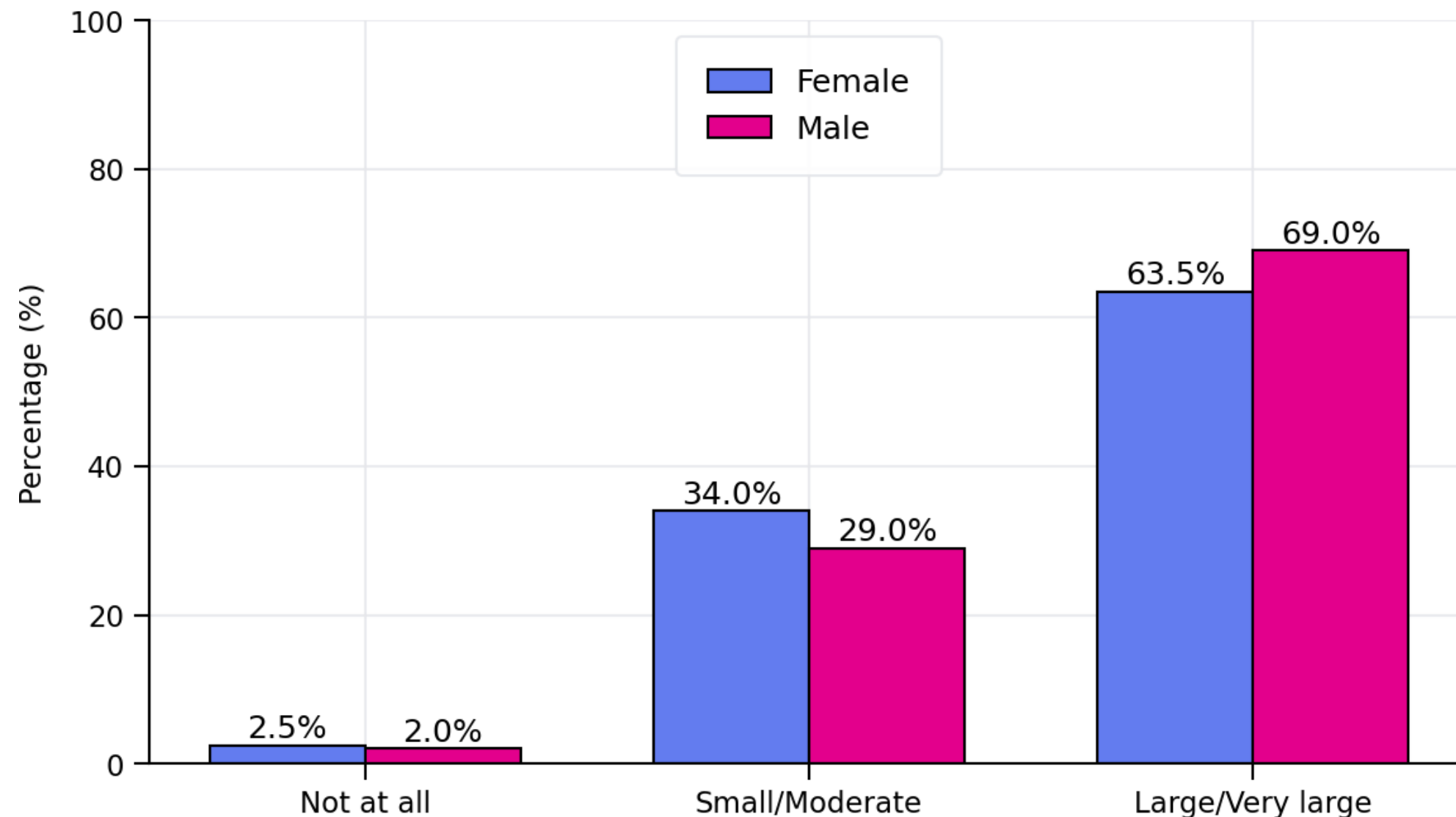
AI Literacy (N = 324)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your understanding of, and ability to engage with, AI-powered tools?

