Mapping media literacy impact in the U.S.: a review of literature and call for equity

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While media literacy has grown to encompass many topics to provide learners with the skills required to be active citizens and savvy media consumers, there is no clear conceptual framework to define ‘impact.’ This review of literature aims to understand how recent U.S.-based media literacy scholarship defines impact. We analyzed 300 articles published from 2010 to 2020 on the impact of media literacy initiatives in the U.S. We propose the 6 E’s as a framework that captures six categories that media literacy researchers use to describe the impact of media literacy interventions: Evaluation Outcomes, Enquiry, Expression, Experiential Learning, Engaged Citizenship, and Equity. We argue for a need to center equity and community-level outcomes in definitions of media literacy impact.

Media literacy is commonly defined as the ‘ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes’ (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 6) that embodies ‘active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create’ (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 7). Debate, extreme beliefs, and contentious dialogue have demonstrated the need for media literacy education. De Abreu (2022) notes, ‘what we say matters,’ from information being shared online to people perceiving history improperly to facts being mixed with opinions. Over the past decade, media literacy scholarship has directed its focus on current topics, such as social media (Alverman, 2017), misinformation (Bonnett & Rosenbaum, 2019), virtual reality (Mikelli & Dawkins, 2020), video games (Leach, 2017), and sports media (Fortuna, 2015), amongst others. Given the diffusion of media literacy scholarship across multiple disciplines and the overlapping terms and definitions within media literacy scholarship, there is a need to consolidate, categorize, clarify, and contextualize how media literacy practice and scholarship conceptualizes outcomes. In particular, in this paper, we are concerned with how media literacy scholarship understands ‘impact.’

In this paper, we share the findings from our literature review of recent U.S.-based studies on media literacy. This study was part of a larger project funded by the National Association for Media Literacy Education to examine media literacy impact in the United States, with the goal of shaping media literacy policies that support equity, inclusion, and social justice. Our team of researchers within the U.S. was tasked with examining how media literacy research in the U.S. identifies and measures impact, and to what extent equity is incorporated within media literacy educational practice in the United States.
The field of media literacy has roots in the desire for citizens to engage in democratic society and civic life. What media literacy research, practice, and impact means in terms of civic participation within democratic societies is culturally-rooted. Definitions, conceptualization, curricula, and policies vary across the world, thus shaping ideas of media literacy and its impact. Many scholars have championed for media literacy as democratic practice in different parts of the world (Aguaded et al., 2016; Buckingham, 2006; Duncan, 2006; Lim & Nekmat, 2009; Livingstone, 2004; 2011; Masterman, 2018; Mateus et al., 2019; Notley & Dezuanni, 2019; Sarwatay et al., 2021; Zdravkova, 2019). For instance, the European Commission (2007) is, without any doubt, amongst the most important promoters of media literacy. Similarly, Canadian scholars have also played a significant role in promoting media literacy curricula and initiatives (Duncan, 2006; Masterman, 2018). Our study acknowledges these varying approaches to media literacy education, policy, and curricula while focusing specifically on the cultural and national context of media literacy within the United States, as one of the many democratic nations committed to media literacy education and practice. Given the lack of emphasis on equity within U.S.-based media literacy scholarship, research, policies, and impact (Brayton & Casey, 2022; Mihailidis et al., 2021b), we focused our review on the U.S. as our particular geographic, cultural, and national context.

Media literacy scholarship often promotes more engaged participation in daily life through media users’ ability to effectively navigate information-rich media cultures. This connection to more engagement carries with it assumptions – namely that media literacy practices support individual agency and community empowerment (Mihailidis et al., 2021a). One of the key components of a strong and engaged democracy is, in fact, the power of the individual to make a desired impact within their communities and society. However, we do not have a conceptual framework to assess whether or not a given media literacy program can impact such outcomes. Previous scholars note that media literacy rarely explicitly defines impact in terms of how media-literate citizens can impact their society and communities (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Mihailidis et al., 2021b). While impact is at the core of media literacy initiatives, it is rarely explicitly defined within the scholarship. Mostly, the impact is conceptualized as evaluative outcomes from a social-scientific perspective in media literacy interventions. For example, in their meta-analysis, Jeong and colleagues (2012) collate nine outcomes consistently mentioned in media literacy studies: knowledge, criticism, influence, realism, beliefs, attitudes, norms, self-efficacy, and behaviors. These outcomes are overwhelmingly focused on the individual, their behaviors, and media behaviors. While Jeong and colleagues take a more social psychological approach to classifying media literacy outcomes by focusing on attitudes and behaviors as outcomes, we take a more critical and broader approach by going beyond individual-level analysis to address larger questions of civic engagement and equity. Accordingly, we conceptualize media literacy impact as complex, nuanced, and layered. Interventions are often process-oriented and impact occurs not only at the individual level but can be at the community level, as well. That is, the impact can be about critical inquiry and artistic expression at the individual level and also about civic participation, engaged citizenship, and collective action at the community level.

To understand how impact has been conceptualized across media literacy scholarship, we conducted a qualitative analysis of published research on media literacy practices. We present a conceptual framework that is built upon both micro- and macro-level characteristics to conceptualize impact within media literacy scholarship, practice, and education broadly. While the impact is arguably difficult to measure, considering both micro and macro levels creates opportunities for a more valid and nuanced understanding of how media literacy intervention might serve and transform individuals, organizations, institutions, and communities.

Based on our review of the literature, we present a conceptual framework, the 6 E’s of Media Literacy Impact, which articulates a framework for media literacy impact across six categories: (1) Evaluation Outcomes, (2) Enquiry1, (3) Expression, (4) Experiential Learning, (5) Engaged Citizenship, and (6) Equity. These categories allow for the impact in media literacy to be understood across approaches, intentions, and outcomes. The literature review justifies the categories based on an
extensive review of media literacy scholarship published over the past decade, specifically as it pertains to impact outcomes.

