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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand how young people define and conceptualize media literacy and media literacy education, what knowledge and skills they associate with media literacy, and how they would like to be taught about the subject. To gather data, interviews were conducted with 18 and 19-year-olds (n = 20). The results indicate that young people would like to learn about media literacy, but that they are not confident in their teachers' ability to properly teach them. Participants also associated media literacy with technology use and information literacy and expressed the desire to learn about internet and social media safety as well as media production. Further, the participants indicated that young teens would benefit most from a media literacy education, mainly to avoid the mental health and addiction issues that the participants and their peers attribute to their social media use.

Keywords: media literacy, media literacy education, social media

GENERATION Z AND MEDIA LITERACY: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

By

ALANNA EAVAN POWERS

B.A. Pennsylvania State University, 2019

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Chapter One: Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic false news and unverified information has spread along with the virus, demonstrating that disinformation can literally be deadly. In fact, a recent analysis finds that over 150,000 Americans died preventable deaths because they chose not to get vaccinated, partially due to vaccine misinformation spread through media messaging (Martínez & Aubrey, 2022; Zhong et al., 2022). The COVID-19 public health crisis is just one recent example behind efforts to combat misinformation among future generations through media literacy education. In academia, media literacy is a thoroughly researched topic, and many media literacy researchers act as advocates for media literacy education in the classroom (Funk et al., 2016; Hobbs, 2005; Mihailidis et al., 2021b; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021; Redmond, 2015). From a government standpoint, 14 states currently have a media literacy education law in place for K-12 schools, all of which were implemented in the past 15 years, and an additional 16 states have media literacy education bills for K-12 schools (U.S. Media Literacy and Policy Update, 2021). As efforts to implement media literacy education expand, it is imperative that media literacy instruction is useful and helpful to those who will engage with it —the young people themselves.

The purpose of this qualitative, constructivist thesis is to understand perceptions and reflections of media literacy and media literacy education among young people (18 and 19-year-olds) in the United States. The constructivist approach assumes that people's perceptions of the world are socially constructed based on the experiences they have had (Schwandt, 2000). The constructivist approach emerges from hermeneutics, which is the study of interpreting meaning (Mertens, 2020). Constructivism also highlights that research is a "product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them" (Mertens, 2020 p. 17). This thesis focuses solely

on the constructivist worldview, because the main goal is to understand how young people understand media literacy based on their unique understanding of the world. For the purposes of this study, "media literacy" is defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" and media literacy education is defined as "the practices necessary to foster these skills" (NAMLE).

Media literacy has been discussed and researched at length, and therefore there are varying conceptualizations of the term. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) asserts that media literacy is interdisciplinary, includes the use of technology and defines it as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (NAMLE). Another media literacy nonprofit, the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), defines media literacy as the ability to "engage, challenge, and create media in ways that empower individuals and communities" (ACME). Media literacy has also been defined as the ability to read and write media (Buckingham, 2003), as well as the ability to critically think about media messages and the information that they present (Hobbs, 2007; Kamerer, 2013; Kellner & Share, 2019; Livingstone, 2004) in order to understand the larger implications of these media messages (Garcia, 2013; Potter, 2018). These multiple aspects all must come together to create a media literate person, and therefore those who will receive a media literacy education should be consulted to create a curriculum that benefits them and leads them on a path towards media literacy (Roschke, 2020).

Further, there are multiple literacy disciplines that relate to or are supported by media literacy. These literacies are discussed in this thesis because of this overlap, and because many participants viewed them as synonymous with media literacy (see Results chapter for more information). First, information literacy teaches people how to gather, analyze and use

information, focusing not on the mass media, but on academic databases and literature (Bruce, 1997; Zurkowski, 1974). Information literacy is typically taught to students by librarians, and, similarly to media literacy, aims to enhance critical thinking skills and create analytical information consumers and creators (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 2003; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011; Simmons, 2005; Tewell, 2015). The other literacies discussed in this section of the thesis are more directly related to media literacy, including internet and digital media literacy, which focus on people's ability to navigate the internet in a safe, responsible, and productive manner (Buckingham, 2009; Calvani et al., 2012; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Glister, 1997; Kim & Yang, 2015; Ng, 2012). Finally, news media literacy focuses solely on news media, with the aim of creating informed citizens and voters, who can navigate news media to get truthful and relevant news information (Altschull, 1995; Ashley et al., 2013; Mihailidis, 2012; Vraga & Tully, 2015). The multiple literacies associated with media literacy allow for it to be taught in conjunction with other subjects, such as health and sexual health education (Attwood et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2013; Pinkleton et al., 2008; Pinkleton et al., 2012) and anti-racism and anti-sexism education (Drogos, 2021; Grabe et al., 2019; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Walsh et al., 2014).

Chapter Two provides an overview of four approaches to media literacy education, derived from Francis' (2016) research on approaches to media literacy education. Of course, there is overlap with these approaches, and often collaboration between scholars, but in order to best categorize media literacy for the purposes of this thesis, the following four areas will be addressed: protectionist, critical, production and the social justice-oriented approach. The protectionist approach centers on the idea that media directly influence behavior, like a hypodermic needle (Laswell, 1927). and therefore people, particularly young people, need to be

protected from it (Hobbs, 1998; Kubey, 1998; Mendoza, 2009; Pasquier, 2001; Winn, 1977). This approach insists that "low culture" such as video games, reality TV and hip-hop do not provide any enrichment and should be avoided (Postman, 1985; Postman, 2006). Kellner & Share (2005) put forth the contemporary design for critical media literacy, which focuses on students bringing their individual experiences to discussions about media. Critical media literacy also focuses comprehension of other topics such as multicultural understanding and climate change, to promote productive uses of media that encourage an informed and active democratic public (Hyslop-Marginson & Pinto, 2007; López, 2019; Share, 2020). The third approach is the production approach, which focuses on teaching students how to produce media. This approach aims to enhance collaboration, communication, and creativity, while also teaching young people to advocate for themselves through media creation (Cheung, 2009; Hobbs, 1998; Kearney, 2013; Goble, 2016; Norton & Hathaway, 2010; Tyner, 2014). The final approach discussed in the literature review is the social justice-oriented approach. This approach encourages media literacy educators to discard the hegemonic, white-centered narratives in order to uplift and support marginalized and minoritized students (Kellner & Share, 2019; McArthur, 2016; Ramasubramanian et al. 2021).

Several studies have evaluated young peoples' media abilities and skills (Arke & Primack, 2009; Ashley & Fasbinder, 2012; Ashley et al., 2013; McGrew et al., 2018; Metzger et al., 2015; Nygren, 2019). These studies provided evidence that young people often lack basic media literacy knowledge (such as how to tell the difference between a news story and a press release, and how to identify hoax websites) and call for media literacy education to be implemented to give young people the tools to develop media literacy skills. Researchers have also assessed what young people learn after taking a media literacy course (Fingar & Jolls, 2014;

Fleming, 2014; Kleemans & Eggnik, 2016; Hobbs, 2007; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Scharrer et al., 2020; Sekarasih et al., 2020; Vraga et al., 2009) and discovered that young people learn valuable skills, such as how to identify stereotypes in media and how to evaluate news credibility.

Although each of the above studies has contributed invaluable information to the media literacy education field, few have focused primarily on young people's perceptions and understanding of media literacy and media literacy education. Akcayoglu & Daggol (2019) assessed Turkish university students' knowledge of media literacy, centering on students' willingness and ability to use media for foreign language learning. In Australia, Chambers et al. (2022) assessed if adults of all ages valued media literacy, focusing on what components of media literacy were the most important, and if the level of importance varied depending on a person's values. De Lyn et al. (2021) conducted a study in Belgium focused on young people's viewpoints and comprehension of media literacy via qualitative interviews.

The above studies are greatly beneficial to the media literacy discipline, and this study aims to fill a research gap by focusing on American young adults' perceptions of media literacy and media literacy education. Further, very little research has focused on American emerging adults' reflections of media literacy education following prolonged remote and hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Because young people's mode of education switched to remote or hybrid learning quite quickly, they had to access, analyze, create and act (NAMLE) using media in a completely new environment, often isolated from their peers and teachers. Moreover, research often fails to expand to young people's perceptions of media literacy education that may be provided outside of a class or workshop dedicated to the topic. Mihiladis et al. (2021a) point out that scholars often enter a school, provide lessons and

resources, conduct their research, and leave, taking their resources and knowledge with them. This is inconsiderate of the students, and it also means that media literacy research tends to focus on young people who have had some sort of formal media literacy training, whether it be through a workshop organized by researchers, or research in collaboration with teachers who are trained in the subject. Because of this model, research tends to ignore young people's perceptions and experiences media literacy education that may happen outside of a formal media literacy class or course (such as media literacy instruction within a class for a different subject). Therefore, the aim of this study is to gain perspectives from young adults with varying media literacy education experiences to help provide comprehensive and beneficial insights into how they view media literacy and media literacy education.

This study will add to the media research field because it focuses solely on emerging adults' perceptions and definitions of media literacy and media literacy education, whereas much of past research implemented emerging adults' perceptions of media literacy education as just a facet of a larger study; or focused on educators' perceptions instead of students. Secondly, media literacy education is already legally implemented in several states, with policymakers in other states and in the federal government pushing to do the same, it is important to understand young adults' perspectives about media literacy education, so that these perspectives help educators and policymakers to make informed decisions regarding media literacy education. It is particularly advantageous to study 18 and 19-year-olds because most have completed their K-12 education (National Center for Education Statistics), and therefore can provide meaningful and comprehensive insights about their expectations and experiences surrounding media literacy education.

The information provided in the previous two paragraphs leads to the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do young adults define and conceptualize media literacy?

RQ2: What knowledge and skills do young adults associate with media literacy?

RQ3: What are young adults' perceptions of media literacy education in the classroom?