Preliminary findings

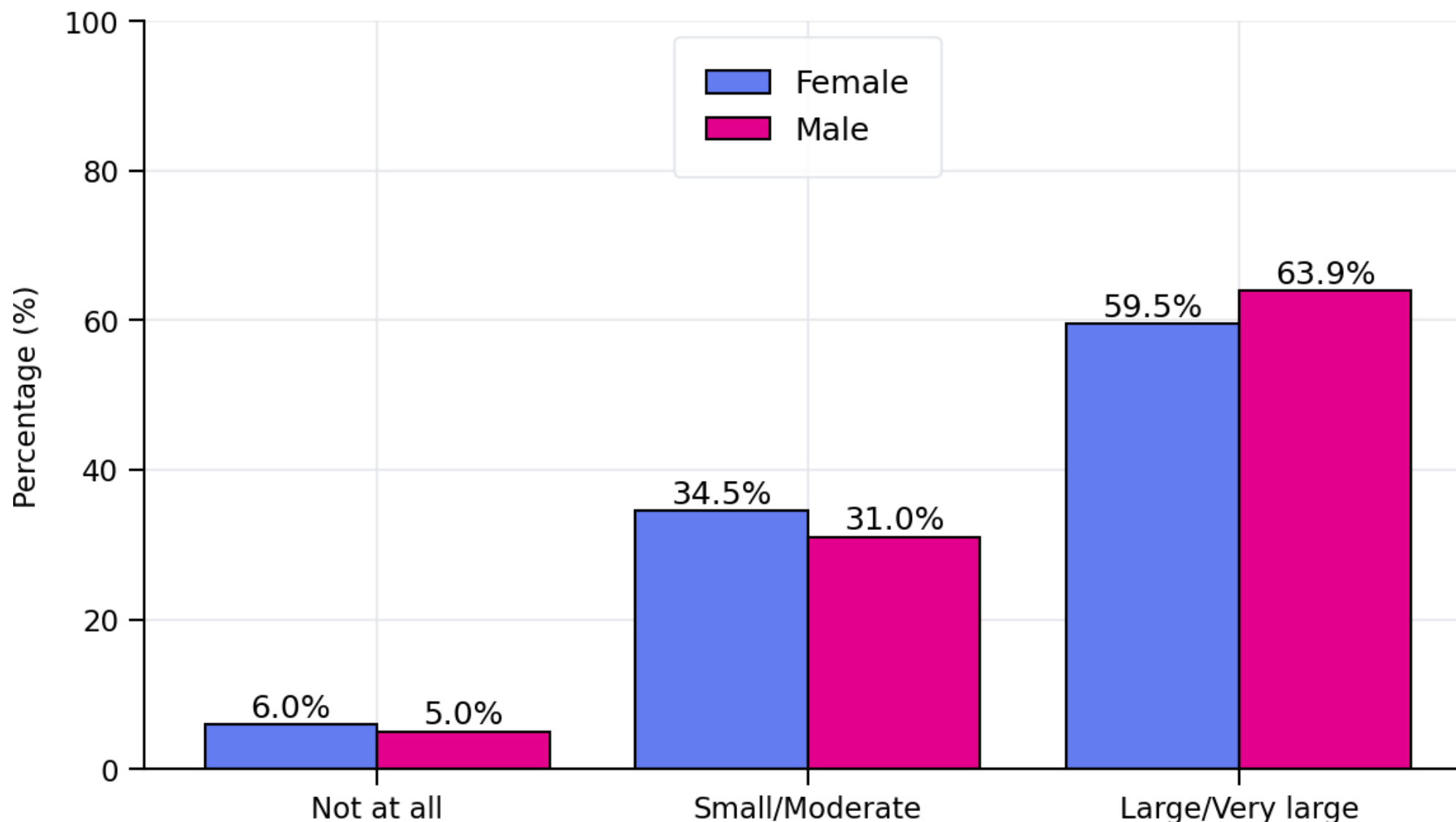
Overall AI chatbot literacy by sex (collapsed categories, all items)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your understanding of, and ability to engage with, AI chatbots?