**Identifying relevant literature on media literacy impact**

To answer questions about the potential for media literacy practices to support a more equitable society and the well-being of democracy, we conducted a review of current literature within the United States.

A qualitative review of the literature aims to identify key themes and summarize critical insights. Unlike a systematic review, which has strict criteria for inclusion and exclusion and clear hypotheses that are tested, a qualitative review takes a more descriptive and interpretive approach to investigate how key concepts are used, what gaps exist in the literature, and how the body of research can be mapped in meaningful ways (Grant & Booth, 2009; Paré et al., 2015). Qualitative literature reviews do not seek to answer a definitive question, but rather to clarify key concepts and can be used to generate a framework to help understand how concepts have been used in the literature. Given that our goal was to better understand how ‘impact’ has been used in media literacy scholarship and to generate a framework for impactful media literacy, we chose to conduct a qualitative analysis of articles.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

**Temporal focus**

For an article to be included in our dataset, it had to be published within the last decade (2010–2020). We focused on the last decade to narrow our scope to the most current literature related to media literacy impact. While our focus was on contemporary debates and dialogues on media literacy impact, we felt it was important to put our findings into conversation with notable research from before this time to illustrate changes over time. Articles published after 2020 were not included as the COVID-19 global pandemic was still evolving and its implications on media literacy impact are yet to be fully developed.

**Geographic focus**

Next, as explained earlier in our paper, the inclusion of U.S.-based research also reflects the research partnership with the National Association for Media Literacy Education which funded this research project. Our team was tasked with focusing on the U.S., while our counterparts in Australia examined media literacy within their cultural and national context. Given that media literacy is at various stages of development across the globe, we limited the geographic scope to the United States, as impact and media literacy practices vary greatly across cultures and countries. We do recognize that this is a methodological limitation. We hope that future scholars will refine and expand our framework across other cultures and contexts.

**Disciplinary focus**

We included publications from fields including education, journalism, media studies, and communication to reflect the diverse approaches to media literacy research and practice. Overall, our data collection took place on databases that covered those fields, including Communication & Mass Media, EBSCO, WorldCat, and Google Scholar. Since EBSCO includes top databases such as Web of Science and Scopus and Google Scholar is a popular search tool among researchers in the U.S., we made sure to include these databases in order to obtain a comprehensive dataset that included a range of publications from a variety of disciplines.

**Topical focus**

The following keywords were used to search for media literacy articles: media literacy, media literacy research, critical media literacy, media literacy interventions, digital literacy, news literacy/news
media literacy, and information literacy. Articles had to include some type of ‘intervention,’ which we defined broadly as any program, curriculum, or initiative that would have an impact at the individual, institutional, or community level. Theoretical articles that did not discuss impact in any way were not included in further analysis. Because the purpose of the current project was to understand how impact related to media literacy interventions and initiatives has been understood in research in the U.S., more theory-based articles are not part of the main analysis in the current paper but rather are used to contextualize and explain trends and patterns.

**Scholar focus**

After the first round of data collection, we went back to review the editorial boards of prominent U.S.-based media literacy journals such as the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* to make sure that leading U.S. theorists and practitioners from education, journalism, and media backgrounds were included in our study. In particular, we wanted to make sure that scholars from historically marginalized groups and disciplines within media literacy scholarship were included. Several of these scholars had already been included in the first round of data collection, but if not, we went back to the data bases to collect any publications within our timeframe by these scholars.

**Multiple articulations and meanings of impact in media literacy scholarship**

One of the challenges that we immediately encountered was that media literacy scholarship rarely uses the word ‘impact’ directly within study descriptions. Therefore, it was a futile exercise to search for ‘impact’ as a keyword or even its synonyms such as ‘outcomes.’ If we had used this approach, we would have ended up with a biased sample of only quantitative methods studies. Impact is a challenging term that, when used, often connotes experimental and intervention studies of media literacy. Impact means different things to different scholars and practitioners within media literacy literature. For example, Ashley et al. (2013) developed a News Media Literacy Scale conceptualizing news media literacy as an outcome, but emphasized the importance of news media literacy and civic engagement. Similarly, Hobbs et al. (2013) examine the relationship between high school video production courses and civic engagement, articulating impact as both experiential learning and engaged citizenship.

Therefore, in order to make our search more comprehensive and intentional, we took a grounded and inductive approach to identifying articles for further analysis. Each of the four researchers in the initial coding team was assigned a database from which they then selected articles on media literacy scholarship that described, defined, conceptualized, and/or articulated impact either directly or indirectly. Using a collaborative journaling approach, we took notes of emerging themes, patterns in definitions of impact, and topics that were missing in the studies that we read. While reviewing, the research team met once a week to discuss and document emerging categories. After reviewing all 300 articles through a series of dialogues about our review of these articles, we came up with six broad, overlapping categories, which are described later below. This was the first round of analysis that we conducted.

After this initial round of collaborative and inductive coding, three researchers returned to all of the articles to categorize them based on the initial framework developed. All 300 articles were read and analyzed by the primary researcher, while coding each article based on which of the 6 E’s were included in the intervention. Articles were coded in MaxQDA, a qualitative research analysis software, to determine the categorization of each article. Specifically, for each article in our dataset, we went back to the six categories to code whether they fit one or more of these categories. This process of coding articles a second time helped to systematically reference back to articles in each category when synthesizing and providing examples. Several articles overlapped across multiple categories. However, there were no articles that did not fit into at least one of the six categories. Therefore, this coding process gave us confidence in the six categories being comprehensive, at least within the scope of the dataset that we examined within the U.S. in the last 10 years. Our goal with this
approach was not to strictly quantify published literature using a meta-analysis or content analysis. Rather, the purpose of this review was to get a handle on how contemporary media literacy scholarship approaches and understands the complex issue of impact.