The following chapter contains a literature review that focuses on research and conceptualizations of media literacy and media literacy education, primarily focusing on young people. The chapter also provides a brief description of media literacy education policies in the United States. Chapter Three will explain the methodological approach to this study, which takes a qualitative, constructivist approach utilizing semi-structured interviews about young people's perceptions of media literacy and media literacy education. Next, the fourth chapter explains the results through themes: New Generation, New Communication, New Education; Reading and Comprehension; Media Use; Computer Kids; "We Were the Guinea Pigs"; Social Media Addiction; I want to Learn Media in School; Learning Media Literacy; Protectionist Learning. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the paper with a discussion of the findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter focuses on literature about media literacy and media literacy education. The first section provides insight into youth and media, focusing on young peoples' relationship to media and a broad overview of media and education. Next, the concept of media literacy and its theoretical considerations will be discussed at length, focusing on the foundational definitions of media literacy, information literacy, internet literacy/digital literacy and news media literacy. The third section examines four approaches to media literacy education. The next section will discuss media literacy education policies in the United States. The final section of this literature review focuses on past studies about media literacy and media literacy education with young adults.

Why Study Young Adults?

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis focuses on young people who are 18 and 19-years old. This age group is important to study because they are close to completing if not finished with their K-12 education. This means they are in a position to provide a holistic view of the media literacy education they received and reflect on its benefits and drawbacks. The following subheadings will detail young people's relationship with the media, as well as media and education practices and purposes, to emphasize the importance of studying 18 and 19-year old's perceptions and opinions of media literacy education.

Young Adults and Media

It is no secret that young people are involved and engaged with media in a way that older people, including their own teachers and parents, are unable and sometimes even unwilling to understand. One of the major areas in which young peoples' media routines differ is their social media consumption. In the United States, 84% of people ages 18 to 29 use social media, which far exceeds the social media use of any other age demographic. Further, those in the 18 to 24 age

group are more likely than any other demographic to be on TikTok (55%), Snapchat (75%) and Instagram (76%) (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). These figures alone make studying young people's perceptions of media literacy worthwhile, because they are using media platforms that are relatively new, the youngest being TikTok, which was launched in the U.S. in 2016 (Liao & Shu, 2020). It's important to note that these platforms are not just meant for passive consumption, but are also a place for content creation for many young people. In fact, young people often view their social media profiles as an extension of themselves (Riccio, 2020).

The above statistics take on more weight when considering that receiving news from social media leads to a decline in understanding news credibility, and that social media use leads to a greater intake of biased news (Mitchell et al., 2020). Further, social media is the most likely place for online harassment to occur (Vogels, 2021). Young peoples' social media use is also a cause for concern due to tech companies' mismanagement, whether intentional or unintentional, of platforms' attention-seeking and profit-first business models (Mihailidis, 2021b; Tyner, 2019). Social media can also lead to an increase in mental health problems, especially among young women (Twenge, 2017). Although these findings look rather dismal, it is important to understand how young people view these issues, and what types of tools they would like to be given through a media literacy education to combat these harmful social media effects.

Young people also differ greatly from their elders in how they consume news. Only 16% of people ages 18 to 29 use the television to get news. Instead, 71% of people ages 18 to 29 often get their news from a digital device, such as a smartphone (Shearer, 2021). To elaborate, 44% of people ages 18 to 29 regularly get news from Instagram, 52% of people ages 18 to 29 regularly get news from TikTok, and 63% of people ages 18 to 29 regularly get their news from Snapchat. These numbers far exceed any other age group's news consumption on these platforms (Walker & Matsa, 2021). A three-stage news consumption pattern occurs with young adults ages 18 to 25

in the United States. First, young people engage in routine surveillance –meaning they regularly check for news using their smartphones (employing methods such as push notifications and email alerts). Secondly, young adults receive news through incidental exposure – meaning they find news without seeking it out, typically through social media. Thirdly, when young people want to take a deeper dive into a news topic, they do so by using a directed approach, for which they look for more information using news websites or television networks (Antunovic et al. 2018).

Although social media is the main platform for many young people, it is important to address other forms of media as well. Streaming services, such as Netflix and Spotify, are also immensely popular. For example, 91% of people ages 18-29 who do not have cable say they do not subscribe to a cable company because they are able to access what they want to watch online (Raine, 2021). When it comes to music streaming, 51% of adults ages 18-29 stream music using a platform such as Spotify every day, which is more than double the 24% of all adults who stream music every day (Shevenock, 2020). These services are also relatively new, justifying research about how young people would like to be taught about these platforms.

With all the above information in mind, it is important to address the psychological effects of media consumption on today's young people. Depression and anxiety in young people are correlated with the amount of time spent on social media platforms (Lin et al., 2016; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; Shensa et al., 2016) as well as the number of social platforms a young person uses (Primack et al. 2017). Cyberbullying is also an issue among young people, with the most common cause of cyberbullying being relationship issues, and the most common recipients being young women (Hamm et al., 2015). Further, social media use is positively related with body image issues (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), especially on more visual social media, like Instagram and Snapchat, which are commonly used by young people (Marengo et al.,

2018). Facebook's own internal research, obtained by The Wall Street Journal, revealed that one in three girls felt worse about their body image because of Instagram (Wells, Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2021). Young people who compare themselves to others on social media are more likely to have a negative body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), and young people who post selfies on social media are more likely to have a negative body image, even when the selfies are edited (Mills et al., 2018). These psychological effects are undoubtedly taking a toll on young people, and this thesis aims to better understand how young people want to be taught about these issues through a media literacy education.

Young Adults and Media Education

The idea that education should be pertinent to children's lives and experiences was first established in the United States by philosopher John Dewey. Dewey believed that students needed to be active participants in their classroom in order to benefit their community and strengthen U.S. democracy as a whole (Dewey, 1934). Young people are often viewed in our society as lost, unable to think for themselves, and in need of guidance (Durham, 2017). In contrast young people are also often viewed as enactors of social change and new viewpoints that former generations did not hold (De Leyn et al., 2019). With this duality mind, it is important to understand what young adults think of themselves regarding their media literacy education, so that educators and lawmakers can create policies and curricula that best serve and benefit the students.

There are three assumptions that are currently present in both media literacy research and educational practice, as outlined by Mihailidis et al., 2021b: individual empowerment, community support, and democratic engagement. Firstly, media literacy prioritizes the individual, focusing on how people can use media to empower themselves and become better

citizens (Buckingham, 2019; Hobbs, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2019). There is a danger in prioritizing the individual because it leads to personal responsibility and therefore consequences, rather than community support and discussion. Secondly, media literacy education leads to community empowerment (Mihailidis et al., 2021b). Of course, media literacy education can empower a community through civic engagement (Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016) and empower young people who are members of marginalized groups to create digital movements and advocate for themselves (Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Ramasubramanian et al., 2020). However, media literacy research and education often ignore the fact that not all young people in the United States have access to media and technology. Furthermore, media literacy education initiatives often look down upon marginalized communities by taking a top-down, instructor to student approach, and leaving with the tools they provided at the conclusion of such initiatives (Mihailidis et al. 2021a). The third assumption is that media literacy education instills and strengthens democratic values (Mihailidis et al. 2021a). Ramasubramanian & Darzabi (2020) and Higdon (2020) point out that democracy has disparate meanings, and that often the version of democracy that is championed in United States media literacy education is white and Eurocentric. The highly individualized version of democracy that is often present in media literacy research and education is dangerous, as it does not work to dismantle white supremacy, but rather reinforces it (Mihailidis et al. 2021b). With these three assumptions in mind, it is important to understand how young people have been affected by media literacy education at its current state, and what their ideas are to strengthen it to be a more fruitful and inclusive educational practice.

What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy is a rather expansive research topic within the media and communications discipline. There are several theoretical standpoints within the media literacy field, and each of

these perspectives have contributed greatly to media literacy scholarship. Young people are increasingly becoming the target of media literacy policy and laws as well as initiatives created by both non-profits and industry companies, and academic research about media literacy and young people is also common (Mihailidis et al., 2021b). Therefore, the research area will be strengthened by research focused on youths' opinions of media literacy. This section will cover four subsections of media literacy scholarship, which include: foundational definitions of media literacy, information literacy, digital and internet literacy, news media literacy, and the interdisciplinary nature of media literacy.

Foundational Definitions of Media Literacy

This section details foundational definitions that cover the theoretical, overarching concept of media literacy. Buckingham (2003) refers to media literacy as the ability to both "read" and "write" media, meaning a media literate person must be able to understand and interpret media texts and be able to create such texts themselves. Buckingham emphasizes the fact that media is a major industry designed for profit, and a media literate public is one that can recognize this fact and use it to inform their media consumption. Expanding on this point, Hobbs (2007) argues that media literacy involves critical reflection and analysis, not only of the media text itself, but also of the larger political, economic, social, and historical implications surrounding the creation and the distribution of the text. In a later work, Hobbs identified five questions meant to be used as a model for media literacy advancement and improvement:

1) "Who is sending the message and what is the author's purpose?
2) What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
3) What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in this message?
4) How might different people interpret this message differently?

5) What is omitted from this message?” (Hobbs, 2007 p. 9).

Economic motives, representation, and access are also part of the concept of media literacy. Audiences are also consumers for media companies’ advertisers, and therefore media companies have an economic motive to maintain and build consumer base. Representation details what perspectives are presented in a media message and what perspectives are not, and access refers to finding information via media texts and subsequently understanding the information obtained. A media literate person understands all three of these concepts, and applies them when intaking media texts (Kamerer, 2013).

Livingstone (2004) placed media literacy within the context of the digital age while also considering the historical and cultural significance of the subject. From this viewpoint three overarching tiers of media literacy emerged: how knowledge, values and culture are represented, both literally and symbolically; how people interpret this knowledge when it is presented to them, and how this may vary between differing populations with differing backgrounds; and how those who are deemed literate are able to access institutions of power in ways that those who are deemed illiterate cannot. As literacy expands beyond print literacy, in order to be completely media literate, one must not only have skills to access online media but must also have the ability to critically think about the information presented to them in this digital space (Livingstone, 2004).

In an updated three-tiered approach, focusing on skills, knowledge structures, and personal locus, Potter (2018) identifies skills as tools which people already tend to have, but need to improve and focus on in the context of media literacy. For example, analysis, the ability to examine messages, is a skill needed for one to be media literate. People use analysis in this context in everyday situations at work, school and in conversations. According to Potter, people can hone this skill when consuming media, and therefore use it to become more media literate.

Knowledge structures refer to how information is organized in a person's brain, and how this organization can help one make sense of media messages. Lastly, personal locus refers to the personal goals one has. If someone can identify what they would like to gain from the media they are consuming, then they are better able to engage with media texts in a meaningful way (Potter, 2018).