Preliminary findings

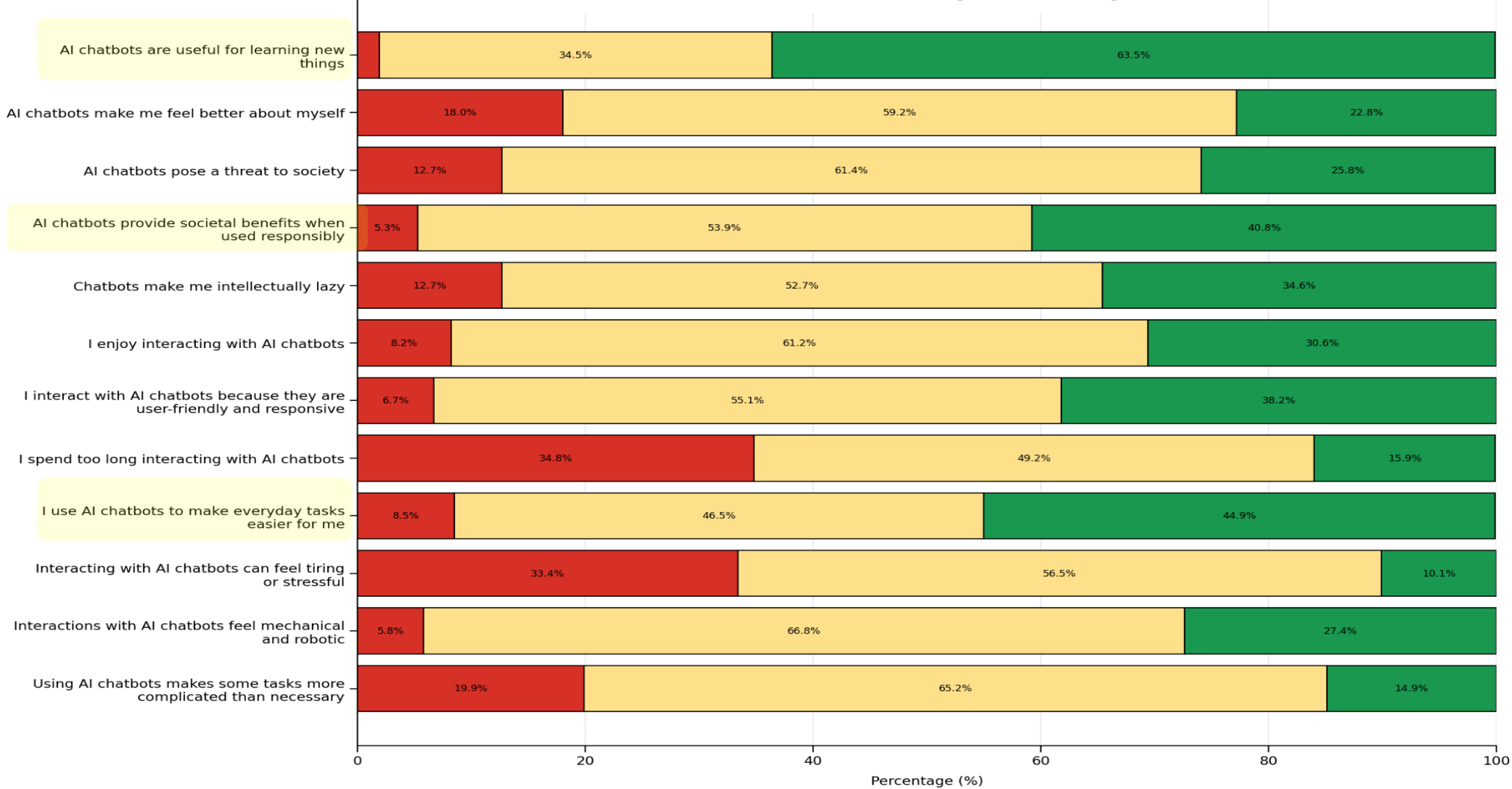
AI literacy by sex (collapsed, all items)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your understanding of, and ability to engage with, AI-powered tools?