We found that most research studies do not explicitly define impact, except through empirical measures of outcomes, such as survey instruments or experiments. To this point, several articles focus on empowering learners with skills, techniques, and tools to engage with media production, at the individual level. For the purposes of this study, it was important for us to include other articles that discussed impact as also artistic or creative media products, civic engagement and digital citizenship, critical thinking, and individual agency as media literacy. We argue that these are contexts where media literacy impact likely extends beyond individual-level outcomes.

The six E’s of media literacy impact: a conceptual framework

Through the literature review, we have classified, categorized, and clarified the conceptual definition of Media Literacy Impact. We have identified six ways impact is conceptualized and articulated within media literacy research (see Figure 1): Evaluation Outcomes, Enquiry, Expression, Experiential Learning, Engaged Citizenship, and Equity. Each of these terms is defined briefly below.

Media literacy impact as evaluation outcomes

Evaluation outcomes are characterized by media literacy research that relies on pre- and post-testing to determine the impact of the intervention, typically at the individual level. These interventions attempt to develop audience knowledge, awareness of the influence of the media, as well as reduce risky and antisocial behaviors (Jeong et al., 2012).

Media literacy impact as enquiry

Enquiry was first conceptualized by scholars such as Elizabeth Thoman (1995) and Paulo Freire (1970). It embraces critical questioning and interrogation of media texts (RobbGrieco, 2018). Pulling from early conceptualizations and critical media literacy, we find impact as enquiry in interventions that develop the skills of inquiry, open questioning, and critical self-reflection.

Media literacy impact as expression

Expression is characterized by the creative nature that media literacy can take on, where individuals can produce art, digital media, and more. Levine (2008) establishes the importance of creation in

![Figure 1. A framework to illustrate how impact is articulated in research. It is composed of evaluation outcomes, enquiry, expression, experiential learning, engaged citizenship, and equity.](image)
Media literacy interventions. Also, ‘Expression’ is not just about the ‘creative nature that media can take on’ but also that media literacy participants can be asked to be creators themselves. By becoming ‘unbound by our modalities of teaching and learning’ this conceptualization of media literacy impact presents opportunities for expression, while being critical media consumers (Buckingham, 2007; Redmond, 2019, p. 235).

**Media literacy impact as experiential learning**

Experiential learning is characterized by hands-on, integrative, and dynamic learning experiences. We see an overlap with this category and educational research in the space of ‘experiential learning theory’ (Kolb, 1984). Defined as ‘a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience and a multi-linear model of adult development,’ experiential learning theory as an important informant for our conceptualization of experiential learning. Illustrations of this type of scholarship can be seen in research by de los Stanos et al. (2018) and Buckley-Marudas (2016), both examples of classroom role playing.

**Media literacy impact as engaged citizenship**

Engaged citizenship is closely related to news consumption and news literacy interventions, but also is characterized by encouraging or including civic participation (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020 Tully et al., 2022). Civic participation encompasses activities such as attending marches and rallies, community service, donations to advocacy groups, political participation such as voting, and much more (Berger, 2009). Our conceptualization of engaged citizenship centers on interventions that promote and include such activities.

**Media literacy impact as equity**

Equity emphasizes interventions that address social inequalities, transformation, and social justice. Studies that incorporate equity center on the examinations of power structures, representation and oppressions, and are oriented toward social change. Equity-based media literacy interventions often integrate multiple other impact outcomes from our framework. Ramasubramanian et al. (2021) point to some examples while discussing their Trauma-informed Equity-minded Asset-based Model (TEAM) for social justice educators: Stanton et al.’s (2020) youth-led, Indigenous filmmaking and McArthur’s (2016) critical media literacy practices for social activism and resistance by Black girls.

Table 1 provides selected examples of each of the 6E’s of the framework. While not all the articles that we analyzed are included in this table or in the sections below, we have made sure to cite as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation outcomes</td>
<td>Chen (2013), Gesualdo and Yanovitzky (2019), Lienemann et al. (2019), Park et al. (2020), Primack et al. (2014), Shen et al. (2019), Webb et al. (2010), and Austin et al. (2018)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Exemplars are articles where the category was either the dominant or only code. Full citations for each article can be found in the reference list.
many of them as possible from across various disciplines such as Education, Media Studies, Journalism, and Mass Communication.

Each category identifies an approach to impact within the media literacy literature. We do not suggest categories are independent of the others; rather, they overlap. A single research study plausibly could incorporate media literacy impact in multiple ways, and most do. While each of these conceptualizations of impact has distinct characteristics, most existing research and many media literacy initiatives integrate more than one definition of impact into praxis.

**Impact as evaluation outcomes**

The primary focus of ‘Impact as Evaluation Outcomes’ is on measurement, prediction, and outcomes as essential indicators of impact. Studies which seek to measure the effects of media literacy interventions – whether they are in the domain of health, education, or news – often imply that impactful interventions produce quantifiable and statistically significant effects. We saw this trend most commonly in the fields of media effects, health communication, and related spaces of inquiry that employ quantitative research methods.

Further, these studies typically compare the results of a pre-test to a post-test to identify measurable changes from media literacy interventions. Existing studies measure a wide variety of outcomes, digital problem-solving skills (Cai & Gut, 2020), selective exposure (Vraga & Tully, 2019), and perceived accuracy of news headlines (Guess et al., 2020). In these contexts, the media literacy curriculums or interventions seek to promote an attitudinal or behavioral change. Several studies involving attitudes and actions related to tobacco (Chen et al., 2013; Lienemann et al., 2019), alcohol (Cox et al., 2018; Rodgers et al., 2019), drug use (Kupersmidt et al., 2010; Kupersmidt et al., 2012; Park et al., 2020) and safe sex (Pinkleton et al., 2013; Rodgers et al., 2019) defined impact in effects or outcomes-oriented way.