Roschke (2020) asserts that media literacy is unique to the individual, in that people implement their own personal understanding of the world when attempting to understand media texts. Because of this, people's understanding of media and media literacy need to be considered when developing media literacy education curricula (Roschke, 2020). Some media literacy scholars emphasize the importance of media literacy from a social justice perspective, indicating that media literacy can also educate students about issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Garcia et al., 2013). Scholars who approach media literacy from a social justice standpoint stress the importance of media literacy for the collective good, noting that media literacy requires access that is often lacking in marginalized communities (Mihailidis et al., 2021b).

Finally, there are several nonprofit organizations that focus on advancing and improving media literacy education. These nonprofits offer succinct and accessible definitions of media literacy. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication" (NAMLE). The Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME) defines media literacy as the ability to "engage, challenge, and create media in ways that empower individuals and communities" (ACME). These definitions, particularly NAMLE's, guide much of the research design of this project, because they explain the various segments of media literacy while also leaving room for multiple perceptions and interpretations, much like the goal of this thesis.

Information Literacy

While information literacy is not particularly labeled as part of the media research discipline, there are areas of overlap and crucial findings within the study of information literacy that make it relevant and necessary for this thesis. In fact, a popular definition of information literacy is "the ability to access, evaluate, organise and use information in order to learn, problem-solve, make decisions –in formal and informal learning contexts, at work, at home and in educational settings" (Bruce, 1997 p. 4). Clearly this definition shares many components with NAMLE's definition of media literacy, which is written in the paragraph directly above.

The concept of information literacy was first introduced in the 1970s due to the rapid growth of technology, and therefore information production, that was beginning to occur. Zurkowski (1974) presented information literacy as the partnership between libraries and industry –making the case that school librarians could provide their pupils with guidance as they learn to navigate an increasingly saturated information environment. In the almost 50 years since this text, the concept of information literacy has been explored and expanded at length.

Traditionally, information literacy follows the "Big Six" skills approach, which outlines and defines the six skills that create a media literate person. These skills are as follows: define the task at hand; create information seeking strategies; locate and access information; use and interact with information; and synthesize, organize, and present information; evaluate information by critiquing the product and process (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 1990). The "Big Six" approach is meant to be used when people need to research and learn about any type of information that they are not familiar with. This approach should be especially used to help students learn about the information problem-solving process. Further, there are overarching themes incorporated with the "Big Six," such as: The "Big Six" works with all subjects, with people of all ages and in all grade levels; the "Big Six" can be applied to any situation involving

information; technology skills are incorporated in the “Big Six” process; the “Big Six” is a looping process, not a linear one; the “Big Six” can be used as a framework for an entire curriculum, especially one focused on technology skills; and the “Big Six” uses critical thinking as a means to solve information-related problems (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 2003). More recently, Saunders (2017) asserted that the “Big Six” approach should be updated to include information social justice, which focuses on information literacy as a human right.

In a study set across high schools in 15 different countries, Hatlevik et al. (2018) found that girls are generally more information literate than boys, that students with more self-efficacy were more likely to be information literate, and that socioeconomic status is the most important determinant of information literacy. Students who can research beyond just the popular and mainstream sources have higher information literacy levels, and information literacy levels are strongly correlated with better writing abilities (Shao & Purpur, 2016). Further, when comedy is incorporated with information literacy instruction, it helps to exhibit information literacy concepts and makes information literacy approachable and conversation provoking (Tewell, 2014).

Critical information literacy was established in 2005, the same year that critical media literacy also began to take shape (see more information in the following section of this chapter). Critical information literacy goes beyond traditional information literacy and teaches that information does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is constructed, biased, and produced with a motive in mind. Further, librarians should engage with the material that they are teaching, so that they are not just relaying information, but doing so in a critical manner (Simmons, 2005). Ten years after the introduction of critical information literacy, Tewell (2015) conducted a meta-analysis focused on critical information literacy, and concluded that information is socially constructed and political, and therefore students must think critically about the creation, use, and

intention of information. Further, information literacy is something that needs to be learned through librarian and student collaboration, and the librarian should cater their critical information literacy lessons to the needs of the students, not through a strict and standardized curriculum (Tewell, 2015). These sentiments are similar to those of many critical media literacy scholars' approaches to media literacy.

Some scholars have sought to combine media literacy and information literacy into an interdisciplinary research and education field. Mackey & Jacobson (2011) argue for the concept of metaliteracy, which focuses on expanding information literacy so that it can be taught and understood in the context of the digital age. The authors justify the metaliteracy reframe because of the rise of social media, which makes the online/media landscape more collaborative. They propose that metaliteracy include information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, cyberliteracy, and information fluency (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). Lau (2013) and Leaning (2017) further explored the relationship between information and media literacy, while also urging an interdisciplinary approach to better accommodate teachers in the digital age. Lau (2013) found that while both literacies have the same goal (creating literacy skills) they differ in what media are most important –information literacy tends to focus mainly on the printed word, regarding academic sources as most important, and media literacy centers on the mass media. Wuyckens et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of media literacy, information literacy and digital literacy and concluded that information literacy is focused on developing the necessary skills to search for information, whereas media literacy focuses not only on searching for information, but also creating, sharing and evaluate information.

Further, scholars have combined information and media literacy in research studies. When three different types of literacy (media, information, news and digital) were tested to see which led to better identification of fake news, information literacy was the only one that

correlated. Further, awareness of media effects and greater online access were positively associated with media literacy among college students (Van de Vord, 2010). Clearly, with these conceptual overlaps in place, information literacy coincides and contributes to media literacy and is an important component to all media literacy research, including this project.

Internet Literacy/Digital Literacy

In contemporary times, it is impossible to acknowledge these concepts of media literacy without also acknowledging the digital world. Within the context of the internet age, scholars expanded media literacy to mean internet literacy, with a focus on teaching people to use the internet with ease while benefiting from the tools it provides (such as Google, databases, and social media) while also avoiding the potential dangers of the web (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Rios et al., 2019). Kamerer's (2013) idea of access also applies here, emphasizing people's ability to find information online, as well as using plug-ins to enhance a search, downloading information, and using online databases. Internet literacy also focuses on one's ability to produce –meaning a user's ability to operate within the medium they are attempting to use as well as create content that is relevant and useful to that medium (Buckingham, 2009; Kim & Yang, 2015). Digital literacy is defined people's ability to use all forms of digital media. The term "digital literacy" focuses less on usage from an IT perspective, and more on critical thinking ability. For example, once a person successfully Googles a question, they need to be able to critically filter the results in order to access and understand verified, truthful information (Calvani et al., 2012; Glister, 1997; Ng, 2012).

Educators are concerned about both students' digital and internet literacy abilities because of the sheer amount of information provided on the internet, paired with students' lack of critical thinking and production skills (Ba et al. 2002; Leung & Lee, 2012). The concept of media literacy must be addressed in the context of digital and internet literacy because young

people spend a lot of time on the internet and tend to have large social media networks, yet do not have a strong understanding of the risks and rewards of such actions (Agosto & Abbas, 2016; Cordes, 2009; Koltay, 2011).

However, when young people are empowered through digital media literacy, they can engage in what Hodgin et al., (2018 p. 18) call "participatory politics," by building communities and voicing their opinions using a digital forum (whether it be through a blog, a social media platform, or something else) to connect and discuss with their peers. When college students were enrolled in a media literacy course during a presidential election season, they engaged in political expression through social media and conversations with peers and were also more likely to view watching presidential debates as a social and enjoyable opportunity (Powers et al., 2012). Digital media literacy is strengthened when young people feel they are in control of the story they are telling using digital platforms, especially when they view adults, such as their teachers, as collaborators rather than authority figures (Jimenez et al., 2021). Further, some scholars advocate to teach media literacy within the standards of the Common Core, which outlines what knowledge American children should retain in each grade level and are a requirement for public schools in the United States (Common Core State Standards, 2022). These standards emphasize the importance of creating *texts,* and some scholars advocate that digital and media literacy can be taught by exploring, analyzing, and producing digital texts (Moore & Redmond, 2014; Redmond, 2015).

News Media Literacy

Plenty of research is dedicated to news media literacy as an important category of media literacy scholarship. Like media literacy, news media literacy focuses on educational goals (Fleming, 2014). News media literacy focuses on fact-based knowledge and aims to create informed, active citizens and therefore strengthen democracy (Altschull, 1995; Ashley et al.,

2013). News media literacy is an important part of media literacy education with K-12 students, because media literacy education should include a close analysis of news stories and an emphasis on critical thinking (Hobbs, 2003). Mihailidis (2009) found that a news media literacy course strengthened students' media literacy skills. Further, students can process political news more critically if they have received a media literacy education (Vraga & Tully, 2015). News media literacy is increasingly important in the context of a growing public sphere that was once controlled completely by media companies but has now grown due to social media (Mihailidis, 2012). News media literacy education has also become more prominent in recent years. For example, the nonprofit the News Literacy Project aims to educate students "to be smart, active consumers of news and information and equal and engaged participants in a democracy" through activities such as in-classroom news media literacy workshops and teacher trainings (News Media Literacy Project).

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Media Literacy

Media literacy is often incorporated into multiple educational disciplines to enhance the learning experience. This is particularly true in the realm of sex education, because media can be used to enhance comprehensive sex education (Attwood et al., 2015) as well as strengthen both media literacy and sexual health knowledge and decision making (Pinkleton et al., 2008; Pinkleton et al., 2012). Certain types of media use such as pornography and reality TV lead to acceptance of objectification of women (Grabe et al., 2019), but a media literacy education can be a useful tool to prevent young people from having a favorable view of objectification. Media literacy can also improve other forms of health education and therefore young peoples' knowledge of the subject. For example, a tobacco media literacy course not only enhanced young peoples' knowledge of both media literacy and tobacco use, but also increased awareness

of persuasive media messaging and generated enthusiasm for the personal creation of media texts (Chen et al., 2013).

Further, media literacy education can discourage bullying by helping young people to identify harmful stereotypes and bullying behaviors in media messages and apply it to real life (Walsh et al., 2014). Media literacy can also lead to a greater understanding of antiracism. When white participants were exposed to a critical media literacy education, they were less likely to be influenced by racial stereotypes in the media (Ramasubramanian, 2007). Following lessons in antiracism and media literacy, middle schoolers were able to point out stereotypes in movies, question power structures, and understand how media can give a voice to the oppressed (Drogos, 2021). Scharrer & Ramasubramanian (2015) conducted an overview of studies that focused on media literacy education and its potential to strengthen understanding about media portrayals of stereotypes. The authors concluded that a media literacy education enhances people's ability to think critically about media and media portrayals. It is clear that media literacy can enhance, and be enhanced by, multiple other educational disciplines, therefore rendering an easier integration of media literacy education into the classroom.

