

Einreichung Innovative Lehre 2026¹

EINREICHENDE/R
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Ggfs. Zusammensetzung der Arbeitsgruppe²:
ALLGEMEINE ANGABEN ZUR EINREICHUNG und LV
LV wird abgehalten im Master
LV-Nummer: 5690
Semester: 4
ECTS: 5
LV-Titel: Critical Thinking and Social Media
Rahmenbedingungen der LV:
(z. B. Studierendenzahl in der LV, Stellung im Studienplan bzw. -programm, Parallel-LVs und damit verbundene bestimmte Anforderungen zur Beurteilung oder Durchführung)
Elective in the Digital Economy und Marketing, seminar with 30 students

¹ Eingereicht werden können Lehrveranstaltungen, die im Jahr 2025 (SS 2025, WS 2025/26) abgehalten wurden und Lehrveranstaltungen, die über zwei Semester andauern (WS 2024/25-SS 2025).

² Bitte nennen Sie hier alle Personen, die an der Entwicklung des LV-Konzepts beteiligt waren (ACHTUNG: es sind nur Personen antragsberechtigt, die im Jahr 2025 (SS 2025, WS 2025/26) bzw. bei LVs über zwei Semester im WS 2024/25-SS 2025 einen Lehrauftrag bzw. eine Lehrverpflichtung an der WU hatten/haben). Die hier genannten Personen werden im Falle einer Prämierung mit ausgezeichnet.

Informationen zur Einreichung

Bitte verwenden Sie zur Beschreibung Ihrer Lehrveranstaltung das Formular auf den folgenden Seiten. Die Einreichung soll einen Umfang von max. 5 Seiten nicht überschreiten (exklusive Anhang).

Unter Punkt 1 bitten wir Sie um eine Kurzbeschreibung Ihres LV-Designs im Umfang von maximal 180 Wörtern. Im Falle einer Prämierung Ihres LV-Designs wird dieser Text gemeinsam mit Ihrem Antrag auf der Website der WU und Ausschnitte daraus in der Teaching & Learning Academy veröffentlicht.

Die ausführliche Darstellung Ihres LV-Designs (Punkt 2) wird in drei Abschnitte untergliedert:

- Punkt 2a soll der Jury einen ersten Überblick über Ihre LV verschaffen.
- In Abschnitt 2b können Sie näher auf die Lehrmethoden und didaktischen Elemente eingehen.
- Abschnitt 2c ist dazu gedacht, den innovativen Charakter Ihrer Lehrveranstaltung in Bezug auf das Schwerpunktthema hervorzuheben.

Die bei den einzelnen Abschnitten genannten Fragen sollen Ihnen als Orientierungs- und Strukturierungshilfe dienen.

Bitte füllen Sie das Formular direkt in Word aus und senden Sie es als .doc oder .pdf bis zum **30. Januar 2026** an lehrenundlernen@wu.ac.at.

1. KURZBESCHREIBUNG DES LEHRVERANSTALTUNGSDESIGNS (max. 180 Wörter)

Die hier verfasste Kurzbeschreibung wird im Falle einer Prämierung gemeinsam mit dem eingereichten Formular auf der Website der WU veröffentlicht.

Critical Thinking and Social Media is an elective course in the Master in Marketing and Digital Economy that addresses one of the central challenges of higher education in the age of generative AI: how to strengthen human judgment in increasingly automated and data-driven environments.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies critical thinking as a key future skill. Yet today, this skill is constantly challenged by algorithmic curation, AI-generated content, and data-driven optimization, which shape what people see, believe, and share online—often amplifying misinformation, bias, and automated persuasion.

This course equips students with the conceptual and practical tools needed to critically engage with digital and AI-mediated content while reflecting on the cognitive and structural mechanisms that influence their own thinking. By embedding critical thinking and the psychology of cognitive biases in social media, data, and generative AI contexts, the course prepares students to navigate AI-shaped environments as reflective decision-makers. In doing so, it embraces a core responsibility of universities today: equipping graduates not just to work with AI, but to participate responsibly in AI-shaped societies.

Using a project-based, applied approach, students work in teams on real-world cases involving social media and AI, translating theory into tangible outputs with relevance beyond the classroom.

2. AUSFÜHRLICHE DARSTELLUNG DES LEHRVERANSTALTUNGSDESIGNS

2a.) Überblick

- Welche Learning Outcomes sollen die Studierenden erreichen?
- Wie ist die LV inhaltlich und strukturell aufgebaut?
- Aus welchen Elementen setzt sich die Endnote zusammen?
- Wie wird das Schwerpunktthema „Innovative Lehre im Zeitalter von generativer KI“ in Ihrer LV aufgegriffen?