Further, evaluative interventions were found to use a range of scales to measure change in a quantitative manner. This includes scale validation studies such as the News Media Literacy Scale (Ashley et al., 2013), the Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Media Literacy Scale (Chen et al., 2017), the Advertising Literacy scale (Nelson, 2016), and the Degree of Engagement Questionnaire (Greene et al., 2015). For example, Greene et al. (2015) suggest that the degree of engagement scale can be ‘adapted to the particular context of the intervention and be used (in addition to existing measures that track the influence of the program) for formative, process, and outcomes evaluation’ (p. 12). The authors imply the impact of media literacy interventions can, at least partially, be measured and predicted via engagement and personal reflection.

Research identified as ‘Impact as Evaluation Outcomes’ rarely centers inclusion and equity in its arguments, but disparities in resources, access, and effects are sometimes addressed. For example, Lienemann and colleagues (2019) refer to disparities in the strength of the association between tobacco advertisements and tobacco use among populations at various educational and socioeconomic levels. While such studies sometimes include measures of poverty and educational access, those issues are not the focus. Additionally, studies articulating ‘Impact as Evaluation Outcomes’ tend to measure effects at the individual level rather than consider impact at a broader community or society level. Occasionally, democratic practices and civic engagement are also measured but usually at the individual level (e.g. as voting behavior). While it is possible media literacy interventions on the individual level could lead to broader effects, more research at the community and societal levels is also needed to assess impact.

Scales and other evaluative studies can be replicated and applied to determine the effectiveness of other media literacy interventions. Since ‘Impact as Evaluation Outcomes’ can be characterized as seeking to identify measurable change, it should be noted that the structure of these studies is limited to measuring individual levels of impact. However, participants might be inspired to engage with the community, share creative outputs, call for change in policy, or challenge representations seen in the media. Evaluative interventions were not typically found to consider these
impacts. The impact of macro-level interventions (beyond evaluating individual change) might be more difficult to measure, but are arguably more important if we seek to enact change at a societal level with media literacy education.

**Impact as enquiry**

Several articles in our review focus on impact not as an outcome described in the previous category but rather as the development of one’s ability to engage in open questioning and critical self-reflection. We call this type of media literacy ‘Impact as Enquiry.’ Research in this area often articulates impact as the ability to question the production, economics, content, and reception of media texts.

For instance, Brown et al. (2012) created an educators’ guide ‘using open-ended questions and critical inquiry’ (p. 141) to help students analyze the *Kony 2012* video. The questions ask students to think critically about the creator of the video, the intended audience of the video, and the stereotypes endorsed by the video. Grounded in critical media literacy, curricula teach students the value of interrogating media texts. Doing so can prompt conversations among students about intersecting identities, dominant depictions, and prevailing constructs with regard to race, sexual identity, gender, and socioeconomic status (Fortuna, 2015). Similarly, Friesem (2016) draws on gender and media studies to cultivate question-based dialogues to interrogate media representations. Advertisements (Sekarashih et al., 2018) and violence in media (Scharrer & Raring, 2012) are also common points of enquiry. Interventions such as these make posing questions, engaging in critical thinking, and enquiry the central focus.

‘Impact as Enquiry’ is most closely aligned with conceptualizations of critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2019). Critical media literacy encourages students to think about a wide range of topics holistically (Brayton & Casey, 2019). This critical perspective has also been associated with concerns around ‘fake news’ wherein students need to question media influences, message shaping, and audience impact (Share et al., 2019). Kingsley and Tancock (2014) imply impactful media literacy education interventions are those which increase fundamental competencies of Internet-based research, such as generating topics, effectively searching for information, critically evaluating resources, and connecting ideas across digital texts. Studies in this area assume impact happens at the individual-learner level but can scale to community levels through more engaged and effective digital citizenship. Kingsley and Tancock (2014) write ‘the key to successful instruction lies in embedding competencies within an authentic inquiry-based process’ (p. 398). Similarly, Ireland (2018) emphasizes the importance of teaching users how to assess information as the most important mission of librarianship, prioritizing information literacy through the ability to critically evaluate sources, understand media production processes, identify false information, and address bias or logical fallacies. Friesem’s (2019) undergraduate course ‘Truth, Lies, and Accuracy in the Digital Age’ places an emphasis on ‘learning to access and validate information was the first step toward a deeper understanding of the complexity of information flow in the post-truth era’ (p. 191).

Additional research is needed to determine if these individual skill-building educational interventions lead to community and societal change. While most studies in this area of ‘Impact as Enquiry’ relate broadly to the assessment of media texts, some take a social justice-based approach by examining the role of racial stereotypes, white supremacy, and systemic racism in media narratives and production (Brown et al., 2012; Dowie-Chin et al., 2020; Matías, 2020). Harris (2015) details a semester-long activity which integrates both the skills of content analysis and critical media consumption. This activity teaches students to use qualitative methods to help them become more vigilant media consumers (Harris, 2015). In a similar manner, some studies were found to examine media through the lens of ‘critical race media literacy,’ which combines the interrogation practices of media literacy with engaging youth in critical conversations about social issues (Cho & Johnson, 2020). Critical race media literacy provides a framework for students to resist racist, colonial, ableist, and heteronormative media depictions (Hawkman & Shear, 2020).
Our literature review began to reveal an intersection with enquiry and equity after we located studies that oriented enquiry from a social justice perspective. The difference between the two, which will be explored in more detail within the ‘Equity’ theme is that enquiry can take place without attention to social transformation. ‘Equity’ studies might include ‘Enquiry’ as a tool, but the distinction lies in the examination of structures of power, representation, and oppression and orientations toward social change.

In our view, it is at this intersection that media literacy might be able to generate macro-level impacts. To this point, enquiry-based media literacy studies that incorporate considerations of race and representation are where we most commonly see an approach toward equity.