What is Media Literacy Education?

This section will identify four approaches to media literacy education. While some approaches differ distinctly, others overlap, often supporting one another. The four approaches identified in this section are as follows: the protectionist/traditionalist approach, the critical media literacy approach, the production approach, and the social justice-oriented approach.

Protectionist/Traditionalist

According to this perspective, young people are in danger of falling prey to the negative effects of media, especially "low culture" forms of media such as reality TV. In order to solve

this, educators should only teach about forms of "high culture," such as focusing on traditional literacy by teaching only classic novels and plays (i.e. Shakespeare). This form of media literacy emphasizes "high culture," which usually coincides with the dominant standpoint (Hall, 1989), as the only proper type of media consumption (Postman, 1985; Postman, 2006). Protectionism stems from the 1970s, when TV was first commonplace across the United States and parents and teachers believed it had a direct, negative influence on youth (Hobbs, 1998; Kubey, 1998; Mendoza, 2009; Pasquier, 2001; Winn, 1977). This approach resembles the hypodermic needle theory (Laswell, 1927), in that it assumes young people do not have the ability to critically think and assess media for themselves and are therefore constantly in danger. Although the hypodermic needle theory was disproved long ago (Lazarsfeld, 1968), the protectionist approach is still popular within the United States' media literacy education curricula (Francis, 2016; Prewett & Stein, 2009).

Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy emphasizes a "student-centered, bottom-up approach" (Kellner & Share, 2005 p. 371) in which students analyze media texts through their own experiences, culture, and background (Luke, 1994). It is centered around five core principles: all media texts are constructed; media messages use a particular language and students need to be taught the difference between the denotation and connotation of words and messaging; audience decoding and the idea that people can read past the dominant meanings and into the negotiated and oppositional readings of media texts (Hall, 1989); that media content is often produced with symbolic intention by media creators; and that American media is a for-profit business (Kellner & Share, 2005).

A critical approach emphasizes molding students into informed citizens and voters, and therefore should teach young people how to use media to enact social change (Hyslop-Marginson & Pinto, 2007). Some scholars argue that a civic approach to media literacy education is necessary, and an activist and emancipatory approach must be a major component of media literacy education, to create not only informed but also active democratic citizens (Mihailidis et al., 2020b; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). Recently, scholars have highlighted that media literacy education is not immune to the systemic racism that is present in the United States education system, and have called for critical media literacy to be taught from a "trauma-informed equity-minded asset- based model" (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021 p. 30).

Further, in the time of the climate crisis, critical media literacy is seen as an essential educational tool aimed at teaching students how to read media texts in order to combat disinformation regarding climate change (Share, 2020). Ecomedia literacy, also referred to as green media literacy, is a form of critical media literacy focused on media education and the environment. Ecomedia literacy joins critical media literacy with ecology, and "involves critically examining the impact of media and communications technology on the physical environment, and explores the various ways in which media systems propagate beliefs about the relationship between humans and the living systems that sustain them" (López, 2019). Ecomedia literacy focuses on more than disinformation and climate change –it encourages people to think about their media use in terms of the environment, such as the mining of conflict minerals for smartphones and the carbon emissions created from the electricity used to power devices (López, 2019; López, 2020).

Ecomedia literacy encourages media educators and researchers to integrate the environment into media literacy as a core principle (López, 2014). Some critical media literacy scholars have done so, such as Beach, Share & Allen (2017), whose book guides English

Language Arts teachers through the process of teaching about climate change through media analysis and creation, focusing on critical media literacy's student-centered approach. Rauch (2018) explores the concept of "slow media," aimed at mindful media habits, such as unplugging, to encourage environmental sustainability, which is consistent with Moeller et al. (2012)'s findings that when young people unplug, they become more self-aware and understanding of how technology affects their lives. Ecomedia literacy is gaining popularity as the pressure of the climate crisis becomes greater with each passing day. López (2014; 2019; 2020) has laid promising foundations for this area of research that will surely continue to be explored at length.

Production Approach

Some scholars believe media literacy is not achieved until students have experience producing their own media content, thus empowering them to use media for their own advancement (Cheung, 2009; Hobbs, 1998; Norton & Hathaway, 2010). The production approach acknowledges that teaching students to have agency with media creation allows young people to create and produce their own narratives while also advancing their communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills (Kearney, 2013; Goble, 2016). Scholars view media production as an area in which young people can learn about both creation and conceptual elements of media through familiar skills such as writing and lesser-known skills such as animating and videography (Dezuanni, 2015).

Media literacy researchers advocate for the production approach because it can lead young people to political and civic participation (Garcia et al., 2021; Kahne et al., 2012; Marchi & Clark, 2021), assist with all forms of literacy (Hobbs, 2011), generate interest in news media and current events (Hobbs et al., 2013; Mihailidis, 2008) as well as interest in careers in media and journalism (Hobbs et al., 2013). Some scholars have explored the concept of multimodal

literacy in education, which expands beyond just the written word to productive skills such as visual and audial media (Anderson, 2013). Kerr (2020) utilized multimodality in workshops within the juvenile justice system. The practitioners and the participants were able to create a community around production and self-expression. Vasudevan et al. (2010) found that when fifth graders are able to take a multimodal, productive approach with classroom learning, they can tell their own stories with more individual agency.

Tyner (1991) introduced an "arts-based approach" that asserts that students should be taught how to use media to express themselves and create art. This approach has a learning-by doing philosophy that acknowledges the layered and sometimes divisive nature of technology, but works to help students be creative and expressive through technology instead (Tyner, 2014). In the time of the climate crisis, a production approach emphasizes the teaching of activist-centered media production to help curb the effects of climate change (Share, 2020; López, 2014).

Social Justice-Oriented Approach

In recent years, media literacy scholars have emphasized the need for media literacy scholarship and efforts to devote special attention to media literacy education as a tool for social justice. For example, social justice has become a pillar of critical media literacy. Funk et al. (2016) stated that the aim of critical media literacy was to create social justice-oriented citizens. In newer critical media literacy work, scholars have argued that a critical media literacy education can empower underrepresented groups and bring about a multicultural, fair democracy (Kellner & Share, 2019).

However, social justice scholars question if the critical approach to media literacy education can recognize and provide adequate resources for marginalized groups and communities (Mihailidis et al. 2021b). The social justice-oriented approach focuses on the understanding that "systemic racism as systemic trauma and normative whiteness as dominant

ideology are embedded in the U.S education and media institutions" (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021 p. 29). This approach recognizes that most media literacy research is conducted by researchers and participants from WEIRD countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) (Alper et al., 2016, Henrich et al., 2010) and that minoritized people may develop internalized racism due to their exposure to white-centered media content (Feagin & Cobas, 2008; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021). Therefore, the social justice-oriented approach focuses on media literacy education from an antiracist perspective. This approach calls on media literacy educators to do more than just acknowledge the presence of racism in both media texts and education, and to instead disrupt the hegemonic, white-centered narratives to uplift and support marginalized and minoritized students (McArthur, 2016; Ramasubramanian et al. 2021).

Mihailidis et al. (2021a) call for media literacy to be taught through transformative media pedagogies. Borrowing from bell hooks' idea of transgression (hooks, 2014), a transformative media pedagogy focuses on students using available resources (media or otherwise) to work to eradicate systems of oppression that exist in their communities. Through a transformative approach, media literacy education comes from what the authors refer to as a "culture of care" (Mihailidis et al., 2021a p. 19) which focuses on collaborative work in which group members recognize their privilege and status to create a collaborative and educational space through media and media literacy.

Media Literacy Education Policies in the United States

As the benefits and consequences of the digital age become clear, law and policy makers have become increasingly invested in creating policies centered on media literacy education (Mihailidis et al., 2021b). Therefore, it is important to understand the current media literacy education climate, because young people in the United States have received varying levels of media literacy education depending on where they live. This variance could play an important

role in how youth perceive media literacy education. This section briefly details efforts made to mandate media literacy education at the federal level, as well as a summary of individual states' current media literacy education laws and policies. A detailed table explaining each states' laws can be found in Appendix A.

The Federal Level

At the time of this writing, there is no federal law mandating media literacy education. There was a media literacy education bill introduced by Senator Amy Klobuchar in 2019 called the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act. This act was aimed at ensuring that the American people become media literate at a young age, starting in kindergarten and continuing until senior year of high school. The goal of this legislation was to create a public that is able to make informed decisions about voting, health, and purchasing; to protect themselves from propaganda (including election and foreign propaganda); and to enhance critical thinking skills as a whole (Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, 2019). Unfortunately, this bill failed to go to a vote in the House of Representatives, and it has not moved since October 19, 2019, so there is little hope it will become law (Media Literacy Now).

The State Level

Currently, there are 14 states with media literacy education laws, and although this indicates progress, many of these laws favor the protectionist approach to media (Francis, 2016; Prewett & Stein, 2009). These states are as follows: Illinois, Colorado, Texas, Florida, Ohio, Utah, Washington, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Rhode Island (U.S. Media Literacy and Policy Update, 2021). Further, 16 states have media literacy bills, meaning legislation about media literacy has been introduced, but not signed into law. These states are as follows: New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland,

Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Montana, Arizona, Oregon and Hawai'i (U.S. Media Literacy and Policy Report, 2020). With these 16 bills, there are 30 states (60%) that either have or are considering mandating media literacy education in K-12 schools. Clearly, media literacy is a popular issue throughout the United States, and with curricula still in the development stage, research about young adults' perceptions of media literacy is imperative at this time.

Media Literacy and Media Literacy Education with Young Adults

There are numerous studies dedicated to researching young people and media literacy. Researching media literacy with young people is important because this demographic is often the target of media literacy educational initiatives (Mihailidis et al., 2021b). Therefore, this type of research directly benefits young people and their educators, making young people ideal research participants, especially in qualitative research, in which research should benefit the community that is studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With this background established, prior media literacy research studies and their findings will be discussed at length in the following pages.