The aim of the course is to provide participants with essential, thought-provoking impulses for a critical and responsible approach to the consumption and production of digital and AI-produced content. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Critically evaluate digital, social media, and AI-mediated information and arguments, identifying underlying assumptions, credibility issues, limitations, and cognitive, algorithmic, and societal biases.
2. Understand and explain the psychological and behavioral mechanisms shaping digital consumption, including drivers of virality, persuasion, and common cognitive biases in data-driven and algorithmically curated environments.
3. Apply principles of critical reasoning to assess the reliability, validity, and ethical implications of AI-generated and algorithmically produced content in academic, professional, and societal contexts.
4. Demonstrate AI and digital literacy at a conceptual level, by explaining how algorithmic systems, machine learning, and generative AI influence information flows, decision-making, and social outcomes, without requiring advanced technical expertise.
5. Exercise reflective judgment and communicate reasoned evaluations under conditions of automation, deciding when and how AI tools should be used, supplemented, or critically challenged, and articulating conclusions using evidence-based arguments while acknowledging uncertainty.

Content elements and course structure

To achieve these learning outcomes, the course introduces key concepts and tools from both formal and psychological perspectives on critical thinking. Core content includes the fundamentals of the psychology of critical thinking and behavioral economics, an overview of common cognitive biases in a data-driven world, sensitivity to statistical pitfalls in data analysis and the responsible handling of big data and machine learning algorithms, strategies to mitigate the effects of cognitive biases, and tools to improve critical thinking and argumentation.

The course follows a project-based structure with two main elements. In the first part, students acquire theoretical foundations in critical thinking and social media marketing, drawing on behavioral economics and cognitive psychology to understand biases, the psychology of virality, and the basic intuition behind machine learning and algorithmically produced content. In the second part, students apply these concepts to a current and relevant case in a group project. Student teams work on contemporary issues related to social media and AI-generated content and develop a presentation, a written seminar paper, and a tangible output beyond the classroom. Across several workshop and coaching sessions, students practice breaking down complex questions, synthesizing scientific literature, collecting empirical evidence, and deriving balanced, practical recommendations. The course concludes with project presentations and joint discussion.

Assessment and grading

The final grade is assessed as the sum of the following components (maximum 100 points):

- Project presentation: 40 points
- Written project report: 40 points
- Peer evaluation of group work: 10 points
- Participation in class: 10 points

Participation in class and the project presentation are graded at the individual level, while the written project report is graded at the group level. Peer evaluation is used to assess individual contributions within the group project.

The course addresses the focus topic by explicitly embedding critical thinking within AI literacy and digital practices. Rather than treating critical thinking as a standalone abstract skill, it is developed in relation to concrete epistemic environments shaped by algorithms, social media platforms, and generative AI systems. Students learn to critically assess AI-mediated information, recognize epistemic and psychological vulnerabilities in digital environments, and exercise human judgment where automated systems increasingly influence decisions. In doing so, the course responds to the central educational challenge of the generative AI era: preparing students to remain reflective, responsible, and analytically autonomous in environments characterized by automation, scale, and cognitive overload.

2b.) „Lehrmethoden“

- Welche Methoden setzen Sie ein, um die Studierenden beim Erreichen der Learning Outcomes zu unterstützen?
- Welche Methoden setzen Sie ein, um die Potenziale von KI sinnvoll für den Lernerfolg der Studierenden zu nutzen und den Herausforderungen optimal zu begegnen?
- Aus welchem Grund haben Sie sich genau für diese Methode(n) und Lehrsettings entschieden? Welche besonderen Vorteile sehen Sie im Einsatz der Methoden und der gewählten Lehrsettings? Was und wie lernen die Studierenden dadurch?

Inwieweit profitieren die Studierenden von den didaktischen Maßnahmen in der Lehrveranstaltung?

To support students in achieving the intended learning outcomes in critical thinking and AI literacy, this course employs a set of complementary, research-informed teaching methods that combine conceptual instruction, applied analysis, and experiential learning in digitally mediated contexts.

(1) Integrated teaching of critical thinking and AI literacy: Rather than teaching critical thinking as an abstract, isolated skill, the course integrates it directly with AI literacy. This method is chosen to reflect how students actually encounter information and make decisions in AI-mediated environments. By learning to evaluate AI-generated outputs, question embedded assumptions, and recognize limitations and biases of automated systems, students develop critical thinking as a transferable competence applicable to real-world contexts. This integration optimally leverages the potential of AI as a learning object while addressing its challenges, ensuring that students do not merely use AI tools, but critically assess their influence on knowledge, judgment, and decision-making.

(2) Contextual learning in the social media environment: The course situates learning within the familiar yet analytically rich context of social media, which is heavily shaped by algorithms and AI-generated content. This teaching setting is chosen because it lowers barriers to engagement while making abstract concepts—such as algorithmic bias, amplification dynamics, and epistemic uncertainty—directly observable. Students analyze phenomena including echo chambers, misinformation, virtual influencers, and synthetic content, allowing them to connect theory with lived digital experience. As a result, students learn to apply critical reasoning to everyday information environments and develop awareness of how AI shapes perception, opinion formation, and social behavior.

(3) Applied case-based and project-based learning: To foster deep understanding, the course uses mini case studies and real-world examples to introduce cognitive biases, psychological mechanisms, and statistical pitfalls associated with AI-generated content. In addition, semester-specific project topics are continuously updated to reflect current technological and societal developments. Examples include analyses of the action bias of chatbots that provide advice rather than reflective listening, investigations of polarization bias explaining the success of extreme political content on social media, and studies of beauty bias in virtual influencers. This method enables students to critically evaluate emerging AI phenomena, promotes analytical depth, and ensures that learning remains relevant and forward-looking.