Preliminary findings

Attitudes towards AI chatbots (N = 623)

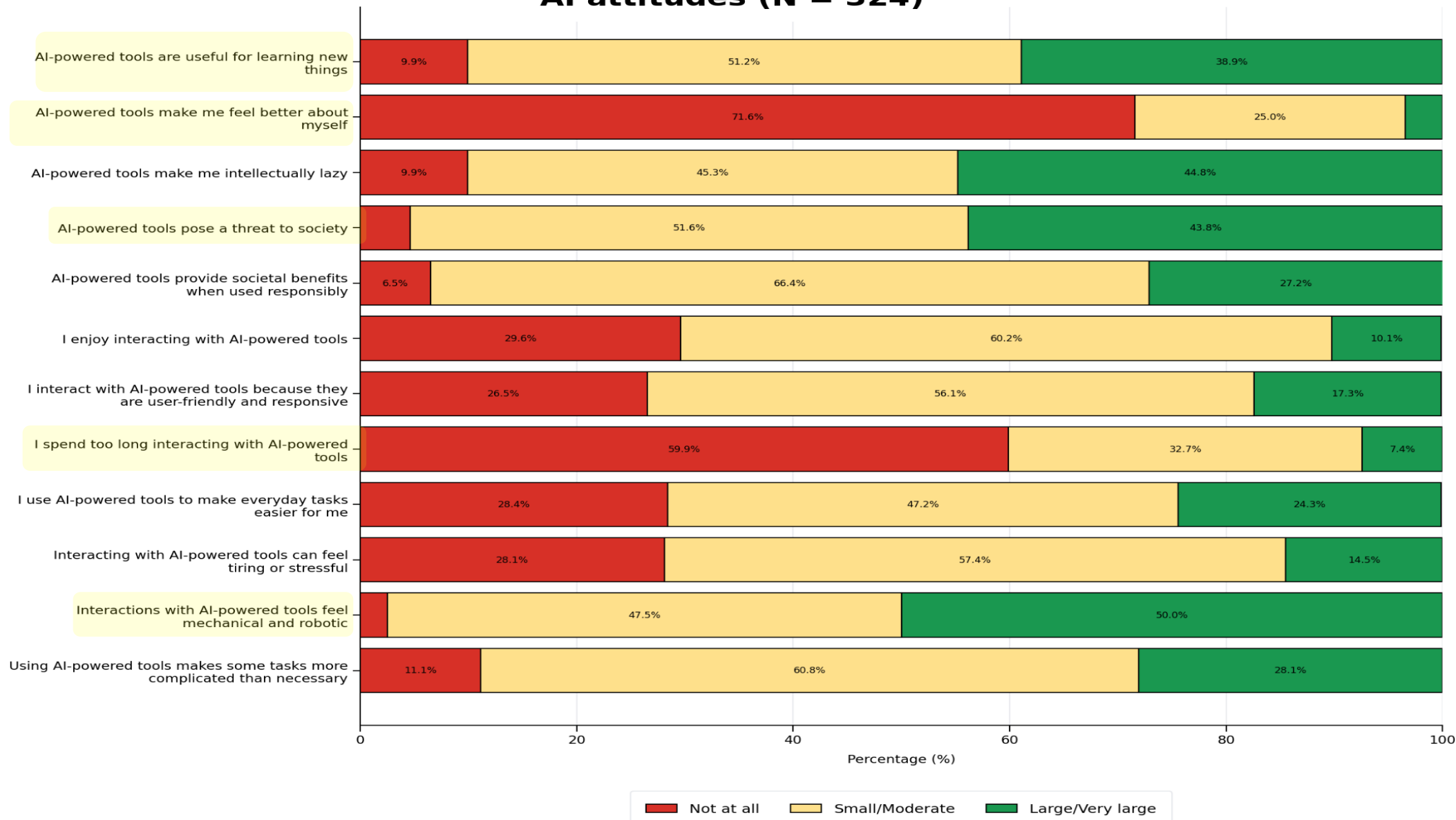


To what extent do you agree with the following statements about AI chatbots in general?