Young Peoples' Media Skills

Many studies have evaluated young peoples' media abilities and skills to determine what they know about the media, and what they need to learn. Although "skills" are only a facet of media literacy education, this prescriptive approach is often used because it allows scholars, educators, and lawmakers the ability to understand what is missing from young peoples' media literacy skill set. This type of research has been conducted in various ways. From a quantitative standpoint, Arke & Primack (2009) found that media literacy ability is positively correlated with critical thinking ability. Another quantitative study found that news media literacy is not correlated with current events knowledge (Ashley et al., 2013). Further, young people can easily

identify advertisements but struggle to identify public relations releases, and they lack the basic skill of evaluating online news sources (Ashey & Fasbinder, 2012; McGrew et al., 2018). These findings indicate that media literacy should go beyond a protectionist approach and integrate critical thinking as well.

Another skill-oriented study found that education level and parental income has little effect on media literacy, that students who are open to varying perspectives are better able to evaluate news, and that children with better grades are more media literate (Metzger et al., 2015). Researchers have also found that young people who believe credible news is important and valuable are better able to determine credibility than those who do not, and that those who generally trust what they see on the internet are not good at assessing credibility. Interestingly, research has found that young people who take credibility training are more likely to believe hoax websites (Metzger et al., 2015; Ngryen et al., 2019), pointing to potential flaws in the current media literacy teaching methods.

Peoples' Perceptions of Media Literacy Education

Research that has focused mainly on this component of media literacy education are important bases for this thesis, because this thesis seeks to expand on the knowledge about young people's perceptions of media literacy education. Ackayoglu & Daggol (2019) assessed young peoples' perceptions of their own media literacy levels, focusing on students' willingness and ability to use media for foreign language (in this case English) learning. The findings indicate that there is little difference in perceived media literacy levels between women and men, that most students view the internet as the most important tool for media consumption, and that students found mass media useful when learning English as a foreign language. Importantly, the effects of media literacy initiatives vary, depending on the participants' identity and background such as their age and gender (Eintraub et al., 2010; Rosenkoetter et al., 2004; Scharrer, 2005;

Scharrer, 2006; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1993; Webb et al., 2010). It should be noted that most of the above studies focused on anti-violence and anti-bullying initiatives, a popular topic in media literacy scholarship.

A national, quantitative study conducted in Australia examined if adults value learning media literacy, comparing people's motivational values such as self-direction, power, and security (Schwartz, 1992) with fourteen different outcomes associated with media literacy. These outcomes included, for example, "to know how to stay protected from scams and predators online," "to use media to increase your understanding of different cultural groups," and "to think about and reflect on your own media use." The researchers found that these fourteen outcomes were important to the participants, but some were considered much more important than others. The most important outcome was "to know how to stay protected from scams and predators online," and the least important were self-promotional outcomes, such as "to use media to influence people." The researchers also found that people's media literacy outcome preference correlated with the values they found most important. This study contributes to the understanding of public perception of media literacy, however in a different country and with adults of all ages (Chambers et al., 2022).

Further, De Leyn et al. (2021) researched teenagers' perceptions of media literacy education, discourse and initiatives in Flanders, Belgium. The research was conducted through a qualitative, constructivist lens via semi-structured interviews with participants aged between 16 and 18-years-old. The researchers found that teenagers think they need guidance through media literacy education, but they are particular about who teaches them. For example, they want someone young and tech savvy, as opposed to someone older. They also believed that those younger than them needed more media literacy education and assistance than they did. The

research presented in this thesis partially replicates this study, but in the vastly different context of the United States.

Although the above research is greatly beneficial to media literacy and media literacy education, young American adults' understanding and conceptualization of the subject should be further explored. Further, scholars have yet to study young American adults' reflections of media literacy education following prolonged remote and hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The above information as well as the identified research gaps lead to my first two research questions:

RQ1: How do young adults define and conceptualize media literacy?

RQ2: What knowledge and skills do young adults associate with media literacy?

Before and After a Media Literacy Course

Many studies have focused on young people's media literacy skill sets before and after taking a media literacy course. One of the more notable examples is the Stony Brook University study, in which students took a news media literacy course at Stony Brook. The author concluded that students found insider information about journalism to be useful and were engaged throughout the course (Fleming, 2014). Other research on the effects after a comprehensive media literacy course show that young people have a higher print reading comprehension, can analyze the main ideas of media texts, and analyze the points of view missing from a media text (Hobbs, 2007). Following a news media course, scholars have found that those who take a news media course have a higher level of news media literacy than those who did not, but that age and overall education level has a greater impact on news media literacy than the media literacy course itself (Kleemans & Eggink, 2016).

Further, people who took a news media literacy course are less likely to perceive a story on a controversial topic as biased than they were before the course began (Vraga et al., 2009). Researchers have also found that young people are able to apply the concepts they had learned during a media literacy course about the media ratings system to offer up a critique of the ratings system and its practices (Scharrer et al., 2020). Researchers have also focused on young peoples' knowledge after taking a media literacy course that focused on stereotypes and violence in media and found that young adults were able to discuss the unfavorable effects of violence and stereotypes in media following the course and that young people had stronger views about violence in the media and resolved to watch violent media less often (Fingar & Jolls, 2014; Sekarasih et al., 2016). Although these studies are worthwhile to the media literacy discipline, they do not focus on the students' personal reflections and takeaways following the courses. Because media literacy education is becoming more prevalent in the United States, (Mihalidis, 2021b) it is important to understand students' perceptions of this media literacy instruction. Therefore, the research seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ3: What are young adults' perceptions of media literacy education in the classroom?

Now that media literacy and media literacy education has been defined in-depth, and the research questions for this thesis have been presented, the following section will provide detailed information about the methodology used to conduct this research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This methodology section details how the research for this thesis was conducted. First, the research approach and research design are discussed, in order to provide information and an explanation about the worldview implemented for this thesis. The following section provides a description of the participant sample. The third section focuses on the recruitment process, the fourth section on data collection, and the fifth section on data analysis. The final section is about the multiple methods used to achieve trustworthiness and validity, which are: rich, thick description; data triangulation; discrepant information; member checking; reliability; and an acknowledgement of the role of the researcher.

Research Approach and Research Design

This thesis adheres to a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist worldview. Qualitative research puts the researcher in direct contact with their participants, relies on multiple open-ended questions, and requires the researcher to understand data from the participants' perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The constructivist approach emerges from hermeneutics, the study of meaning (Mertens, 2020). Therefore, constructivism focuses on the idea that people make meaning of the world based on their personal experiences and are influenced by their communities. All individuals view the world subjectively based on these lived, socially constructed experiences (Brennen, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwandt, 2000). Because constructivism acknowledges the subjectivity of individuals' views, the approach also emphasizes that there are numerous understandings of the same topic. Therefore, a constructivist researcher focuses on the complexity of these understandings and each participant's individual perspectives on the subject. This leads to broad, open-ended interview questions so that the researcher can interpret each participant's unique worldview. These views are shaped by the participant's personal background, including their

nationality, race, sex, gender class, sexual orientation, as well as their personal values. Constructivism acknowledges that participants' understandings are not "discovered, but rather created; it exists only in the time/space framework in which it is generated" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013 p. 40).

This thesis as a whole aims not only to focus on one specific type of media literacy and its benefits and drawbacks, but rather media literacy as a broad, disparate concept, in order to better understand young peoples' relationship with the topic. Chapter Two provides varying viewpoints through which media literacy is studied, taught, and understood; and the main goal of this research project is to understand how the participants themselves make sense of this topic. This thesis focuses solely on the constructivist approach because the main goal is to understand young peoples' perspectives of media literacy education. This research aims to better understand my participants' varying, subjective understandings about the topic of media literacy. Therefore, I recruited and interviewed students from public, private, charter, and technical schools. The questions I posed were open-ended to ensure that I was able to fully understand the participants' views. I also gained insights into the participants' backgrounds both with a qualifying questionnaire as well as through introductory questions in the interview process.

Sample

Since I am focusing on media literacy education at the K-12 level, I interviewed 18-years-olds and 19-year-olds. I purposefully focused on this population for multiple reasons, the first being because 85% of adults in the United States graduate high school by the age of 18 (National Center for Education Statistics). Therefore, the majority of the participants have completed most, if not all of their K -12 education, thus giving them the ability to reflect on most of their K-12 educational experience. Because the majority of 18 and 19-year-olds have nearly completed their K-12 education, they had the ability to reflect on the media literacy education (or

lack thereof) that they received, and they therefore gave comprehensive answers about what they would prefer and expect from a media literacy education. Further, some of the participants had started their undergraduate college degrees. These participants were able to recall what they had learned in K- 12 and relate the knowledge and skills they had gained to their college education. This provided another layer of insight, because these participants were able to reflect on what types of media literacy education (or lack thereof) they found helpful (or unhelpful) at this next level of their education. For these reasons, my participants had insight into media literacy education and how they believe it should be taught. After 20 interviews I reached the point of saturation, meaning I was beginning to hear many of the same sentiments and ideas from my participants (Birks & Mills, 2015; Given, 2016).

Recruitment

Before any recruiting materials were shared or any participant was contacted, I obtained Exempt authorization from Syracuse University's Institutional Review Board. I recruited participants in a number of ways. First, I asked personal connections, including Syracuse University faculty and staff, to connect me with any 18 and 19-year-old high school students they may know. Further, my mother, who used to work at a high school, asked teachers she knows to give my interview information to their students. I also asked friends who were teachers or who have siblings/relatives who are 18 or 19-years-old to share my recruitment information. My father, who teaches at the university level, also shared my recruitment information with his 18 and 19-year-old students. I utilized my own social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) to recruit participants, and I asked my friends and family to share the recruitment information on their platforms as well. Once I began to conduct interviews, I implemented snowball sampling by asking those participants to recruit their friends.

My recruitment materials included a flier that states the purpose of my study, what type of participants I was looking for (18 and 19-year-olds) and my contact information (see Appendix D). My other recruitment material (sent or posted along with the flier) was a Qualtrics qualifying questionnaire (see Appendix C). To ensure I recruited the right population, all potential participants were presented with this brief Qualtrics questionnaire, to ensure that they were the proper age for my study. I also used this instrument to ask more practical questions, such as their names, the type of school they attend, what type of school they attend (public, private or other), their email address or phone number (they could choose to be contacted by text or email), and their preferred pronouns. I also asked participants to identify further information, such as race and ethnicity. Asking for this information ahead of time allowed me to stick within the time parameters (45 minutes to an hour) promised on the recruitment flier, while also helping to relieve pressure that may come along with answering personal identity questions, such as participants' sexual orientation.