**Impact as expression**

Expression is one way in which media literacy interventions can have an impact on participants. This emphasis emerges from research that articulates impact as the ability to express oneself by creating or producing media for individual, collective, or public consumption. Therefore, expression is another category of impact, which puts emphasis on both the learning that takes place during the production of creative outputs, as well as the learners who share their final products with their audiences and communities. At the individual level, expression as impact is praised for its ability to foster critical thinking and inspire analysis and evaluation in a manner that challenges hegemonic structures (Redmond, 2019). At the community- or macro-level, expression as a media literacy impact outcome focuses on ‘…creation, dissemination, and reception of individual expression, young citizens can reflect on the content of their voice, and also on the power they have to be part of a larger civic dialog’ (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013, p. 1618). This body of research often implies that media creation impacts individuals and communities through the development of identity, cultural awareness, cultural perspectives, and agency.

Several studies that fall into the category of ‘Impact as Expression’ not only focus on media production but also deeply consider its impact upon audiences. This consideration creates opportunities for youth and other individuals to actively engage with communities through the media that they produce. Expression as impact often culminates where students present together, ‘united with a mission to tell their own story about their community’ (Choudhury & Share, 2012, p. 43). Research that considers expression as media literacy impact can and often does bridge the gap between individual, community, and societal-level change. While media literacy impact as expression takes place at the individual level, these practices are assumed to affect multiple parties: the individual creator, the community of audiences who interact with the creative work, and society at large. However, scholars and practitioners do not usually interrogate these assumptions, especially regarding how the creator or the audience is impacted by the expression.

‘Impact as Expression’ was found to come in several forms. For example, it could be applied if a study incorporated elements of creative outputs, such as creating art (Burke & Hadley, 2018). Writing is also a common tool that serves as a means of expression for students, and digital tools such as student blogs (Garcia et al., 2015; Ranker, 2015) and discussion boards used to interact with peers (Langub & Lokey-Vega, 2017) can be utilized. Interventions free of digital constraints include spoken word or poetry (Call-Cummings et al., 2020; Fortuna, 2015). Studies that incorporate digital expressive tools include podcasting (Montgomery, 2014), video production, (Friesem, 2014; Frydenberg & Adone, 2016; Hobbs & Moore, 2014), photovoice (Saal & Gomez, 2019), curation (Cohen & Mihailidis, 2013; Mihailidis, 2015), detournement (French & Cambell, 2019), and sites such as Storyboard That for digital storytelling (Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020). The intersection of expression and technologies oftentimes puts an emphasis on digital literacies. Thevenin (2020a) notes when developing educational games for media literacy education, students frequently declare it to be a valuable learning experience. The technologies of today can be seen as ‘a unique opportunity to foster an understanding of the power of the information world and the Internet through media literacy education’ (De Abreu, 2015, p. 30). The use of digital media in the
production of creative works lends itself to impact in the form of expression and fosters valuable technology skills.

The wide array of expressive media suggests that one does not need artistic talent or Internet access to engage in these interventions. To that point, the messages embedded in these creative outputs can be understood by a wide range of audiences and can reach beyond language barriers. This can be interpreted as a democratization of communicating and sharing stories. As the options for creative outputs appear to be endless, this outcome increases the number of people who can engage with, learn from, and respond to these media literacy initiatives. Additionally, it is important to note that differential access to internet or digital tools for expression can be overcome with more widely available mechanisms and tools, an aspect that connects directly with issues of equity, which will be elaborated in more depth later in this paper.

**Impact as experiential learning**

Articles that articulate ‘Impact as Experiential Learning’ focus on creating more meaningful, dynamic, engaging, and integrated learning experiences. Research in this area that we categorize as ‘Impact as Experiential Learning,’ highlights media literacy practices that create spaces for learners to interact with digital technologies and share their skills with others, providing them with opportunities to learn by recognizing the knowledge students bring to the classroom (Bostock, 2012; Clarke, 2020; Nowell, 2014; Redmond, 2019; Vu et al., 2019). The research in this area additionally makes sure to note that the technologies we use every day can serve as tools for digital and media literacy education. This, paired with collaboration, lends itself to experiential learning-based outcomes (Hobbs & Coiro, 2016). Similar to ‘Impact as Expression,’ through digital media, experiential learning can take advantage of the ever-expanding affordances of technology. In many of these instances, it appears to be a process in which (1) students use digital technologies, (2) experiential learning takes place, and (3) creative outputs are produced. Therefore, as noted before, experiential learning and expression were often found working in tandem in media literacy interventions.

Spikes and Haque (2014) used social media and video production as tools to teach news media literacy. Similarly, digital storytelling served as experiential learning for literacy improvement among K-12 students (Vu et al., 2019). Such media literacy practices focus on teaching students how to interact with, use, and critique media. This literature often implies that the incorporation of digital media in the classroom can improve student learning by supporting agency, expression, broader world-views, and engagement. As Redmond (2019) asserts, ‘it is increasingly becoming clear that media production is a way for students to learn through or with media, and is essential for media literacy education’ (p. 215).

Experiential learning also was found as an outcome for building literacies for learners across a broad set of demographics. Digital literacies can be taught to students with diverse learning abilities (Donne, 2012; Leach, 2017). For example, Donne (2012) provides an example of a keyboarding curriculum for students with disabilities. In other cases, computer-based training can be used to teach immigrant workers (Flynn et al., 2018), video games can democratize accessibility to literacies for Asian American youth (Leach, 2017), digital literacies can be used to sustain and promote ethnic pride for refugees (Gilhooly & Lee, 2014), and tutoring programs can facilitate digital literacy learning for adult populations (Pendell et al., 2013). In the same vein, Dalton (2017) notes, ‘teachers can design and plan instruction that involves creating interesting and varied learning opportunities that motivate and stimulate learners according to their personal backgrounds and interests’ (p. 19). This literature contributes to the argument that digital literacies align with experiential learning and can serve a variety of needs. It is at this intersection that experiential learning as an impact outcome can permit an opportunity for future transformative research. This future research is where equities in access, skills, and ability can all be explored.