Preliminary findings

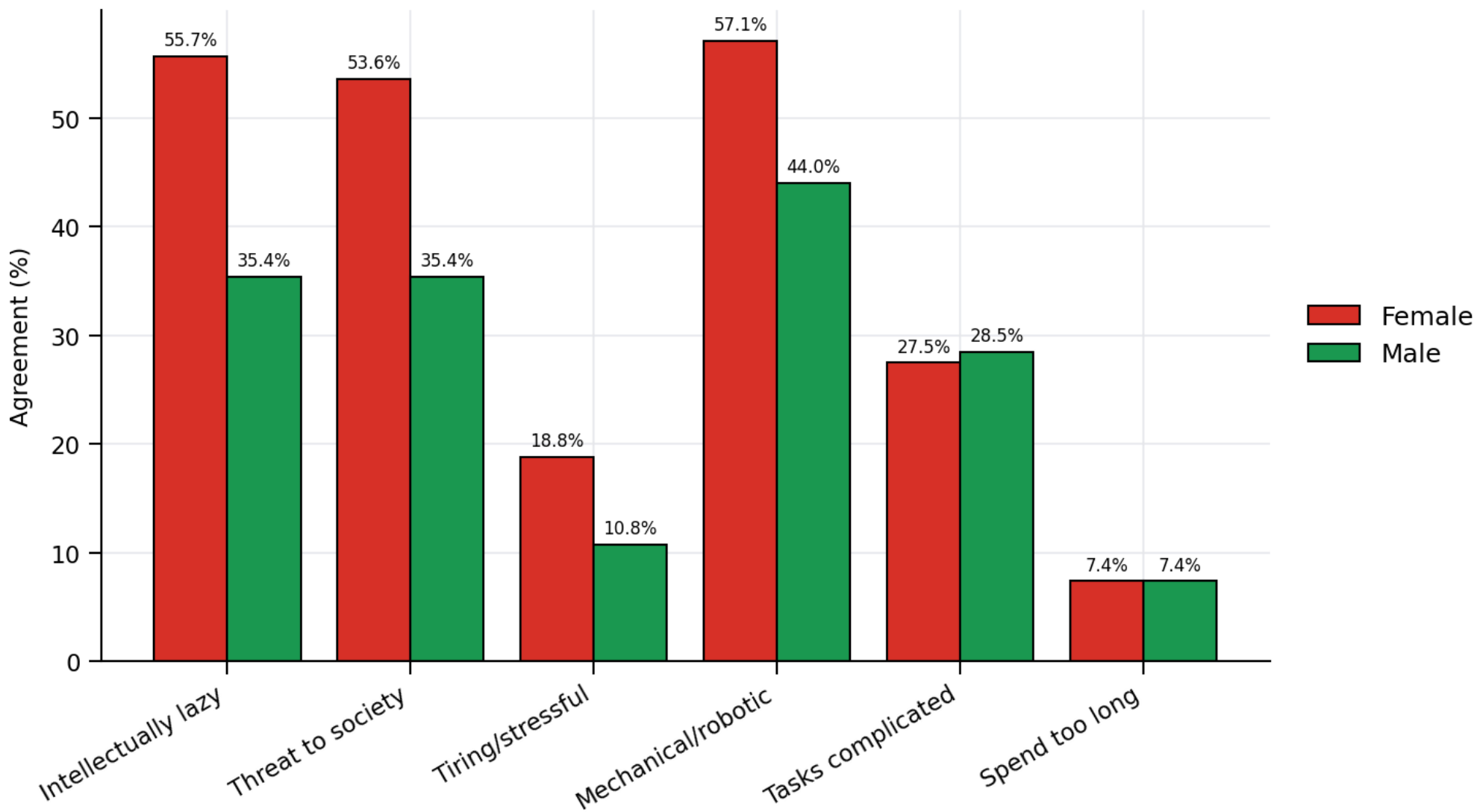
AI attitudes (N = 324)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about AI-powered tools in general?

