

Exploring Activist Art Studies: 44.3 Enhancing Visual Literacy through Critical Engagement and Interpretation

Ayşe Nihan Zengin  and
Nur Ütkür-Güllühan 

Department of Primary Education, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Istanbul, Turkey
Department of Primary Education, Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

This study systematically examines activist art practices carried out between 2005 and 2023 within Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory frameworks. Based on 58 articles, the research aims to analyse these practices' characteristic features and thematic focuses. The findings reveal that qualitative methods, particularly those based on content and discourse analysis, are predominantly employed; this indicates that contextual and interpretative approaches are emphasised in the studies. The frequent selection of middle and high school level individuals as sample groups aligns with theoretical emphases on developing critical awareness during the identity formation process. As a result of thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: social justice and character building, media and digital culture and cognitive-emotional-citizenship development. These themes reveal the transformative power of art in questioning social norms, analysing media representations and fostering awareness. This study contributes to the literature by holistically addressing the theoretical and methodological gaps in the field.

Keywords

activist art education, critical media literacy, interpretation, visual literacy

Introduction

The digital age has profoundly transformed how individuals interact with information, society and cultural norms. Individuals grow up in a mediated environment shaped by social media, advertisements, animations and digital visuals. Engaging

with such content is critically important for developing critical thinking and awareness skills, as well as for shaping identity and fostering social participation (Pietrobelli *et al.* 2020; Bozzola *et al.* 2022). Beyond conveying information, media messages encompass normative values, cultural representations and ideological perspectives. Professionals working particularly in visual communication play a significant role in shaping society's perception of reality. Roxburgh & Caratti (2018) define these professionals as cultural intermediaries and state that developing critical awareness of this production process is an ethical obligation of visual communication design education. This approach reveals that critical media literacy developed through art education is a process that embodies cognitive and social responsibility. There is growing interest in addressing this transformation through art education and activist art. Therefore, art education is positioned as a pedagogical tool that enables individuals to adopt a critical stance towards media messages through aesthetic expression.

The activist art studies in this research refer to pedagogical interventions aimed at developing critical media and visual literacy skills through art (Nowell 2019; Duncum 2020). The impact of these interventions, which make oppressive structures visible by combining critical and creative thinking and offer participants a transformative role, has been highlighted in various studies (Jónsdóttir 2019). Critical literacy enables individuals to become subjects who question and reinterpret media messages rather than passively receiving them. This approach allows for developing a critical distance towards societal norms and producing alternative perspectives (Kellner & Share 2005). Critical media literacy focuses on understanding how cultural representations, ideological codes and social structures are constructed through media (Romero Walker 2021). It is essential to recognise that individuals' relationship with media is shaped by personal factors and historical, political and social contexts (Ferguson 2001; Berry 2014; Carmi *et al.* 2020). Within this framework, the present study aims to systematically analyse activist art practices conducted between 2005 and 2023 through the lenses of Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory and to identify these practices' characteristic features and thematic focuses.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis of this study is built upon Visual Culture Theory and Critical Media Theory, which analyse the processes of producing and interpreting visual content. The reason for considering these two theories together lies in their shared potential to deconstruct the ideological structure of media messages and visual representations.

Visual Culture Theory

Visual Culture Theory was first introduced by Mitchell (1994) in the 1990s. While Mitchell (1994) emphasised that visual images, in addition to their aesthetic qualities, carry cultural and ideological meanings, Mirzoeff (1999) expanded the scope of visual culture studies by addressing how political, social and historical forces shape visual materials such as advertisements and digital visuals. Rose (2007) further deepened the theory by examining how individuals interpret visual texts through identity frameworks such as class, gender and race. Thus, the aim is to

consider individuals not as passive consumers of visuals but as active interpreters who uncover hidden meanings and ideologies.

Critical Media Theory

Critical Media Theory was first introduced by Adorno & Horkheimer (1947). Horkheimer *et al.* (2002) argued that mass media function not merely as a means of entertainment but serve as an ideological instrument reinforcing dominant power structures. Sholle & Denski (1995) emphasised that individuals are not passive receivers who neutrally consume media; they are active interpreters who engage with media messages through their social and cultural contexts. Kellner (1995) proposed that dominant ideologies are embedded within media narratives and that media significantly shape social perceptions regarding race, gender, politics and power. In subsequent years, Kellner & Share (2005) expanded the theory into the field of education, stressing that media literacy should involve critical engagement rather than remain at the level of content consumption. Within this framework, critical media literacy emerges as a transformative tool that fosters social justice and critical consciousness.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual intersection between Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory, which form the theoretical foundation of activist art studies. Critical Media Theory focuses on media ideologies, subtext analysis and critical media literacy, while Visual Culture Theory foregrounds components such as cultural means, image analysis and visual literacy. The area where the two theories intersect represents the activist art approach, which aims to develop critical awareness towards visual and media texts. Activist art studies, critical media literacy and visual literacy offer an intersecting framework through which individuals can reinterpret media messages and generate creative and transformative responses. This approach draws upon literature that emphasises the contribution of art to social participation (Nowell 2019; Duncum 2020). These studies aim to foster critical media and visual literacy skills through art. This framework highlights

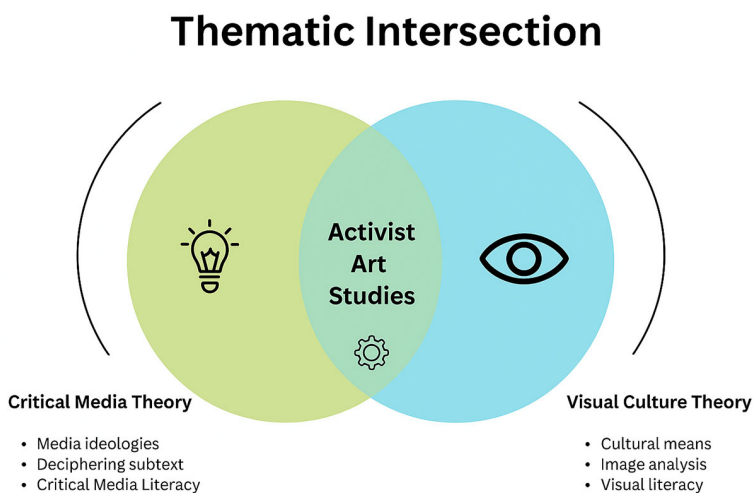


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Connecting Critical Media and Visual Culture Theories in Activist Art Studies.

critical and visual media literacy, encouraging individuals to analyse visual communication and generate responses within their social and cultural contexts.