Along with a focus on integrating digital tools and activities into the classroom, another common component recognizes students’ interests and agency. Bostock (2012) uses the ‘third space
framework,’ which recognizes students’ knowledge and experiences by providing opportunities for them to be the teacher. This practice allows learners to develop skills by teaching the instructor how to use creative software programs, create podcasts, and ultimately educate others by facilitating agency-building, creative interactions within their own classrooms. Further, de los Stanos et al. (2018) and Buckley-Marudas (2016) both provide examples of the benefits of role playing as a final task in learning about humanities. Experiences when students are granted an opportunity to be both teacher and learner are a key characteristic of this outcome. This characteristic of experiential learning is perhaps what makes it most distinct from expression. Expression and experiential learning both can have creative outputs, but experiential learning does not require such an output.

Similarly, Clarke’s (2020) ‘Walk a Day in My Shoes Project’ integrates digital technologies into the classroom to help students recognize ‘the power of digital technology as a way to explore other cultures and increase students’ experiences with people different from themselves without leaving their classrooms’ (p. 662). Within this literature, it is often implied that experiential and student-led media literacy learning experiences lead to increased student achievement. Likewise, Thevenin’s (2020b) ‘Devices in the Dirt’ activity inspires students to consider the relationship between their cellphones, apple watches, laptops, and the earth. Another study details an unexpected interaction with an unhoused individual, which prompted a two-week, inquiry-based lesson involving interviews with community advocates and critical analysis of media depictions of homeless populations (Moore, 2013). Through experiential learning and hands-on learning, such initiatives involve dynamic learning moments that take into account real-life experiences.

Impact as engaged citizenship

The literature review includes a subset of studies that focus on outcomes related to news, politics, and democracy – concepts generally aligned with notions of engaged citizenship. Research in this area, which we refer to as ‘Impact as Engaged Citizenship’ focuses on how young people learn to critique and create media for stronger participation in civic life (Burke & Hadley, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2013). Civic activities play an important role in shaping youth development, including via their identity, purpose, political concerns, and academic achievement and engagement (Middaugh & Clark, 2017). Behaviors such as interpreting, evaluating, and critiquing media are also aligned with articulations of ‘Impact as Enquiry.’ Research in this area of ‘Impact as Engaged Citizenship’ situates these skills as deeply connected to politically engaged citizenship, civic engagement, and democracy (Ashley, 2020; Ashley et al., 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Tully & Vraga, 2018b). This is one way how media studies (a term often used in research and university contexts) can intersect with social studies as a K-12 class/subject that teaches civic engagement and participatory democracy (Mason, 2015; Mason & Metzger, 2012).

To strengthen civic engagement, Clark (2013) argues students need to gain a sense of awareness when it comes to the media environment around them, which is accomplished through understanding the criticisms associated with structures, systems, and ownership. Recent activism that has taken place through new forms of media include: memes, remix culture, and social media platforms (Jenkins et al., 2018). Therefore, civic engagement in media literacy education must consider the tools that students are taking advantage of. To this point, teaching is not telling when it comes to engaged citizenship. Instead, as Education scholars such as Gainer (2012) suggest educators focus on ‘teaching students to use critical thinking to analyze and discuss ways that new literacies support democratic movements throughout the world, and then applying this knowledge to their own writing of digital texts, is to teach the principles of democracy’ (Gainer, 2012, p. 16). A key finding of this literature review is the connection between engaged citizenship and equity. More specifically, media literacy interventions that focus on civic engagement can result in social justice advocacy and calls for change at a macro-level.

This conceptualization of ‘Impact as Engaged Citizenship’ is common in the following research areas: news media ownership, agenda setting, media effects, journalism studies, civic engagement,
and news literacy. News literacy programs stress the importance of critical thinking when searching for reliable information (Miller, 2010), put an emphasis on an informed citizenry (Leggett & King-Reilly, 2020), and pave a path toward a functioning democracy (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Studies focusing on media ownership critiques explore reader skepticism and news credibility (Ashley et al., 2010). A strong concept of power structures and news media ownership results in well-informed citizens, fostering a better context when engagement comes into play (Clark, 2013). Studies of this nature conclude that news media literacy and critical analysis of journalism prompt engaged citizenship.

In a similar vein, this review found many studies focusing on the relationship between the ability to detect fake news and civic engagement. Neely-Sardon and Tignor’s (2018) fake news and information literacy intervention establishes the importance of building the skills of evaluating and investigating source credibility. Likewise, the News Literacy Project stresses the importance of reliable information and the significance of fact-checking information (Miller, 2010) and Farmer’s (2020) research emphasizes informed citizenry, fake news, and the spread of misinformation. In these studies, media literacy skills are connected to the broader goal of helping students to become ‘better informed citizens,’ a common approach in news literacy research (Vraga et al., 2020). Just as critical consideration of ownership and media effects contribute to a citizen’s engagement, the ability to determine fact from fiction is also a common thread among this subsection of studies. Research in this area, such as that from Culver and Alton (2017), note the importance of teaching about privacy and data surveillance in media literacy education. The acquisition of these skills is essential when considering one’s desires or efforts to enact change at a macro-level.

Connecting media literacy to democracy is a consistent theme of much research that positions the audience or consumer as a citizen, a framing that elicits connections to civic life. The Civic Imagination Project links theory to practice, based on the belief ‘that democracy works best when we can bring together diverse perspectives, encouraging people to share their memories, dreams and hopes with each other’ (The Civic Imagination Project, 2017). The project maps research, case studies, workshops, and brainstorming sessions to foster civic engagement and bridge the gap between diverse communities. Saal and Shaw (2020) emphasize the need for media literacy to support engaged citizens, arguing that ‘the cornerstone of democracy is an informed citizenry, and without adequate literacy tools or information, citizens’ self-determination and freedom suffer’ (p. 221). Much of the research in this area implies civic-focused media literacy interventions will not only better the individual but can promote democratic values and perhaps strengthen democracy (Ashley, 2020; Tully & Vraga, 2018a).