Preliminary findings

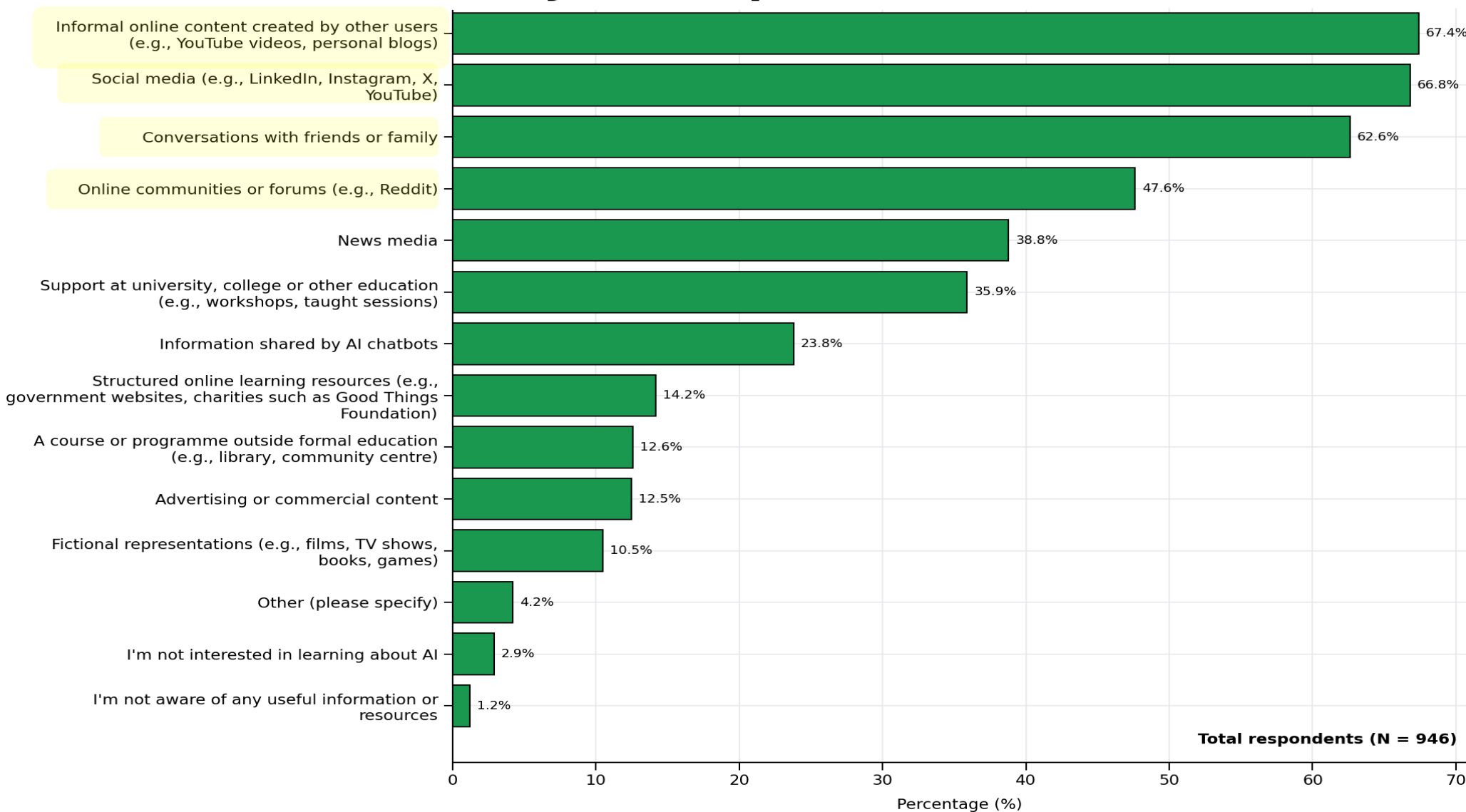
Negative AI attitudes by sex (Large / Very large agreement)



To what extent
do you agree
with the
following
statements
about AI-
powered tools in
general?