Data Collection

My primary form of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Qualitative research often requires face-to-face interaction, with the researcher at the center of the data collection in order to observe and make meaning of the participants' views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These interviews were intended to be a conversation between myself and the interviewee (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015), and I prepared questions in advance to maintain a level of uniformity throughout the interviews. However, a semi-structured interview style allows for flexibility in case the interviewee provides information that is unanticipated yet still relevant and helpful for the topic of media literacy education (Bhattacharya, 2017). Further, semi-structured interviews are the most sensible option for my research, as participants were able to recall their

experiences with media literacy education in high school and reflect on what they find useful and relevant to themselves and others. For the complete interview topic guide, refer to Appendix B.

I conducted interviews via Zoom so that I was able to connect with participants from different areas of the United States. Because qualitative research emphasizes multiple forms of data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I recorded both the audio and video of the Zoom interviews. To ensure that I was still able to interact with my participants face to face, I asked that all participants turned on their camera. All participants did so but one who experienced a technical difficulty. Further, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is ongoing at the time of this research, Zoom provides a safe and healthy alternative to an in-person interview. The intended interview time was between 45 minutes and an hour. Ultimately, the average interview time was 51 minutes long, the shortest interview was 21 minutes, and the longest interview was an hour and 45 minutes. I recorded field notes in my research notebook throughout each interview. Following each interview, I downloaded the Zoom recording in order to create a transcript to begin the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Although qualitative data analysis happens throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), it is important to clearly state my analysis procedures for my data collection. Following each interview, I uploaded interview recording into an AI software called Descript, which generated a transcript. Because AI is not perfect, I listened to the interview and corrected typos in the AI transcript. During this editing process, I began my inductive analysis by identifying certain patterns or categories as they emerged. At this stage in the analysis, I tracked these patterns and categories manually by typing them in a Word document and annotating as necessary. Physically seeing and annotating information is a helpful part of my analysis process, and it prepared me for the more in-depth analysis to come (Tracy, 2019).

The formal coding process went as follows: First, I coded using NVivo coding software. During the first round of coding, I highlighted large segments of text to create categories, or codes, of data, labeling each using an in vivo term. This first stage of coding enabled me to begin identifying patterns that emerged throughout several interviews. By using in vivo terms, I was able to familiarize myself with actual quotes from participants and apply them to the codes. For example, as media use began to emerge as a pattern, I used the quote from a participant, "it's knowing how to use media" to create a code. These codes were broader, generalizable understandings of the data aimed at better understanding the topics that were frequently discussed throughout the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). My codes are fell into three categories – expected codes, codes of unusual or conceptual interest and surprising codes (Saldaña, 2020). Expected codes were codes that had emerged in past research that had also emerged in this research. Codes of unusual or conceptual interest identified ideas that would be particularly interesting to the audience of this research, which includes educators and policy makers as well as researchers. Surprising codes were codes that I did not foresee at the beginning of my research. There were a few codes that were not assigned and in vivo term, and for these codes, I used both description coding, which are codes that "reflect a participant's values, attitudes and beliefs representing [their] perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2016 p. 131) and evaluation coding, which "assigns judgement about the merit, worth or significance of programs or policy (Saldaña, 2016 p. 140).

I also wrote a description of each code in NVivo. Throughout the coding process, I cross-referenced the codes' description with the quotes I had attached to the codes to ensure they were still aligned. If a quote I had attributed to a code did not line up with the description, I would remove and place it with a different code, if necessary. I also read through the codes, their descriptions, and the content of the codes after each interview was coded to ensure I was not

duplicating the same sentiment in two separate codes. During this round of data analysis, I wrote research memos to capture my thoughts and draw connections between codes that could emerge as themes. This was especially important because this coding process occurred over the span of days, and I did not want to forget important information between coding sessions.

I then borrowed from the phenomenological approach of horizontalization, during which I identified significant sentences that provided a comprehensive understanding of my participants' perceptions of media literacy education. These sentences were quotes from participants that I had previously coded. These sentences helped me identify the most important and reoccurring sentiments throughout the 20 interviews. Horizontalization allowed me to give value to what each participant said, while also focusing on the phenomenon of young people's perceptions of media literacy education. While phenomenology was not used throughout the research process, horizontalization allowed me to approach the participants' perceptions of media literacy education from a holistic viewpoint, while also continuing to relate the statements back to the research questions. I then compiled these significant statements into clusters of meaning to create themes. Also at this stage, I merged multiple codes into one theme, and removed codes that did not have enough information to produce a theme as well as codes that did not relate to the research questions. I continued to write research memos during this process, because this process also took multiple days, and it was imperative for me to be able to track my thought process and understanding of the themes as I created them. At the conclusion of this process, I had derived nine themes. To ensure each theme was unique and aligned with a research question, as well as to better contextualize what the participants experienced, I wrote a textual description of each theme. This textual description served as an aide as I wrote about each theme in the "Results" section.

Trustworthiness and Validity

As is true with most of qualitative research, the researcher (me) is the key component for data collection and data analysis. Because of this, it is important that I establish trustworthiness and validity throughout the research, using multiple forms of evaluation (House, 2010; Patton, 2002; Quartaroli, 2012). Validity serves as a tool to verify the accuracy of a researchers' findings. Multiple validity strategies were applied throughout the research process to ensure my findings are accurate, and they are as follows: rich, thick description; data triangulation; discrepant information; member checking; and reliability.

Rich, Thick Description

When describing my themes in the "results" section, I use rich, thick description with multiple participants' perspectives included. These descriptions make the themes believable and understandable to the reader. These descriptions are especially important in qualitative, constructivist research like mine because they reveal details about how a participant views the world. Rich, thick description shows that the researcher (me) has spent a prolonged time speaking to participants about their perceptions of media literacy education, demonstrating that I have a greater understanding about young peoples' perceptions of media literacy than a "tourist" in this subject would acquire (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2019).

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation occurs when multiple sources are used to validate the presence of a singular theme, proving that there is robust data supporting that theme (Denzin, 2017; Hussein, 2009). All of my themes were established using multiple participants' perspectives, thus using data triangulation to confirm the validity of the themes.

Discrepant Information

When applicable, I provided discrepant information that negates the theme. This is important to constructivist, qualitative research, because not every participant views the world the same, and therefore, not every participant will identify which each theme (Brennen, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwandt, 2000). For example, the theme "Learning Media Literacy" describes a common sentiment among participants that their teachers cannot effectively teach them media literacy. However, three participants thought that their teachers were able to teach them about media literacy, and their reasoning is described in detail to provide discrepant information.

Member Checking

I also engaged in member checking by showing a semi-polished version of the results section to my participants. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they would like to see a copy of the results section before my thesis defense. Those who said that they would were emailed a copy. I told these participants that I was open to any questions, concerns, or feedback they wanted to provide (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Reliability

In order to ensure that my research process was reliable, I used several procedures throughout the study. As mentioned previously, each transcript was generated by Descript AI. I then played through each transcription, correcting spelling and wording mistakes the AI had made. This helped ensure the participants' sentiments were correctly presented in the "results" section. I also ensured that the codes maintained the same meaning throughout the coding process. I did this by creating a description of each code Nvivo, and regularly reviewing the contents of each code. Further, I created a qualitative codebook, which contained the names of

each code, its definition and the locations in which the code appeared (the specific interview and the minute number) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

Finally, I of course hold biases that I must acknowledge to present a trustworthy account of the research. As is necessary with any qualitative research, I must recognize that I, as the person in the center of the research, hold certain beliefs and subjective worldviews that I must acknowledge to truthfully and transparently present my findings (Mertens, 2020). My reflexive statement is as follows: First, I am passionate about the subject of media literacy. While at Syracuse University, I researched media literacy with college students as part of a graduate course, I also researched media literacy in the television industry for a research assistantship, and taught media literacy to students as a teaching assistant. Beyond that I have led media literacy workshops for high schoolers as part of a Fulbright grant. I myself have a media literacy education. Although I was not formally educated in the subject before college, I have since obtained undergraduate degrees in both Public Relations and English, and am now pursuing a master's degree in media studies. Secondly, I have my own opinions about how media literacy education should be taught, as well as the United States' media literacy laws and policies. Third, I must recognize that all my participants are younger than me and in their teens. Therefore I, as a 24-year-old, may have appeared as an authority figure, thus altering the way the participants acted and spoke around me. Fourth, my view of the world and my treatment within it is based on my nationality, race, sex, gender, class, and sexual orientation. I am a heterosexual, white cisgender woman from an upper-middle class household located in the United States. My lens of the word will be different from my participants, as each person has their own view of the world based on their unique subjective viewpoints.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter details the results of the in-depth interviews. Some of the results are surprising, while others align with past research. The results will be explained through themes. The first theme provides insights into how participants navigate the media landscape. Although this theme does not fall squarely under a research question, it provides context for young people's understanding of media literacy. Following the first theme, each theme is placed under the research question with which it aligns. Following the coding process, nine themes emerged from the data. These themes are as follows: (1) New Generation, New Communication, New Education (2) Reading and Comprehension (3) Media Use (4) Computer Kids (5) "We Were the Guinea Pigs" (6) Social Media Addiction (7) I want to Learn Media in School (8) Learning Media Literacy and (9) Protectionist Learning. The results exposed many convergent responses, perhaps because both the subject of media and the subject education are areas with which each participant has engaged for most of their lives.

This chapter begins with an overview of participant demographics. Then, each theme is described and explained.

Participant Demographics

As stated in Chapter Three, several avenues of recruitment were used to find participants. Since the inclusion criterion was for 18- or 19-year-olds, recruitment was difficult at times, but 20 participants were ultimately recruited over the span of four months. Prior to the interview, participants entered their demographic information into the Qualtrics recruitment survey, found in Appendix C. This gave participants a chance to explain their identities as thoroughly as they wanted to, and it also gave participants the option to choose not to answer demographic questions if they were not comfortable doing so. Participants were asked about their pronouns

and their sexual orientation, as well as their race and ethnicity. It is important to note that while the participants have intersectional identities, and 11 participants have minoritized identities, the majority of participants identified their race as white. While these participants did have varying backgrounds overall, the number of participants who identified as white is a limitation to this study. Participants were also asked to name the states where they received their high school education. However, because this research is about K-12, participants were asked about that states they lived in for their elementary and middle school education during the interview process. Most participants attended K-12 in New York or Pennsylvania, due to heavy recruitment in these two states because of the researcher's ties to both areas.