The rationale and importance of the study

When examining the distribution of studies in the literature (Figure 2), it is observed that the most frequently addressed themes are youth/adolescence and migration/refugee representations, followed by health behaviours, body image, violence and digital literacy. Early studies revealed that interventions had limited but meaningful effects on violence (Cantor & Wilson 2003), advertising (Livingstone & Helsper 2006) and health behaviours (Bergsma & Carney 2008). Meta-analyses indicate that the effects of interventions vary depending on context and can be sustained over time (Jeong *et al.* 2012; Vahedi *et al.* 2018; Xie *et al.* 2019). Recent studies report that media literacy interventions have shown effectiveness regarding body image, media skills (Kurz *et al.* 2022; Ferdowsi & Shahvalipoor 2023) and across different age groups (d'Haenens *et al.* 2024). Additionally, positive outcomes have been observed in areas such as health (Lin *et al.* 2024), tobacco prevention awareness (Kim *et al.* 2024) and sexual health education (Scull *et al.* 2024). Similar results have also been found in contexts of migration and social exclusion. While Smets & Bozdağ (2018) discussed the stereotypical representations of migrants in the media, Pasta (2019) and Leurs *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that media literacy interventions had a transformative impact on the social integration of migrants and the development of media awareness among young refugees.

Understanding how media content influences individuals through ideological codes and cultural representations is significant within the contexts of both Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory. However, in the existing literature, no comprehensive study holistically analyses the characteristic features and thematic focuses of activist art practices within these theoretical frameworks. This gap poses the risk of overlooking the critical thinking, awareness-raising and socially transformative aspects of media and visual literacy. In this regard, the present study is significant in that it systematically examines the fragmented data on activist art practices in the literature, identifies the themes holistically addressed by these studies and clarifies how these themes intersect with critical media and visual

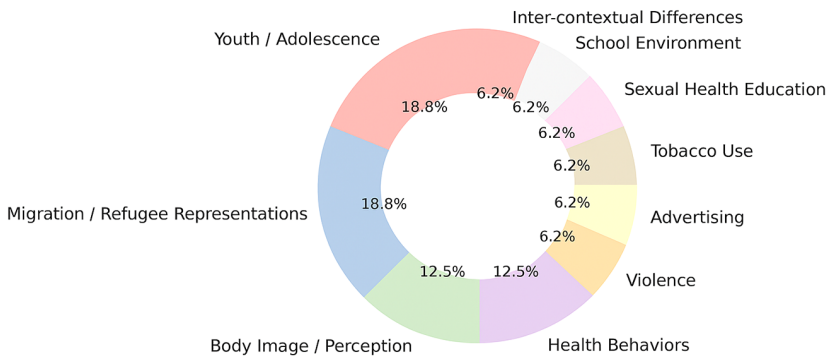


Figure 2
The Landscape of Other Studies Conducted.

culture theories. While literature reviews fall short of presenting the field comprehensively, bibliometric analyses make methodological gaps objectively visible (Zupic & Čater 2015; Paul & Criado 2020; Donthu *et al.* 2021). Systematic examination of the characteristic features and themes of studies enhances research quality and identifies new directions for the field (Ke 2022). Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated to reveal the distribution of studies:

RQ1. What are the characteristic features of activist art studies situated within the Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory frameworks between 2005 and 2023?

RQ2. What thematic focuses emerge in activist art studies analysed within these theoretical frameworks?

Method

During the research design process, the relevant literature was first reviewed, and a conceptual framework was established. In this context, the research problem was identified, leading to the formulation of eight research questions. In the second phase, inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined to prevent bias in the selection of studies to be included. The analysis process was structured in line with the theoretical framework presented in the introduction. The intersection of Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory, illustrated in Figure 1, was a guiding reference point in determining themes and the inclusion or exclusion of articles. To enhance the reliability of the research, the quantitative equivalents of the collected research data were presented to the reader using the PRISMA flow diagram. After scanning the abstracts of the articles to be included and accessing their full texts in English, these studies were recorded by the first researcher into an Excel Guide. The full texts of the included studies were examined in the data analysis, and the data were coded and reported. The steps outlined in Figure 3 were followed throughout the research process.

Figure 3 illustrates the steps followed throughout our research. First, the key ideas and questions we aimed to explore were identified. Then, clear criteria were

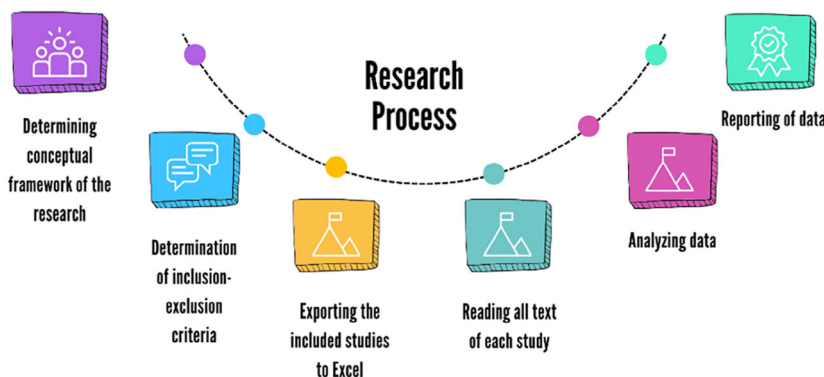


Figure 3
Research Process.

established regarding which studies would be included or excluded, ensuring the fairness of the process. All studies that met these criteria were collected and organised in an electronic spreadsheet (Excel). Subsequently, each study was carefully read, and all necessary information was gathered. Once all the data had been compiled, an analysis was conducted to identify patterns and trends. Finally, a report was written based on the findings and results obtained. This diagram visually represents how we progressed through each stage of our research.

Data collection process

The following databases were searched to identify relevant research reports: Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC and Google Scholar. Publications with full texts available in English were preferred, although studies from non-English-speaking countries were also accepted. The authors used Boolean operators such as “OR” and “AND” during the searches. The following keywords were employed in the preliminary preparation phase to enable a more detailed selection: Activist Art Education, Activist Art Studies and Activist Visual Literacy. Within this scope, studies in artistic and media literacy were examined. All articles retrieved using these keywords were read, and their publication year, title and aims were recorded in an Excel file. In the Web of Science, Scopus and ERIC databases, the number of studies retrieved using the relevant keywords ranged between 50 and 60, and most were deemed unsuitable. Consequently, a new search was conducted within 2 weeks using alternative keywords: critical media literacy, visual literacy and visual arts. The following terms were used to limit the research to preschool, primary, secondary, high school, higher education and lifelong learning levels: kindergarten, primary, elementary, secondary, high school, undergraduate, graduate and education. The search strings are presented in Appendix A.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Following the initial screening, 58 full-text articles were evaluated and included in the study. According to the inclusion criteria, articles had to feature the keywords Critical Media Literacy or Visual Literacy and, after the intervention phase, had to include elements of ‘awareness’ or ‘reinterpretation’ within the target group. This study covers academic articles examining interventions aimed at teaching critical and visual media literacy. The reviewed studies are empirical articles from various regions worldwide, all with full texts available in English. In this context, studies selected were those assessed under the framework of Activist Art Studies, with the potential to foster an ‘awakening’ in individuals. Considering the lifelong learning approach in education, studies at preschool, primary, secondary, high school, undergraduate, postgraduate and adult education levels were all included. The following studies were excluded: literature reviews, theoretical articles, curriculum analyses, articles comparing national policies on the subject and articles solely offering suggestions. Also excluded were studies examining only the impact of critical media or visual literacy interventions on academic achievement. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals that met the criteria of Activist Art Studies were prioritised. As no meta-synthesis study addressing media literacy research in this way was identified in the literature, no restriction on publication years was applied. Databases that allow for multidisciplinary and comprehensive searches were included in the study.