Preliminary findings

AI literacy development (N = 946)



Where does your knowledge of AI mainly come from?

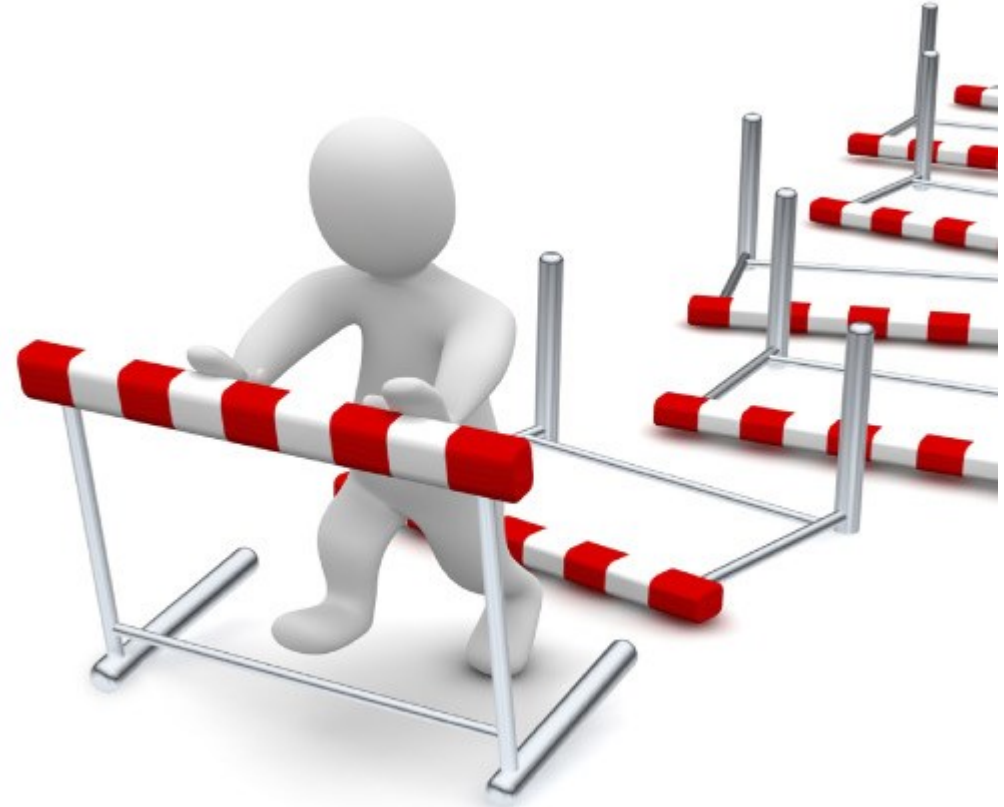
Provision and policy in the UK



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Key challenges

1. Lack of consistent **formal education**
2. A vibrant yet under-resourced **civil society** sector
3. Limited robust **evidence** of what works
4. Disjoint **policy** efforts lagging behind technological advancements



1. Lack of consistent formal education

- **Provision is patchy** across the UK
- Only **23%** of UK children report having had *regular* media literacy lessons (Ofcom, 2026)
- Media literacy education is **not mandatory or firmly embedded** in the national curriculum (Polizzi et al., 2025)



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LEARNING, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2025.2572624>

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Media literacy provision from the perspective of policymakers and civil society organisations in five areas of the UK: a case study approach

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^aDepartment of Linguistics and Communication, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom;

^bCentre for Urban Wellbeing, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom; ^cDepartment of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; ^dDigital Media & Society Institute, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; ^eLiverpool Screen School, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2025
Accepted 28 September 2025

KEYWORDS

Media literacy; education; provision; policymakers; civil society organisations

Introduction

1. Lack of consistent formal education

- **Educators need more support** (resources, training) (McCarthy, 2023)
- Education landscape is complicated by **new technologies**
- **Low confidence** in AI use (DfE, 2025), reluctance to use AI, concerns about its impact (GMB, 2025)



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Press release

AI revolution to give teachers more time with pupils

Government driving forward AI tools to deliver excellence everywhere for every child, as part of Plan for Change.