Generally, ‘Impact as Engaged Citizenship’ can occur at the individual or community level. Some researchers imply these individual-level differences in news literacy and democratic engagement are connected to disparities at a community level. For example, Frechette (2016) draws attention to the impact on accessibility that occurred when daily print news media moved to online ‘pay-as-you-go systems.’ Frechette (2016) emphasizes that the shift to social media has also resulted in disparities in access: ‘while the participatory nature of social media has endowed certain populations within particular geographic regions with a new set of agency, others have not found their place within these social spheres due to political, economic and social reasons’ (p.57). She uses these accessibility changes to articulate the ways identity, place, and socioeconomic status impact individuals’ ability to be informed citizens, highlighting that people with more socioeconomic resources, critical news literacy skills, and access to technology are able to access news more easily than populations with fewer resources. Considering these disparities when designing media literacy interventions can help move the discipline toward more equitable long-term goals.

**Impact as equity**

In our review, we examined how impact in media literacy practice was only tangentially connected to issues of equity, social justice, transformation, and emancipatory practices. We call this ‘Impact as
We noted only a small body of research that sought to use media literacy interventions and education to address social inequities. Topics relating to social justice, transformation, emancipation, and community-oriented action research are not common in media literacy scholarship. The studies that consider these macro-level topics were often from the late 2010s or early 2020s.

In this category that we label ‘Impact as Equity,’ equity and impact were not addressed directly but there were some articulations of impact connected with equity in indirect ways. Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) question whether media literacy education can help reduce the media’s role in perpetuating stereotypes, while noting ‘we have precious little data to apply to that socially significant question’ (p. 182). More recently, some scholars have foregrounded the need for equity-mindedness within media literacy. For example, the Trauma-Informed Equity-Minded Asset-Based Model (TEAM) framework explicitly describes six strategies to incorporate equity into media literacy and education more broadly: (1) Realizing that dominant ideologies are embedded in educational systems (2) Recognizing the long-term effects of systemic trauma on learners from aggrieved communities (3) Responding to trauma by emphasizing safety, trust, collaboration, peer network, agency, and voice within learning environments (4) Resisting retraumatization within learning environments (5) Replacing egalitarianism with equity-mindedness (6) Reframing deficit ideology with an asset-based lens to leaders’ (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021, p. 34). While media literacy practices are often seen by educators and scholars as liberatory forces, these articles draw attention to the ways in which they can sometimes inadvertently reinforce societal inequalities, and thus scholars should be intentional about keeping equity in mind while considering the impact of media literacy initiatives.

Several authors call for a consideration of the digital divide when examining the impact of media literacy interventions, which we include under ‘Impact as Equity’ (Cohron, 2015; Kesler et al., 2016). The digital divide is often placed alongside socioeconomic causes (Frechette, 2016; Mabee & Fancher, 2020), with digital literacy and broadband access as focus areas (Cohron, 2015). These factors influence individuals’ ability to become media literate and contribute to the conversation surrounding equities, as intervention objectives transform when access is limited. At the individual, community, and societal levels, differences in access, often due to marginalization, lead to differential impact. Differential impact can refer to multiple phenomena; for example, different communities often have disparate access to resources, or different communities could have access to the same resources but those resources could have less impact in one community than in another.

Some studies within ‘Impact as Equity’ indirectly address equity by considering the factors that served as barriers to impactful practice within the field of media literacies. For instance, research identified the lack of focus on adult learners as a challenge within media literacy education in general, which affects its overall impact on communities (Bowen, 2011). Other factors include a lack of focus on youth in special education programs (Donne, 2012; Friesem, 2017; Kesler et al., 2016). The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, paired with media production can ‘support an inclusive, emotionally supportive framework for designing and teaching literacy learning activities to students who bring diverse learning abilities and challenges to the classroom’ (Leach, 2017, pp. 31–32). Media literacy programs are not one-size-fits-all when it comes to application, therefore, to move toward more equitable practice, curriculum design must be flexible, adaptable, and accommodating.

Another way in which equity was brought into media literacy practices was by paying attention to the marginalizing characteristics of mediated experiences. McArthur and Lane (2019) note that educators must take into consideration “… cultural differences between themselves and their learners as strengths rather than primarily as problems to be solved’ (p. 66). If working toward more equitable practices is a primary focus, attention must be paid to the intersecting identities, experiences, skills, and capabilities of those that are being taught. Bowen (2011) and Cordes and Sabzalian (2020) call attention to the ways media itself can be a marginalizing force through the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of some groups within the literature. For instance, pop culture representations of marginalized groups can provide a setting for students to consider the effects these depictions
might have on audiences (Baleria, 2019; Erba et al., 2019; Jackson, 2010). While investigating representations of Islam and Muslims in U.S.-based media, Jackson (2010) notes resources beyond textbooks can be useful because they ‘… can help enable students’ critical distance and development of their independent reasoning skills through the exploration of different perspectives … so long as these materials are accompanied with guidance on critical media literacy’ (p. 21).

Critical race media literacy was a common theoretical lens for equities (Cho & Johnson, 2020; Cubbage, 2022; Dowie-Chin et al., 2020; Matias, 2020; Patterson & McWhorter, 2020; Stanton et al., 2020; Yosso, 2020). While using films as a pedagogical tool, Yosso (2020) notes critical race media literacy was built on the following foundation: ‘I felt compelled to move beyond critical content analysis and toward a deeper understanding of the ‚impact‘ of that content (p. 6). Similarly, Cordes and Sabzalian (2020) emphasize anticolonial media literacy and Critical Race Theory (CRT) in order to teach youth about the misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in media. To this point, Stanton et al.’s (2020) youth-led, indigenous filmmaking intervention provides insights into how counter-narratives can be developed for anticolonial education. Instead of only teaching studies how to spot a stereotype, these studies dig deep into the cultural impact and produce content to challenge said stereotype.