Data analysis

In the content analysis conducted within the scope of the bibliometric analysis, Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory guided the conceptual classification of the study data. Theoretical components such as media ideologies, subtext analysis, cultural representations and visual literacy were used as references in evaluating the articles' content, methodology and thematic orientations. The descriptive content analysis method, one of the qualitative research approaches, was employed in the data analysis. After downloading and organising the articles into folders, the 58 articles were recorded in an Excel file created as the 'Analysis Guide'. The titles and abstracts of the articles were reviewed in line with the literature review and their relevance to the research questions. Subsequently, each article was examined in detail, including its introduction, context, theoretical background and methodological information. During this process, aspects such as context, theoretical foundation, education level, type of education, topic, research questions, objectives, hypotheses, and aims were considered. Under the heading of methodological information, each study was analysed in terms of data type, research methodology, study population, data collection tools and data analysis techniques. Figure 4 illustrates the process used to select the final study set and include it in the analysis.

Initially, articles retrieved using keywords, year, author and abstracts were transferred into an Excel file. Subsequently, the article selection and inclusion checklist shown in Figure 4 was employed. As the first screening step, the titles of the articles were reviewed. If the title aligned with the aim of the study, the article was accepted for inclusion and then evaluated in greater detail. Articles deemed unsuitable were marked in red, and the next article was considered. In cases where a decision could not be made based on the title alone, the abstract was read. A new 'purpose' column was added to the Excel file, where the aim of each study was clearly and emphatically recorded, and suitable articles were marked in green. When the abstract still did not provide sufficient clarity, the full text was quickly scanned to make a decision. The Excel Analysis Guide was developed per the research purpose and literature review. The abstracts of the included articles were read first, and then their aims were recorded in the Excel file (Appendix B). Each article was subsequently read individually, and the remaining columns were completed. Figure 5 provides a detailed overview of the screening process. This study was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) Statement, an internationally recognised standard for ensuring transparency and rigour in systematic reviews (Page *et al.* 2021). The review process was carried out in three main stages: (1) article selection, (2) article screening and (3) data coding, extraction and analysis.

The total number of articles identified from the databases was 3623. A total of 3073 articles were excluded prior to screening on the grounds that they fell outside the study framework. Before the duplicate removal and inclusion–exclusion steps, 550 records remained. After removing duplicate articles ($n = 252$), 298 studies were left. The evaluation was carried out using Finfgeld-Connett's (2018) Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist. In applying this checklist, it was essential to systematically consider 10 questions designed to facilitate a structured assessment of the topic. If the first two screening questions were answered positively, the evaluation continued with the remaining eight questions. During the initial screening phase, many articles were excluded for the following reasons:

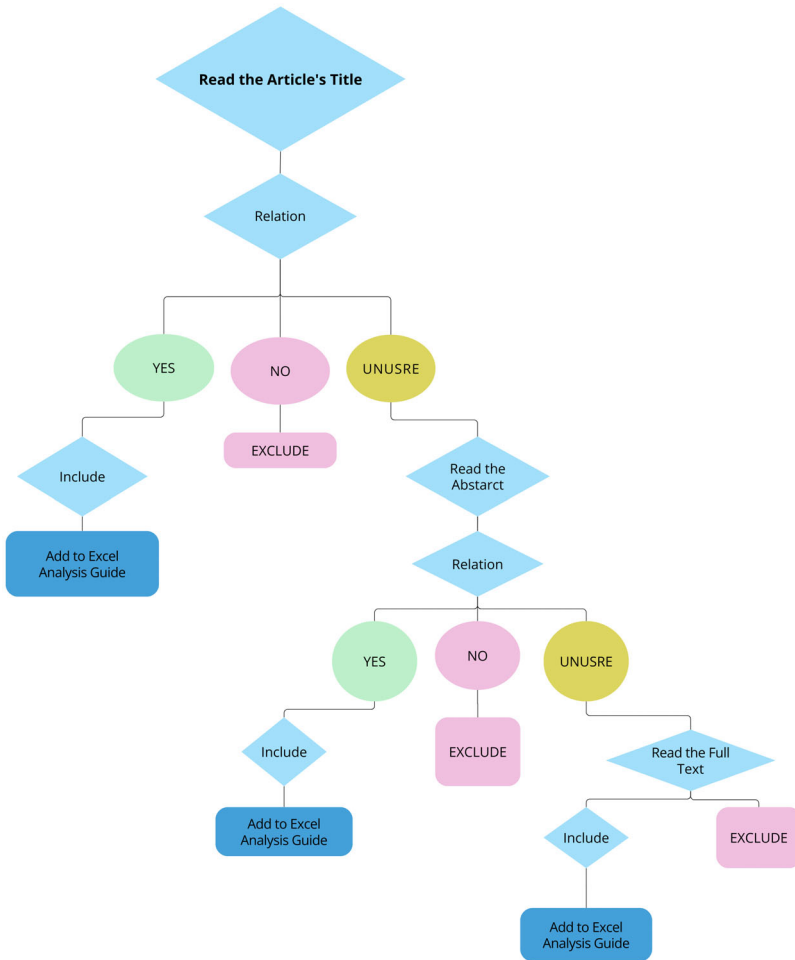


Figure 4
Article Selection and Inclusion Process.

literature reviews, theoretical articles, curriculum analyses, studies examining or comparing national policies related to the subject and articles containing only suggestions ($n = 19$); studies teaching Critical Media Literacy without Visual Literacy ($n = 43$); studies that did not involve 'awareness or reinterpretation' in the target group ($n = 27$); studies without accessible full texts in English or Turkish ($n = 7$); and those listed ($n = 42$). Based on the indicators used and the responses provided at each evaluation stage, the final number of articles included in the study was determined as 58.