From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP](#)

Published 10 June 2025



2. Vibrant yet under-resourced civil society

- Many charities doing work on the ground
- Yet, limited, short-term and prescriptive government **funding**
- **Short-lived** small-scale projects, **precarious** staff
- Limited **national coordination**
- Media literacy provision piggybacking on regional **digital inclusion networks**



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LEARNING, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2025.2572624>

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Introduction

3. Limited robust evidence of what works

- The media literacy sector is **under-evaluated**
- Vast array of educational resources but we know little about **uptake** or **effectiveness**
- **Robust evaluations** (including large-scale RCTs and longitudinal studies) can be expensive and not always easy to implement



4. Disjoint policy efforts lagging behind

- The Communications Act (2003) gave **Ofcom** its statutory duty to promote media literacy – later reinforced through the Online Media Literacy Strategy (2021) and the Online Safety Act (2023)
- Government **department silos**, and historically **undefined/unclear** role of **DfE**
- Media literacy approached in **protectionist terms**



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LEARNING, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2025.2572624>

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Media literacy provision from the perspective of policymakers and civil society organisations in five areas of the UK: a case study approach

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ABSTRACT

Despite efforts to promote media literacy provision (i.e., the support provided to develop people's media literacy within and outside formal education) in the UK, this provision remains fragmented, under-supported, and under-evaluated. Employing a case study methodology, this article explores the state of media literacy policy and provision within five areas of the UK: Birmingham and the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Scotland, and Wales. Based on semi-structured interviews with policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations, key findings suggest that government bodies within all five areas have established digital inclusion networks, with media literacy provision piggybacking on these networks. While best practice is often based on forms of collaboration (e.g., to access target populations, co-design/co-deliver initiatives), significant barriers remain, including funding and the lack of an overarching framework for coordinating media literacy provision across the UK. The implications of these findings for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2025
Accepted 28 September 2025

KEYWORDS

Media literacy; education; provision; policymakers; civil society organisations

Introduction

Promising recent steps

- Ofcom published its media literacy strategy (2025) – “media literacy is everyone’s business”
- **Review of the national curriculum** – decision to embed media literacy education more robustly (*although AI literacy is discussed separately*)
- **More coordinated efforts** involving government departments (DSIT, DCMS, DfE)
- **Media Literacy Action Plan** (UK Government, 2026) (*despite key limitations*)



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The screenshot shows the UK Government website header with the GOV.UK logo and a menu. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: Home > Society and culture > Online safety > A Safe, Informed Digital Nation. Three departmental logos are displayed: Department for Science, Innovation & Technology; Department for Culture, Media & Sport; and Department for Education. A large blue banner features the title 'Policy paper A Safe, Informed Digital Nation' and the date 'Published 16 March 2026'. Below the banner, a table of contents lists the document's structure and its presentation to Parliament.

Contents	A Safe, Informed Digital Nation
Ministerial foreword	Government's Media Literacy Action Plan (2026-2029)
Introduction	Presented to Parliament by the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for AI and Online Safety by Command of His Majesty
Part 1: Principles	March 2026
Part 2: Priorities and actions	
Part 3: Implementation timetable	

Recommendations



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Recommendation 1

Media literacy should be made **mandatory, embedded** more robustly across the **curriculum**, and promoted as incorporating **AI literacy**



Recommendation 2

Revising the curriculum might not work, unless **more and better support for teachers** (training, resources) is also provided



Recommendation 3

We need a more **comprehensive framework**, building on the recent Media Literacy Action Plan (2026), spelling out who (government departments, civil society, industry) should be doing what, and allocating resources accordingly



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Recommendation 4

More **government funding** is needed to support civil society initiatives and interventions, as well as research and evaluations



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Thank you



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