(4) Public-facing outputs beyond the classroom: To enhance motivation and learning transfer, students are encouraged to translate their analytical work into outputs that reach audiences beyond the classroom. This teaching method is chosen to reinforce learning through knowledge transfer and communication. For example, students researching “sharenting” complemented their academic analysis with a quiz and informational leaflet

distributed in pediatricians' offices to raise awareness about children's online privacy. Students benefit by deepening their understanding, strengthening communication and creative skills, and experiencing their work as socially meaningful and impactful.

(5) Generative AI as a hands-on learning method: The course actively leverages AI by enabling students to engage directly with generative AI systems in a controlled and reflective manner. Using a dedicated interface, students conduct empirical experiments by prompting large language models, comparing outputs, and analyzing variability, bias, and context sensitivity. In addition, AI-generated stimuli are used in field experiments to study user responses on social media platforms. This method allows students to experience both the potential and limitations of AI firsthand, fostering informed skepticism, methodological awareness, and responsible tool use rather than passive adoption.

Through this combination of methods, students learn not only about critical thinking and AI, but how to apply critical reasoning in complex, AI-driven environments. They benefit from higher engagement, stronger transfer of skills to real-world contexts, improved analytical and communication abilities, and increased confidence in exercising judgment under conditions of automation. Overall, the teaching methods support the development of reflective, critically literate graduates capable of responsible participation in AI-mediated academic, professional, and civic life.

2c.) Innovativer Charakter der LV

- Welche didaktischen Elemente Ihres Konzepts erachten Sie als besonders innovativ im Hinblick auf das Schwerpunktthema „Innovative Lehre im Zeitalter von generativer KI“?
- Inwiefern ist Ihr LV-Design auf andere Lehrveranstaltungen übertragbar? Welche didaktischen Elemente könnten auch in anderen Veranstaltungen an der WU zum Einsatz kommen?
- Welche Elemente können für eine neuerliche Abhaltung der LV noch verbessert/überdacht werden?

Innovative didactic elements in the age of generative AI

The innovative character of this course lies in its deliberate integration of critical thinking and AI/digital literacy, an approach that remains rare in both European and U.S. higher education, where critical thinking is typically taught as a decontextualized foundational skill. In contrast, this course treats critical thinking as a situated competence that must be exercised within AI-mediated environments. This design directly addresses one of the central challenges of the generative AI era: the growing delegation of cognitive and epistemic tasks to automated systems. By positioning students not merely as users of AI tools but as critical evaluators of AI-generated content—particularly in socially consequential domains such as social media—the course develops epistemic agency, judgment under uncertainty, and responsible oversight of automated systems. A further innovative element is the use of students as multipliers of digital literacy. By translating analytical insights into public-facing outputs beyond the classroom, the course bridges academic analysis and societal practice, strengthening both learning outcomes and real-world impact. This combination of theoretical grounding, empirical engagement with generative AI, and outward-facing knowledge transfer directly aligns with the award's focus on innovative teaching in the age of generative AI.

Adaptability and transferability to other courses

The course design is highly adaptable and transferable across levels and disciplines. While currently positioned as an elective at the end of master's studies—where it has received outstanding teaching evaluations and exceptionally positive feedback regarding learning experiences and preparation for future careers—the core didactic elements are equally relevant at the undergraduate level. Introducing digital and AI literacy earlier in students' academic trajectories would strengthen foundational competencies and allow more advanced courses to build upon them. In addition, the principle of positioning students as multipliers of knowledge can be readily transferred to other courses through formats such as public engagement projects, collaboration with institutional outreach initiatives (e.g. the Lange Nacht der Wissenschaften), or student-organized conferences open to practitioners.

At a more technical level, the experimental use of generative AI as a methodological tool can be scaled through cooperation with the Competence Center for Applied AI, enabling other courses to use the same

infrastructure to conduct controlled AI experiments, using SCIO in the background. These elements can be modularly integrated into a wide range of courses without requiring a complete curricular redesign.

Future development and further innovation

In future editions of the course, a key area for further development is the systematic strengthening of individual reflection. While critical evaluation is already embedded in group projects and case analyses, additional structured reflective components—such as individual reflective essays, learning diaries, or meta-analyses of decision-making under AI influence—would further deepen students' awareness of their own cognitive processes and biases. In line with the goal of fostering broader transmission within and beyond the university, a further planned innovation is the introduction of a podcast format in which each project group translates its findings into a short, accessible episode. This format would enhance reflective learning, strengthen science communication skills, and further extend the societal reach of the course by disseminating critical thinking about AI and digital media to wider audiences.

Hinweis: Der*die Einreichende bestätigt mit der Einsendung des Formulars sowie der erforderlichen Unterlagen, dass keine anderweitige Förderung besteht.

Anlage: Falls vorhanden, bitte Evaluierungsergebnisse beilegen!