Validity and reliability

Appendix A presents the search strings used in the studies' analysis. The data obtained through content analysis were interpreted, and the results were presented using figures showing percentage and frequency distributions. The steps followed during the design, data collection and analysis processes to enhance the reliability of the research have been explained in detail in the "Method" section. The keywords used for data access were provided in detail with Boolean

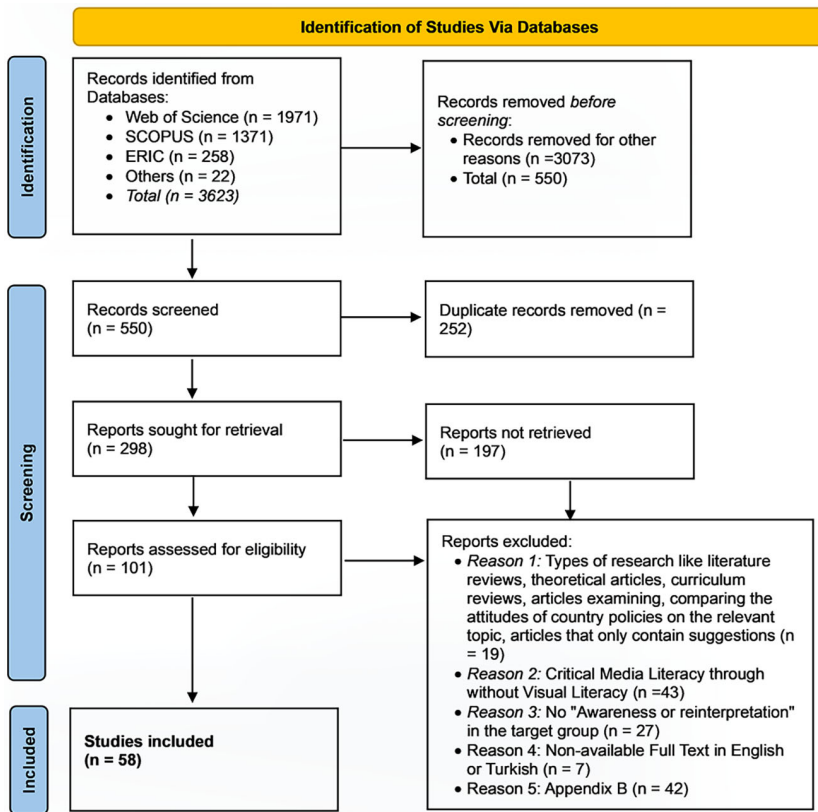


Figure 5
PRISMA Screening Process Diagram.

operators. To ensure consistency with the research questions and conceptual framework and to prevent bias (Newman & Gough 2020), the researchers established inclusion and exclusion criteria before conducting database searches. In the data analysis, the PRISMA protocol (Figure 5), widely used in the social sciences, was followed (Page *et al.* 2021; İlgün-Dibek & Toptaş 2023). All these steps represent necessary practices to enhance the validity and reliability of the research (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Findings

RQ1. What are the characteristic features of activist art studies situated within the frameworks of Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory between 2005 and 2023?

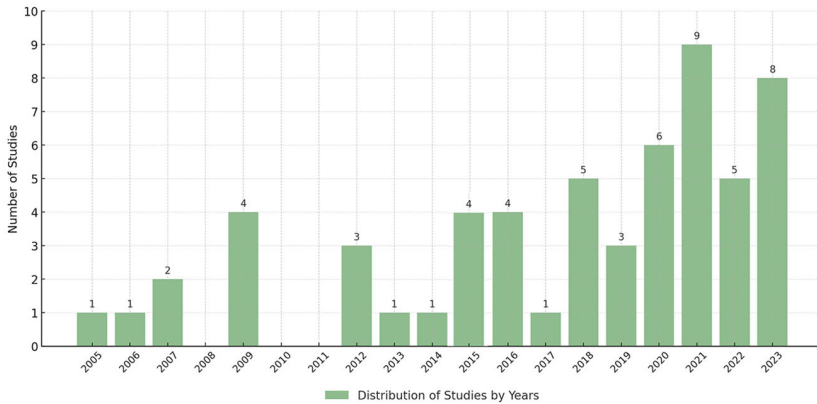
Study characteristics

Within the scope of the findings related to the first research question, the characteristic features of activist art studies conducted within the frameworks of Critical

Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory were analysed. The findings are presented according to publication year, sample groups, research method, data collection tools and data analysis techniques.

Year

Graph 1 reveals the trends in research activities within the specified time frame.



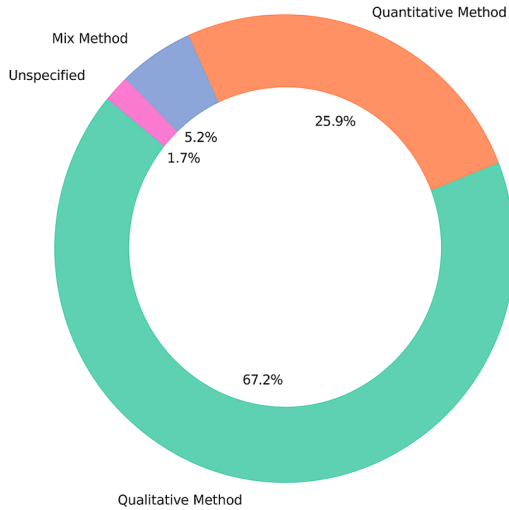
Graph 1

Publication Years of the Reviewed Articles.

Graph 1 shows the distribution of studies published between 2005 and 2023. A notable increase in the number of publications is observed particularly in 2020 ($n = 6$), 2021 ($n = 9$) and 2023 ($n = 8$). This increase aligns with the objectives of Critical Media Theory, which focuses on questioning media ideologies, and Visual Culture Theory, which aims to develop awareness of visual representations. Media and visual literacy are increasingly regarded as fields linked to pedagogy, social participation and human rights (Linné & Quinn 2020; Brum *et al.* 2023). This trend explains the recent shaping of activist art and media discourse studies. The annual increase reflects both a rise in numerical intensity and a pedagogical orientation grounded in theoretical depth, highlighting the capacity of these studies to respond to social developments and to advance transformations in visual and media literacy.

Research methods

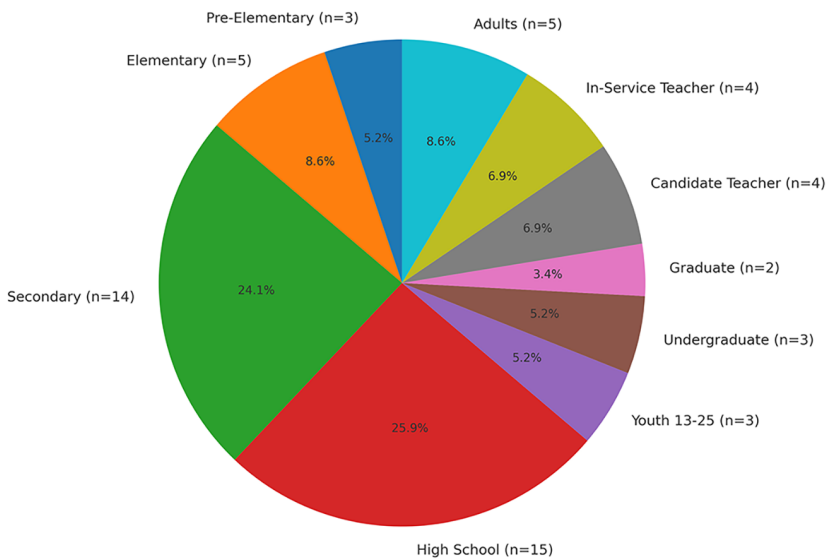
The findings related to research methods are presented in Graph 2. It shows that most of the 58 reviewed articles preferred qualitative research methods ($f = 39$). This is consistent with the structure of Visual Culture Theory, which is based on multilayered visual analysis and the interpretation of cultural representations (Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007). Similarly, Critical Media Theory, which necessitates the ideological analysis of media content, explains the need for critical interpretative processes conducted with qualitative data (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002; Kellner & Share 2005; Kreikemeier 2021). This theoretical orientation makes the limited number of quantitative ($f = 15$) and mixed-method ($f = 3$) studies meaningful.