Empowerment often shaped these studies, defined as, ‘… individuals, families, organizations, and communities gaining control … within … their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life’ (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 32). For example, Garcia et al. (2015) discuss how media production and dissemination potentially enable individuals to make an impact on their wider community. They state, ‘participatory media has the potential to transform research into an ongoing civic dialogue between youth and adult members of a community’ (p. 160). They describe expression through media creation as agency-building experiences which impact both the individual and the community. Similarly, Turner et al. (2013) helped coordinate a Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) program at a middle school with the lowest test scores in the San Francisco Bay Area with a large high school dropout rate among African-American men. This project included youth-led research, with results expressed to the wider community through rap music written and produced by students themselves. Through the intentional development of youth programs in marginalized communities, media literacy is used as a vehicle to work toward a more equitable and inclusive future. The community engagement aspect of these studies is what takes them from an individual learning experience to one that can impact an entire group.

**Implications, limitations, and future directions**

In a literal sense, the word ‘impact’ is most commonly used within social-scientific studies of media literacy interventions to denote changes in attitudes or behavior due to an intervention. However, a number of articles that we reviewed spoke to how media literacy practices can have an impact through a variety of processes and methods, such as creative expression, experiential learning, empowerment, and critical evaluation. Therefore, while ‘impact’ is central to understanding the effectiveness of media literacy interventions through quantitative measures related to evaluative outcomes, there is no existing framework to highlight and showcase other types of impact that are more subtle, nuanced, long-term, and complex.

In this paper, we argue for a broader definition of media literacy impact that includes multiple approaches in order to make sense of the complex ways in which media literacy can shape individuals, groups, and communities as a whole. The ‘6 E’s of Media Literacy Impact’ which includes Evaluation Outcomes, Enquiry, Expression, Experiential Learning, Engaged Citizenship, and Equity offers a more comprehensive conceptualization. It provides greater clarity about the multiple ways in which scholars, educators, and activists could make a case for the impact of their media literacy practices and interventions beyond narrow definitions such as pre- and post-test outcomes.

While most media literacy interventions are focused on individual-level change, almost all of them seem to imply that these individual-level changes may lead to larger changes in the community or
even in society. However, very few studies clearly theorize or provide empirical evidence for community or society-level impact of media literacy practices. Further research needs to not only focus on these connections more directly, but should also offer recommendations for how to design and conduct research that focuses on the connection between individual, communal, and societal-level impacts. This can help shift the onus of media literacy impact from an individual-level practice alone to one that is also intentionally situated at community, institutional, or societal-levels. While research at broader social levels could be more challenging, they provide evidence for the broad and lasting effects of media literacy interventions on students, schools, communities, and society.

While this study has helped provide clarity in conceptualization of media literacy impact, it is certainly not without limitations. The scope of our study was limited to research conducted within the U.S. due to the specific nature of this funded project where our team was selected to focus on media literacy in the U.S. Our findings are relevant and applicable to this limited context. Future research should examine our framework within the context of other cultures and regions to expand and elaborate on this model that we have proposed here. To this point, the scope of our study also limited our review of other fields that are tangential to media literacy. This includes areas of research such as psychology, public health, social studies, and many others. We welcome and encourage future research of this nature, to determine how media literacy impact is conceptualized beyond media studies, education and their intersections.

Additionally, another significant limitation is that our findings are applicable only to recent literature from 2010 to 2020 as we were interested in current understandings of media literacy impact. Given this focus on the last decade, this paper limits a strong historical grounding that could frame the current challenges in the field based on historical scholarship within media literacy. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, we believe that there is going to be a significant difference in how media access, literacy, and equity is examined within media literacy impact literature. For instance, we believe that research on media literacy impact in the post-pandemic period is likely going to be much more about ‘Equity as Impact,’ which we did not find to be a dominant theme in our review. It will be important to examine the shifts in definitions of impact following the pandemic in a future study to see if there are new categories that emerge and if the emphasis on various E’s has changed, say, in the ten years after the pandemic started in 2020 by conducting a follow-up study in 2025 or 2030. Our framework is a starting place that we hope will encourage continued research on media literacy and its impact.

Equity is a dimension that is often missing within the discussion of media literacy impact. Overall, this review identified a need to address equity more directly and centrally within the literature on media literacy impact. Some ways in which equity could be considered from a broader community-oriented perspective could be to consider issues of digital access to tools and platforms, creating safe environments for marginalized communities to express themselves freely, providing additional support to educators to incorporate civic engagement that connects with social transformation, and more professional development opportunities for media educators to consider the democratic and social implications of media literacy education. While we recognize that not all media literacy practices can or even necessarily need to be oriented toward addressing social inequities, we find that the ones that sit at the intersection of several aspects of the 6E’s framework are more likely to be equity-focused. Also, equity can be explicitly incorporated into media literacy initiatives through professional development workshops for teachers and other educators on issues relating to equity. Additionally, finding ways to incorporate equity with other forms of media literacy interventions such as civic engagement and expression could mean reflecting on questions of access, representation, employment, and participation within such initiatives.

Equity should be a consideration at every stage of media literacy education by considering the varying needs and intersectional identities that learners hold. Media literacy can then be used as an emancipatory force, in which participants learn to use media literacy to challenge inequities in their own lives and those within their communities and society at large. Further media literacy research needs to investigate the connections among individual agency, community empowerment,
and support for democracy. This review found a lack of media literacy scholarship that addresses social inequities. In particular, there is a need to conceptualize what diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice means within our understanding of impactful media literacy practices at the individual, community, and societal levels.

**Note**

1. For consistency and alliteration purposes, we use “enquiry” instead of “inquiry.” However, inquiry is the common spelling utilized by media literacy scholars using U.S. English. We took this distinction into account while conducting our literature search. Enquiry is common in British English.

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