Lastly, participants were asked about the type of school they attended during K-12. Out of the 20 participants, 16 attended public school at some point in their lives. Participants also attended Catholic school (Catholic schools are private, for-profit schools in the U.S.) charter school (charter schools are funded by tax dollars but are independently owned and operated by interest groups), and technical school. In the case of this study, the technical school that participants attended is funded by the school districts in one Central Pennsylvanian county. This school offers trade courses, so that qualifying students graduate with a trade certificate (such as veterinary assistant or medical assistant). Students at this school also take academic classes and this school is only available for students in grades nine through 12.

It is important to reiterate that these demographics are self-identified, and were not chosen or written by the author, but by the participants themselves. Table One provides details about participants' demographics and introduces them by their pseudonym. Table Two provides information about the type of school each participant attended and the states where they received

their K-12 education. Each participant was given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym at the end of the interview. A pseudonym was chosen by the researcher for those who opted out.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Maya	woman	Black, African American	Queer
Isabella	woman	white, Sicilian	Heterosexual
Brittney	woman	white, Israeli-American, Jewish	Bisexual
Henry	man	white, Irish and Italian	Heterosexual
Olivia	woman	Chose not to answer	Chose not to answer
Grace	woman	white, Hispanic	Heterosexual
Dakota	woman	mixed race (Black, white), French Creole	Chose not to answer
Cillian	man	white, American	Heterosexual
Angelica	woman	white, Italian	Bisexual
Valerie	woman	mixed race (Black, white, Asian), Korean	Heterosexual
Madelyn	woman	white, Latina	Heterosexual
Sophie	woman	white, Caucasian	Heterosexual

Name	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Antonio	Non-binary	white	Homosexual
Kayon	woman	Black, African American	Heterosexual
Barry	man	white, Eastern European	Heterosexual
Charlotte	woman	white	Heterosexual
Nora	woman	white, Ashkenazi Jewish	Heterosexual
Chloe	woman	white, Caucasian	Heterosexual
Alice	woman	Black, African American	Chose not to answer
John	man	white, Scandinavian and French	Heterosexual

Table 2
Participant school types and states

Name	State(s) they lived in during K-12	Type of K-12 school(s) attended
Maya	New York	Charter school
Isabella	Pennsylvania	Public school, Catholic school
Brittney	New York	Public school
Henry	New Jersey	Public school
Olivia	Pennsylvania	Public school
Grace	Pennsylvania	Public school, technical school
Dakota	Pennsylvania	Public school
Cillian	New Jersey	Public school
Angelica	New York	Public school
Valerie	Pennsylvania, North Carolina	Public school
Madelyn	Pennsylvania	Public school, technical school
Sophie	Pennsylvania	Catholic school
Antonio	New York	Public school
Kayon	New York	Charter school
Barry	Ohio	Catholic school
Charlotte	Pennsylvania	Public school

Name	State(s) they lived in during K-12	Type of K-12 school(s) attended
Nora	Pennsylvania, Arkansas	Public school
Chloe	Pennsylvania	Public school, technical school
Alice	Pennsylvania	Public school, technical school
John	New York	Public school

RQ1: How do young adults define and conceptualize media literacy?

This research question is particularly interesting because each participant had the opportunity to define media literacy towards the beginning of the interview. The definitions did vary, which signifies a distinction in media literacy knowledge among participants –not so much that some participants know more than others, but that among the participants there were different media literacy education opportunities (some did not have any at all). Most of the definitions fell into two major categories: (1) reading and comprehension and (2) media use. It is also important to note that the state(s) in which participants received their K-12 education as well as the type of institution they attended did not appear to have an obvious effect on their media literacy knowledge. Rather, those who were exposed to media literacy education during their time in K-12 appeared to be more knowledgeable about the subject of media literacy than those who were not.

Theme One: New Generation, New Communication, New Education

As with any generation, Generation Z has its own culture and individuals make their own social rules that differ from those who came before them. Of course, media plays a large role in this culture, because it is so intertwined in daily life. This theme mainly talks about how the

young people interviewed for this thesis navigate their media landscape. It is important to understand how young people are using and navigating media, so that researchers and educators are equipped to teach these young people things that are relevant to them and their daily lives, as is supposed to be the main goal of education in the United States (Dewey, 1934).

As mentioned earlier, these young people are engaged and active on social media. That finding does not come as a surprise. What was surprising is how these participants used social media. All 20 participants said they create and publish social media posts. Of these 20 participants, 17 identified social media posts as their main form of media creation (as opposed to media creation such video production, podcasting, graphic design, etc.). For most participants, posting was a social activity that they did to update their network of followers about their life events. Cillian, who recently graduated from high school, is now part of his university's ROTC program. Cillian described his social posting habits this way: "Like I'll make a [Instagram] post or something like that about like something cool I did. Like uh, probably my most recent post is about like training I did for ROTC, which was really cool." For these young people, creating social media content was about showcasing unique events that were special to them. Grace used TikTok to showcase memories of her senior year. "So I think there was a one that my friend and I are doing where it's little clips of us throughout our senior year. Um, so like when we got like piercings done, um, we're probably gonna make one at prom, make one at graduation, that kind of thing." Participants like Grace and Cillian are using social media to connect and share their lives with others, while also documenting important memories for themselves.

However, not every participant was as willing to post on social media. Angelica talked about the negative effects of posting on apps like Instagram: "I feel like it's a lot of pressure to post. Um, see the likes, like stuff like that. Like if I- it has to be like the best picture. Everyone

else, on like Instagram, they go on like feeds of like, everything looking like aesthetically pleasing. It's just more stressful than anything." Although participants had varying opinions about creating and sharing social media posts, all 20 of them posted, at least occasionally, on social media. Some of those who posted often on social media expressed the desire to be media literate, so that they could properly navigate their various social media platforms. For some of the participants who did not post often, they felt as though they were not media literate enough to navigate the social media landscape, claiming that most of their peers were far more media-savvy than they were.

Young people also have a unique way of communicating using the social media app Snapchat. Of the 20 participants, 14 talked about using Snapchat as a texting app, as opposed to SMS or iMessage. Snapchat is a unique social media platform, on which users can send photos to individuals or groups, but these photos disappear immediately after the receiver views them. Users can also post "stories," which are photos that stay up for 24 hours and can be viewed by all of the user's Snapchat friends. Users can also send text messages to individuals and groups, and these also disappear immediately after the receiver views them, unless one person in the message thread saves the text (Snapchat Support). Participants, such as Madelyn, identified ease of use as the main reason behind using Snapchat as a messaging app: "Snapchat is easier, like, because it can be quick. And I could like send a video really fast instead of calling you or take a picture and just send it instead of –and it doesn't save. So, I feel like it leaves less of like, it takes up less space in my phone pretty much." Snapchat as a quick and easy way to connect was a main draw for participants, especially because Snapchat does not require users to share their phone numbers, just their Snapchat-specific usernames. Olivia described the "informal" manner of the app as a way avoid awkward situations:

> I definitely think like, there's like some weird stigma with texts. Like I would much rather communicate on texts, but I feel like whenever you ask, like, 'Ooh, can I get your number?' Like people just like automatically assume like you're hitting on them. Whereas like Snapchat is like very informal.

The idea that asking for someone's phone number can create awkward situations perhaps represents a boundary that Generation Z has set for themselves. During a time when young people are constantly surrounded and connected because of social, Snapchat may serve as a way for young people to protect their space.

The participants also demonstrated these boundaries by using Snapchat's private story feature. Of the 20 participants, eight talked about their use of private stories. This feature allows users to select who sees their posts, so that users can limit their viewers to friends only (Snapchat Support). Participants like Antonio chose to post more personal information on these private stories than what they would on a regular story: "I'm a big fan of posting on like my private story. It's like, I don't know, it's almost kind of like a journal, but it's fun, it's up for the day, it's just crazy." These participants used private Snapchat stories to inform their close friends about their lives in an interactive, but more intimate manner. Alice spoke about how she created a private story specifically for her 18th birthday party, so that the people at the party could see the pictures and the memories they made. She then made a public post about her birthday party that only included pictures in which she and her friends looked "good." Alice explained this dichotomy:

> My private stories are for like the people that, like, I know won't judge them for being goofy. And then my public story is like the stuff where we actually look nice and we'll

kind of just be sharing it to everybody. Like 'I had a wonderful birthday party and I want all of you to know that these are my friends.'

Snapchat seems to serve as an "all-in-one" social media platform where participants feel connected to their peers, but that they are able to control the level of connection based on what they were comfortable with. As mentioned in the introduction of this theme, this observation may not tie perfectly back to media literacy. However, it is important to understand what types of media young people are engaging with the most, and why they are doing so, to teach media literacy education in a way that young people are most likely to resonate with and understand.

Theme Two: Reading and Comprehension

In their responses, half of the participants focused on reading and comprehending the media, making this the most popular way to define media literacy. Participants chose this type of definition because of the "literacy" portion of the term. For example, Angelica said "Literacy to me is like reading, writing. Like reading and stuff like that. So, online version of that, I guess?" This definition gets to the core of media literacy, for which the ultimate goal is the ability to create, access, comprehend, and act using media texts instead of traditional ones. Although Angelica's definition was limited to online media, Madelyn expanded on Angelica's definition by saying: "Like, I think it would mean like, like literacy, like I dunno it reminds me of like English or like reading something on the media." Madelyn acknowledged that media is beyond online media, but still focused on how literacy and media literacy are intertwined.

Relating media literacy back to English class was quite common, partially because many participants related the term "literacy" with such classes. However, many also related media literacy to English because of their experience with information literacy within the English class setting. Nora put it this way:

> My expectation is that media literacy is understanding like, like fi- like knowing what your sources are and making sure that you have reliable information. Um, and most of that, at least from if that's the perspective, if that's the definition we're going off of, was like in English class when they were like, 'make sure we're- when you're writing a research paper, like make sure your sources are real.'

This definition is consistent with information literacy, which focuses on the ability to find, access, evaluate, analyze, and present information. Information literacy focuses on these skills within a research context, and it is commonly taught in U.S. schools during tasks like writing research papers, as Nora mentioned. Most participants mentioned receiving an information literacy education, so it is understandable that they would relate media literacy with information literacy.