Graph 2
Research Methods Used in the Reviewed Articles.

Sample groups

When examining the distribution of the sample groups across the 58 reviewed articles (see Graph 3), it is observed that the highest proportions belong to high school ($n = 15$) and middle school ($n = 14$) students. Together, these two groups constitute approximately half of the total sample. The selection of primary school students ($n = 5$), preschool students ($n = 3$) and young individuals (aged 13–25, $n = 3$) as sample groups is relatively limited compared to high school and middle



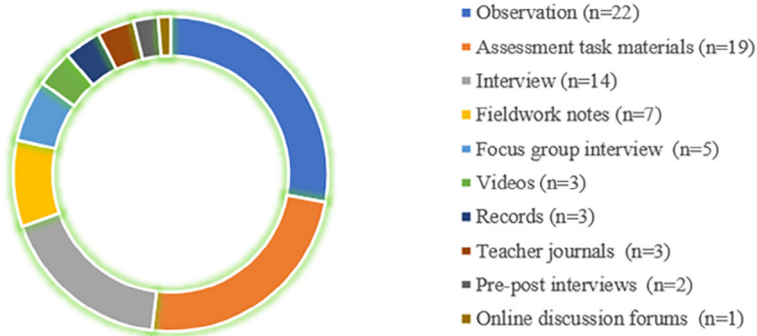
Graph 3
Sample Distribution.

school groups. Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory emphasise that questioning media messages and visual representations from an early age is crucial for developing critical awareness and identity formation (Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007). Adult individuals ($n = 5$), pre-service teachers ($n = 4$), in-service teachers ($n = 4$), undergraduate university students ($n = 3$) and postgraduate students ($n = 2$) are comparatively less represented in the studies.

Data collection tools

Information regarding the data collection tools used in the reviewed articles is presented in [Graphs 4](#) and [5](#).

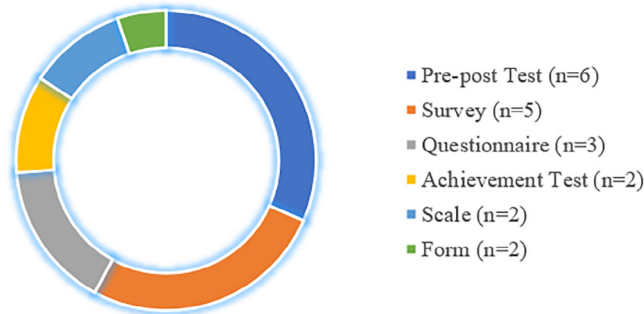
Qualitative Data Collection Tools



Graph 4

Qualitative Data Collection Tools.

Quantitative Data Collection Tools



Graph 5

Quantitative Data Collection Tools.

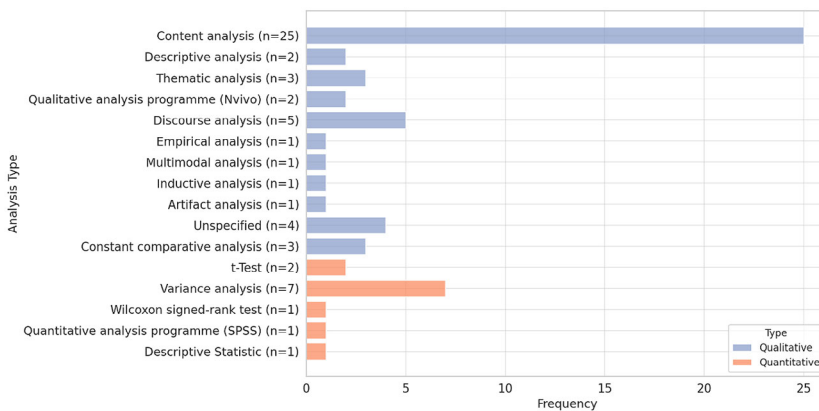
[Graphs 4](#) and [5](#) show the distribution of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools used in the research studies. Among the reviewed studies, the most frequently used qualitative data collection tool was observation, employed in 22 studies. Observations were followed by assessment task materials ($n = 19$) and

interviews ($n = 14$). Within the interviews, some studies included techniques such as focus group discussions ($n = 5$) and pre-test/post-test interviews ($n = 2$). Data obtained through interviews reveal how participants make sense of their media and visual experiences (Kellner & Share 2005) and make their subjective awareness regarding critical media literacy visible (Rose 2007). Other qualitative data collection tools included field notes ($n = 7$), videos ($n = 3$), recordings ($n = 3$), teacher diaries ($n = 3$) and online discussion forums ($n = 1$).

Conversely (Graph 5), in quantitative studies, the most frequently used tools were pre-test/post-test applications ($n = 6$) and surveys ($n = 5$), while questionnaires ($n = 3$) and achievement tests ($n = 2$) were also notably present. The methodological orientations of both Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory can explain the limited use of quantitative data collection tools. Since these theories aim to develop individuals' abilities to question media messages and analyse visual representations (Kellner 1995), they prioritise qualitative approaches that focus on participant narratives and contextual analyses. In this context, visual literacy requires the interpretation of multilayered and subjective experiences rather than relying solely on singular quantitative measures to critically make sense of media messages (Méndez-García & Cores-Bilbao 2021).

Types of data analysis

Information regarding the types of data analysis used in the reviewed articles is presented in Graph 6.



Graph 6

Types of Data Analysis.

Graph 6 illustrates the main and sub-themes of qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods employed in the research studies. Content analysis emerged as the most used method in qualitative data analysis, and it was applied in 25 studies. This finding reflects the theoretical perspectives aiming to ensure that individuals address media messages not at a superficial level but alongside their deep structures (Mitchell 1994; Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007). Content analysis is followed by discourse analysis ($n = 5$) and thematic analysis ($n = 3$). Descriptive analysis, qualitative analysis software such as NVivo, and the constant comparative method were also utilised. In quantitative data analysis, the most prominent method was analysis of variance, which was preferred in seven studies. This was followed by

t-tests ($n = 2$) and other quantitative analysis methods such as the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and the use of SPSS software. This distribution highlights the different approaches to data analysis between qualitative and quantitative methods, with content analysis and analysis of variance standing out as leading methods in their respective areas.

RQ2. What thematic focuses emerge in activist art studies analysed within these theoretical frameworks?

Within the scope of the second research question, the themes related to activist art studies were analysed based on Critical Media Theory (Kellner & Share 2005) and Visual Culture Theory (Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007). The overall framework of this analysis and the themes related to the theories are presented in Figures 6–8.

The analysis conducted within these theoretical frameworks shows that the studies are not limited to aesthetic production; instead, they incorporate critical dimensions such as questioning media ideologies, deconstructing cultural representations and developing visual literacy. The studies contain thematic structures aimed at transforming participants into individuals who are more sensitive and aware of media representations. Based on Critical Media Theory, themes such as media ideologies, politics of representation and critical production emerge prominently. In contrast, within the framework of Visual Culture Theory, themes such as visual culture critique, decoding cultural codes and participatory visual literacy are highlighted in the research.

Media and Digital Culture

Figure 6 reflects the multilayered structure of the focus on Media and Digital Culture in activist art studies. The figure shows that most studies are concentrated on the themes of 'Advertisements' ($n = 10$) and 'Critical Media Literacy' ($n = 7$), indicating that approaches aiming to analyse digital content critically are prominent.

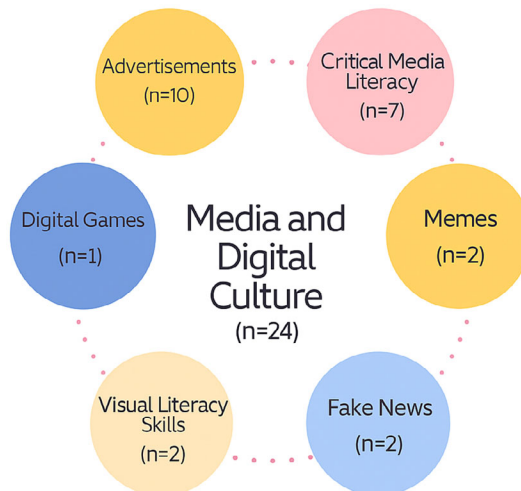


Figure 6
Media and Digital Culture.

Within the context of Visual Culture Theory, themes such as visual literacy ($n = 2$) and memes ($n = 2$) particularly point to studies questioning how individuals produce meaning through digital images and how these images relate to cultural contexts (Mitchell 1994). From the perspective of Critical Media Theory, themes such as fake news ($n = 2$) and digital games ($n = 1$) reflect an approach questioning the ideological dimension of media messages, power relations and practices of representation on digital platforms (Horkheimer *et al.* 2002).

Social Justice and Character Building

The Social Justice and Character Building theme aligns with Critical Media Theory's focus on making social structures visible and subject to critical interrogation. Figure 7 shows that sub-themes such as gender stereotypes ($n = 8$) and social issues ($n = 7$) are the most prevalent. This reveals that activist art studies prioritise content that enables individuals to develop critical awareness towards social norms (Sholle & Denski 1995; Shefer 2019). The theme of migration and refugee backgrounds ($n = 6$) is related to studies within the framework of Visual Culture Theory, emphasising the artistic expression of identity representation, belonging and cultural differences (Rose 2007). The emphasis on social justice ($n = 4$) shows that pedagogical approaches prioritising ethical development and character building through an equality-focused perspective are also addressed through activist art (Garber 2020). These findings demonstrate that art, beyond being an aesthetic tool, provides a transformative environment fostering social consciousness.

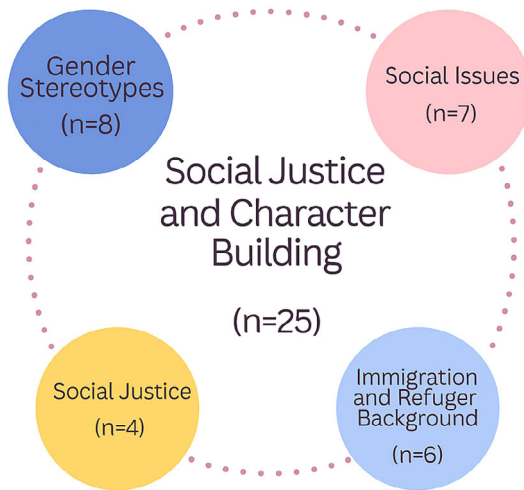


Figure 7
Social Justice and Character Building.

Cognitive, Emotional and Citizenship Development

Figure 8 reflects the holistic approach of activist art studies to foster emotional and social awareness alongside cognitive skills. The figure shows that themes such as language learning ($n = 4$) and critical thinking skills ($n = 2$) are particularly prominent, indicating that art, as a pedagogical tool, contributes to intellectual depth and multidimensional inquiry processes. Within the framework of Critical

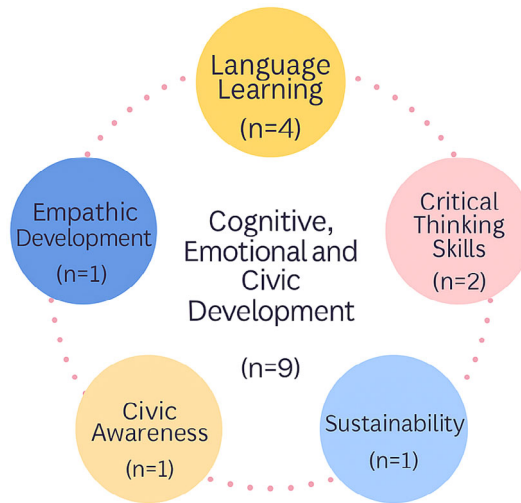


Figure 8

Cognitive, Emotional and Citizenship Development.

Media Theory, this situation represents the use of art to process content, enabling individuals to engage with media messages critically and analytically rather than passively, from the perspective of Visual Culture Theory, themes such as the development of empathy ($n = 1$), citizenship consciousness ($n = 1$) and sustainability ($n = 1$) point to the transformative impact of aesthetic experiences that foster individuals' engagement with social and environmental issues. In this regard, the theme demonstrates that art is treated as a field fostering ethical, cultural and social awareness.

Discussion

This study aimed to systematically examine activist art research published between 2005 and 2023, shaped by Critical Media Theory (Kellner 1995; Sholle & Denski 1995; Horkheimer *et al.* 2002; Kellner & Share 2005) and Visual Culture Theory (Mitchell 1994; Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007) and to comprehensively identify the characteristic features and thematic focuses of these studies. Regarding the results of the first research question, a general perspective was provided by reporting the characteristics of the reviewed studies. Study characteristics were examined regarding publication year, sample, research method, data collection tools and data analysis. It was observed that the highest number of publications occurred in 2021, 2023 and 2020. These increases parallel transformations related to digital media use and global social events (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation, social justice movements). This rise can be associated with studies questioning the impact of global events such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and migration and refugee crises on media representation, suggesting that the ideological aspects of visual culture have become more visible (Mitchell 1994; Mirzoeff 1999). In the present study, it was found that qualitative studies dominate the literature. While highlighting the power of qualitative methods in depicting

individuals' processes of confronting and transforming social contradictions (Jónsdóttir 2019), designs based on the interpretation of participant narratives are proposed (Vella 2022). The predominance of qualitative studies indicates that interpretive paradigms are prioritised in revealing activist art's contextual, experiential and subjective dimensions. In this respect, it can be said that qualitative studies emerge as tools supporting critical media literacy and visual analysis skills. In examining the study sample groups, it was found that middle and high school students were predominantly selected. In contrast, primary school, preschool, university and adult groups were considerably limited. This can be associated with the focus of Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory on adolescence as a critical period for identity formation, sensitivity to media representations and the development of critical awareness (Kellner & Share 2005; Kreikemeier 2021). The vulnerability of young individuals to media representations underlines the importance of initiating critical media literacy education at an early age, which may explain the selection of these age groups as samples (Kellner 1995). Considering the intensity of interaction with visual and media content from early ages, it is suggested that preschool and primary school levels should receive greater attention within these theoretical frameworks. This limitation may be related to the methodological challenges of conducting applied studies with younger age groups. Indeed, Mirzoeff (1999) emphasises that visual culture plays a decisive role in the internalisation of social norms from childhood onwards. Similarly, adults and university students hold significant theoretical relevance as media producers and interpreters (Ahmadi *et al.* 2021). The limited representation of these groups can be considered an important gap in the literature. Thus, the distribution of age groups in the existing literature indicates that the theoretical potential is not fully reflected, highlighting the importance of targeting new sample groups in future research. Observation emerged as the most frequently used qualitative data collection tool among the reviewed studies. This finding aligns with the aims of Critical Media Theory to question the ideological structures of media content (Horkheimer *et al.* 2002; Kellner & Share 2005) and the layered nature of visual representations (Rose 2007; Gil-Glazer 2017). There are studies demonstrating that qualitative and artistic approaches make visible the processes by which students develop creative expression, digital storytelling and critical awareness (Kurz *et al.* 2022; Ferdowsi & Shahvalipour 2023). It was observed that quantitative data collection tools were used less frequently. This result parallels the finding that, due to the nature of the research, fewer quantitative studies were conducted. This limitation is closely related to the methodological orientations of Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory, which prioritise individuals' processes of questioning media messages, deconstructing visual representations and developing critical awareness (Kellner 1995). Among the studies examined, content analysis emerged as the most commonly used qualitative data analysis method ($n = 25$). This finding is consistent with the theoretical frameworks emphasising the necessity of analysing media messages not superficially but in depth (Kellner & Share 2005) and interpreting visual representations within their contexts (Mitchell 1994; Rose 2007). The prominence of content analysis indicates that critical analysis and meaning-making processes are central to studies conducted within the context of activist art (Hunting 2021; Potter 2023).

The results of the second research question show that the studies are clustered around the themes of Media and Digital Culture, Social Justice and Character Building and Cognitive, Emotional and Citizenship Development. These themes

are directly related to Critical Media Theory's approach to questioning media ideologies and making power relations visible and Visual Culture Theory's effort to decode the ideological structures of visual representations (Chung 2013; Nowell 2019; Duncum 2020). Studies are focusing on gender stereotypes, art-based strategies against racism, the role of humour-based digital visuals (memes) in developing critical approaches and visual literacy skills and the use of art as a tool for addressing social inequalities (Gil-Glazer 2017; Romero Walker 2021; Vella 2022; Luo *et al.* 2023; Shin *et al.* 2023). These results reveal that the studies are not limited to individual awareness but adopt aims of fostering social awareness, cultural critique and social transformation. In the theme of Media and Digital Culture, it was found that 'Advertisements' ($n = 10$) and 'Critical Media Literacy' ($n = 7$) were frequently addressed. It can be argued that there is an effort to develop skills to question media messages and produce creative responses. Critical Media Theory questions how media shapes individuals through ideological content and views the analysis of media texts as a tool for social transformation (Kellner & Share 2005). The focus on pervasive and influential media forms such as advertisements may stem from the need to critically evaluate individuals' relationships with consumer culture and normative values. Visual Culture Theory advocates the reconstruction of visual images with cultural and political layers of meaning (Mitchell 1994; Rose 2007). Digital contents such as advertisements, memes and fake news are among the text types most suitable for analysis within these theoretical approaches, and thus the thematic concentration aligns with this orientation (Kurz *et al.* 2022; Ferdowsi & Shahvalipour 2023). This indicates that under the guidance of the theoretical framework, priority has been given to the critical analysis of digital media representations, aiming to promote social awareness and transformation through such content. In the theme of Social Justice and Character Building, sub-themes such as gender stereotypes ($n = 8$), social issues ($n = 7$) and migration and refugee backgrounds ($n = 6$) are predominant. While Critical Media Theory focuses on questioning power relations, studies addressing gender and social issues foster individuals' critical consciousness towards these norms (Sholle & Denski 1995; Kellner & Share 2005). Visual Culture Theory facilitates the interpretation of representations through artistic images, which is significant in visualising experiences such as migration and displacement (Giroux 2004; Rose 2007; Gil-Glazer 2017). These results are directly aligned with Critical Media Theory's goal of making social inequalities visible and Visual Culture Theory's encouragement of artistic analyses of representation. They support the development of individuals' critical perspectives on social norms, the reconsideration of character formation and the cultivation of sensitivity towards conflictual social situations. Reflecting the core assumptions of the theoretical framework, these themes suggest that art is used as a tool for developing critical thinking and social consciousness (Leurs *et al.* 2018; Smets & Bozdağ 2018; Pasta 2019). In the theme of Cognitive, Emotional and Citizenship Development, it is concluded that art supports individuals' intellectual depth and multidimensional inquiry processes through themes such as language learning and critical thinking skills. This aligns with the approach of Critical Media Theory, which encourages the evaluation of media messages not at a superficial level but alongside their ideological content (Kellner & Share 2005). Within the context of Visual Culture Theory, themes such as the development of empathy, citizenship consciousness and sustainability show that aesthetic experiences foster individuals' engagement with social issues (Mirzoeff 1999; Rose 2007). Art's ethical and social dimensions have been emphasised,

explaining why the themes point not only to cognitive development but also to emotional and social growth (Kim *et al.* 2024; Lin *et al.* 2024; Scull *et al.* 2024).

Conclusion

This study presents a theoretically grounded and comprehensive synthesis of activist art research conducted between 2005 and 2023 within Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory frameworks. Through the systematic analysis of methodological and thematic characteristics related to the field, significant findings have been obtained regarding how activist art practices are connected to media ideologies, visual representations and social justice issues. The results show a predominant use of qualitative approaches, particularly content analysis and observation. This highlights the prioritisation of interpretive paradigms and in-depth analyses in studies shaped by critical theory. The methods employed allow for the multilayered examination of media texts, artistic productions and participants' meaning-making processes, aligning closely with the epistemological foundations of both Critical Media Theory and Visual Culture Theory. The dominance of middle and high school students in the sample groups reflects the emphasis these theories place on adolescence as a critical period for identity formation and media literacy development. However, the limited representation of preschool, primary school, university and adult individuals points to a notable gap in the literature. It suggests the need for more inclusive sample groups in future research. Thematically, the studies concentrated on three major focuses: Media and Digital Culture, Social Justice and Character Building and Cognitive, Emotional and Citizenship Development. These themes demonstrate the decisive role of activist art in fostering critical thinking, ethical awareness and social participation. The particular focus on popular culture products such as advertisements, memes and digital narratives highlights the dual function of visual culture as a domain for both ideological reproduction and transformation. In conclusion, this study once again reveals the transformative power of activist art education in questioning media ideologies, producing alternative discourses against conventional media representations and fostering social consciousness. While drawing attention to the necessity of integrating critical visual practices into educational contexts, it suggests that future research should include more diverse sample groups, enhance methodological diversity and further explore the intersections of aesthetics, ethics and activism. The findings of this study offer multilayered recommendations for both educational policies and broader societal strategies aimed at enhancing critical media literacy through art-based approaches. The limited representation of preschool, primary school, university and adult groups highlights the need to reconsider curricular structures and lifelong learning processes. Integrating activist art into educational programmes from an early age could support the foundational development of critical thinking, visual analysis and creative storytelling skills. For this purpose, it is recommended that teacher-training programmes adopt an interdisciplinary structure based on media theory, digital literacy and art education. Beyond educational policies, cultural policies, digital media regulations and supportive practices by local governments targeting youth and art centres could also effectively strengthen critical media literacy. Public exhibitions, digital platforms and art-based campaigns aimed at raising media literacy awareness would further reveal the role of art in social transformation. Finally, encouraging interdisciplinary research across the fields of media,

art and education is considered essential not only for academic knowledge production but also for promoting a culture of data-driven decision-making in policy development processes.

Ayşe Nihan Zengin is a research assistant at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University and a PhD student at Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa. Her research interests include social sciences and humanities, education through art, museum education, AI in education and elementary school education.

Nur Ütkür-Güllühan is associate professor at Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa. Her research interests include social sciences and humanities, education, elementary school education, teacher training for primary school, teacher training, creative drama and art in education.

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Appendix A: Search Strings

The search strings are presented in Table 1. Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar were used. Publications with full-text access in English were preferred; however, publications from non-English-speaking countries were also included. The authors used Boolean operators such as “OR” and “AND” in their searches.

Data base	Search strings
Web of Science	(kindergarten OR primary OR elementary OR secondary OR high school OR undergraduate OR graduate OR education) AND (critical media literacy OR “critical media literacy” OR visual literacy OR “visual literacy” OR visual arts) AND (academic journals) AND English OR Turkish (All field)
Scopus	(kindergarten OR primary OR elementary OR secondary OR high school OR undergraduate OR graduate OR education) AND (critical media literacy OR “critical media literacy” OR visual literacy OR “visual literacy” OR visual arts) AND (academic journals) AND English OR Turkish (article titles, abstracts and keywords)
ERIC	(kindergarten OR primary OR elementary OR secondary OR high school OR undergraduate OR graduate OR education) AND (critical media literacy OR “critical media literacy” OR visual literacy OR “visual literacy” OR visual arts) AND (academic journals) AND English OR Turkish (All field)
Google Scholar	“activist art education” OR “activist art studies” OR “critical media literacy” AND “visual literacy” OR “critical visual literacy” AND “intervention” OR “practice”

Appendix B :

Excel Analyses Guide

A. Article Pre-Face

- a. 1 Reference
- b. 2 Abstract

B. Context and theoretical backgrounds

- a. 3 Education level [one or more]
 1. a Primary school
 2. b Secondary school
 3. c High School
 4. d Undergraduate Students
 5. e Graduate Students
 6. f Continuous teacher training
 7. g Other
- b. 10 Objectives/Sub-themes
 1. a Learning
 2. b Attitude
 3. c Interest
 4. d Motivation
 5. e Social Justice
 6. f CML Skills
 7. g Other specify
 8. Primary Education
 9. Visual Literacy
 10. Teacher Education
 11. Adult Education
 12. Social Justice
 13. Culture

C. Methodological information

- a. 14 Type of data
 1. a Qualitative
 2. b Quantitative
 3. c Mixed
- b. 16 Studied population
 1. a Teachers
 2. b Pre-service teachers
 3. c Students
 4. d Principals
 5. e Parents
 6. f Other specify
- c. 18 Data Collection Tools
 1. a Questionnaire quant.
 2. b Questionnaire qual.
 3. c Individual interviews
 4. d Group interview
 5. e Observations

- 6. f Direct observation
 - 7. g Video recording
 - 8. h Audio recording
 - 9. i Document
 - 10. j Other specify
- d. 19 Data Analysis

Qualitative Research Checklist (Fingfeld-Connett, D. 2018. A guide to qualitative meta-synthesis. Routledge.)

Screening Questions	Yes	Can't Tell	No
<p>1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?</p> <p><i>Consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the goal of the research? • Why was it thought important? • Its relevance 			
<p>2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?</p> <p><i>Consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants • Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal? • Is it worth continuing? 			
Detailed Questions	Yes	Can't Tell	No
<p>3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?</p> <p><i>Consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the researchers justified the research design e.g. did they discuss how they decided which method to use? 			
<p>4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?</p> <p><i>Consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the researchers explained how the participants were selected • If they explained why the participants, they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study • If there are any discussions around recruitment e.g. why some people chose not to take part 			
<p>5. Were the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?</p> <p><i>Consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the setting for data collection was justified • If it is clear how data were collected e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview, etc. 			

(continued)

- If the researchers justified the methods chosen
- If the researchers made the methods explicit e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews were conducted, or did they use a topic guide?
- If methods were modified during the study. If so, did the researchers explained how and why?
- If the form of data is clear e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes, etc.
- If the researchers discussed saturation of data

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Consider:

- If the researchers critically examined their own role, potential bias, and influence during:
- Formulation of the research questions
- Data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location
- How the researchers responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Consider:

- If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained
- If the researchers discussed issues raised by the study e.g. issues around informed consent, confidentiality, or how they handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study
- If approval was sought from the ethics committee

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

Consider:

- If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process
- If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data?
- Whether the researchers explain how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process
- If sufficient data are presented to support the findings
- To what extent contradictory data are taken into account
- Whether the researchers critically examined their own role, potential bias, and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

Consider:

- If the findings are explicit
- If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researchers' arguments
- If the researchers discussed the credibility of their findings e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst
- If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question

(continued)

10. How valuable is the research?

Consider:

- If the researchers discuss the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding
- e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy or relevant research-based literature?
- If they identify new areas where research is necessary
- If the researchers discuss whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or other ways the research may be used