Brittney also emphasized information literacy when defining media literacy, by saying: "We're all taught like Wikipedia, isn't a source. And like, you have to assume the bias and you have to like, look at the date, look at the website, like, is this website, like is it just like crafted for content or is it like an actual source?" This definition showcases the overlap between media and information literacy. While what Brittney said relates to information literacy by speaking about finding and using academic information, these steps are also worthwhile when assessing non-academic types of media, such as news articles or tweets. There is of course a great overlap between information and media literacy, as seen in the literature review. The fact that this overlap was emphasized by participants' definitions supports efforts to teach these literacies in conjunction with one another. Based off these participants' definitions of media literacy, scholars' calls to teach media and information literacy together are justified, because it would

come naturally to the students as well as the teachers, who are already used to teaching information literacy (Leaning, 2017; Lau, 2013; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011).

Theme Three: Media Use

Seven participants defined media literacy as the ability to use media properly. Isabella defined media literacy as "how to use social media." This simple definition evokes the importance of internet and digital literacy. Since young people spend a lot of their time on social media, understanding how to use it, and use it to their benefit, is important to them. Kayon talked more specifically about media use while defining media literacy. "I think it's just more like, learning about like things to post on media or like how it affects people and stuff like that." Kayon's idea of media literacy also touches on digital and internet literacy, since she talks about posting on media platforms. These definitions also highlight the production approach to media literacy education, because of their emphasis on encouraging personal agency that allows young people learn new skills, such as posting, as Kayon suggested (Cheung, 2009; Dezuanni, 2015; Hobbs, 1998; Kearney, 2013; Goble, 2012; Norton & Hathaway, 2010).

Sophie defined media literacy in terms of how media use corresponds with daily life. "Like how media is used throughout your life. Like how it like intertwines with your like daily routine maybe." With modern life so intertwined with media use, Sophie's definition underscores the importance of media use as part of media literacy education. This definition relates to López's (2019; 2020) conceptualization of ecomedia literacy, which focuses on creating environmentally conscious media consumers, and encourages people to think about how they use media devices and what they can do to use them less. This intentionality also exists in social justice-oriented media literacy, which emphasizes that the media institutions in the U.S. are dominated by white people, and therefore media use can reinforce white supremacy (Cobas,

2008; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021). Therefore, learning how media use affects one's daily routine, as Sophie mentioned, is an important part of media literacy and media literacy education.

Charlotte defined media literacy as media use, but also talked about how media literacy meant a holistic understanding of the media.

> I feel like it's knowing how to use media and, like different aspects of it. Like, I feel like literacy is usually when you're like, well, taught about something. So- or like, well-knowledged about it. So media literacy would be like having a lot of information on the media and maybe even like, it could be like a class that teaches you about the media.

This definition of media literacy is important because interactive learning is one of the ultimate goals of the production, social justice-oriented, and critical approaches to media literacy. This is also the goal of the media literacy non-profit NAMLE, which aims to teach people a holistic approach to media literacy. Charlotte also suggests that media literacy could be taught through a class, which demonstrates young people's desire to receive a media literacy education in school.

RQ2: What knowledge and skills do young adults associate with media literacy?

It is important to understand the knowledge and skills that young adults associate with media literacy so that researchers and educators are aware of what is top of mind for young people when it comes to media literacy education. To gain an understanding of what these skills and pieces of knowledge might be, participants were asked about how they search for things using media, including how they access and analyze this information. Participants were also asked if/how they create media. In order to expand participants' perspectives, they were also asked if their peers were able to perform these tasks. Although unintentional, knowledge and skills also came up in one of the introduction questions, when participants were asked about what

they liked and didn’t like about the media that they used. During these conversations, participants talked about their likes and dislikes, and some would follow up by talking about how glad or upset they were that they were taught or were not taught a certain skill or piece of knowledge. Knowledge and skills were also occasionally mentioned when talking about media literacy education in the classroom (RQ3). Therefore, this research question was addressed throughout the course of the interviews. This demonstrates that young people have many opinions and perspectives about media literacy and media literacy education, and participants were excited to share these opinions with the researcher. It is important to note that this section concentrates mainly on social media –all 20 participants used at least two social media platforms, and most used them every day, making social media a major part of their lives and of high importance to them in terms of their opinions about media literacy education.

Theme Four: Computer Kids

Half of the participants spoke about the importance of learning basic computer skills for them and their peers to succeed. These participants talked about learning to type, as well as to use Microsoft Suite and being able to navigate their laptops for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be argued that this is not quite media literacy, but information literacy (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 2003). However, in the digital world of today, these skills could be perceived as a version of media access, which is an important part of media literacy (NAMLE; ACME). Chloe echoed a common sentiment among these participants when she said, “I took like a technical class, which just taught us about how to like work with a computer. I don't know if that counts.” Many participants found it worthwhile to bring up their computer classes, even if they weren’t sure if a class like this was technically “media.” Some participants felt like their lack of basic computer skills had set them behind. Alice put it this way:

> I hate Google. Like Google docs and stuff like that. And Google Excel, because I don't know how to use it. Like I don't, I don't understand it. I think it's stupid. I don't, I don't understand why things are moving this way. What do you mean autosave? Like, I don't understand it, don't get it. . . Like and I'm a senior, like, this is stuff that I should have been learned. But I didn't, you guys [referring to her teachers] just told us that we had to do stuff on Google docs to share, and that was it. Like, that was it. We just kind of had to fend for ourselves with that.

Participants like Alice felt as though they were being asked to perform tasks using computer skills that they did not have. This was especially important to participants who did a lot of their coursework using a computer, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Sophie saw her education completely shift, like many young people during this time. Sophie spoke about how her school shifted from pencils and paper to laptops in order to adjust to the COVID-19 world.

> I would be using my laptop all the time in like classes to take notes and assignments a lot would be like on the laptop. Like, you, it wasn't like you're using a paper, especially like with COVID too. Like there was a rule like you couldn't pass out papers, whatever. Um, which some teachers completely ignored it, but, um, a lot of times, like the assignment is on your laptop and you need a laptop to complete the assignment. And, um, so that's pretty much like how it was all the time from like junior to senior year.

Although the technical skills mentioned above are not directly related to media literacy, they were important for many participants. These participants felt as though they needed these computer skills to be more productive and adept members of society. Therefore, the sentiments expressed in this theme were important because of this thesis' focus on highlighting young

people’s perceptions of media literacy, even if they vary from traditional definitions. Perhaps if young people are taught these technical skills, they will feel more prepared to learn about media literacy, including how to use computers to “access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act” using media (NAMLE).

Theme Five: “We were the guinea pigs” – Barry

A popular sentiment discussed during the interviews was that participants felt as though their generation signed up for social media during many platforms’ infant years with little to no guidance. Participants felt the effects this had on them personally and on their peers. As the “guinea pigs,” these young people felt as though their mental health and development was altered by social media, and like the adults in their lives had let them down by not teaching them about the dangers of these platforms.

An unfortunate, but unsurprising, finding was that nine of the participants, eight of whom identified as women, talked about how their self-esteem and body image were affected by social media use during their developmental years. Participants often felt that their self-esteem and body image suffered because they compared themselves to others on social platforms, especially visual ones such as Instagram and TikTok. Valerie described this comparison culture by saying: “I do think they have like a competitive, um, undertone where it's just like, no one wants her life to look bad on social media . . . it kind of blocks human connection because no one wants to show like the negatives of their life on social media.” This lack of authenticity often left participants feeling like they were not “good” enough in some way, whether it be in terms of physical appearance or social life.

This comparison culture was especially pertinent when the young people were exposed to influencers’ content. Many influencers appear to look just like normal, everyday people, but they

are still internet celebrities who do not live normal lives. Nora, who attended public school in both Arkansas and Pennsylvania, talked about how teachers have trouble understanding the "bad" side of social media, while explaining what it is like for her to views influencers' content:

> I think that it [TikTok] starts to know what's gonna make me watch, even if that watching is not a positive thing. So sometimes it's like a girl who's like 'what I eat a day' and she eats like 800 calories and I'm like, 'oh my God, I like, I, should I be doing that?' I'm like, 'obviously not.' Um, but I think that there's that like, there's - that uncomfortable and bad side, that just is not evident to most educators if they're not using the platforms.

Nora brought up the disconnect between her and her teachers, signifying that she feels her teachers have trouble understanding what the media landscape is like for people her age. This disconnect could be fueled by the fact that neither Pennsylvania nor Arkansas require media literacy education instruction, and therefore Nora did not have the opportunity to talk with her teachers about this side of social media.

Although the participants mentioned influencers, they also talked about how they wanted to be more like people they actually know in real life based on their social media accounts. Isabella talked about comparison with both influencers and her peers. "You can look at like influencers and how, like, you would want to be like them, but like, it's not possible for you to have like these millions and millions of followers. And like, or even if you want to be like another person in your school that is like more popular on like social media and how, you would want to be like that." Isabella's statement is an interesting one, because although young people comparing themselves to their peers is not a new concept, social media adds a layer to this comparison that did not previously exist (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Marengo et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2018; Wells, Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2021).

Adding another perspective, Brittney talked about her struggles with an eating disorder. She spoke about posting a selfie on social media and getting a response from a friend asking for her workout plan, so she could look more like Brittney. This upset Brittney, because she realized that people were comparing themselves to her.

> I like haven't posted on Instagram in so long, even though I take photos with the intention to, because I know for a fact that I'm not happy and I'm not healthy. And I don't want to like, put that out that I am, and have people look at that and be like, look at me and my body and be like, 'oh my gosh, she's so hot, like, ugh, why can't I be like that' when like, you don't want to be like this.

If media literacy was taught from a critical or social justice-oriented approach, young people such as Nora, Isabella, and Brittney would be able to talk about how to navigate this comparison culture through open and honest discussion with their peers (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2019; López, 2014, 2019; Luke, 1994; Mihailidis et al., 2021a) and perhaps this could help ease young people's worries about not being "good" enough.

Participants came of age feeling as though social media was a fake world that made it harder to truly connect to people, and they were unable to receive guidance from the adults in their lives, including teachers, as social media was a new tool for everyone. This is an interesting finding because it supports media literacy scholarship that acknowledges that media is a tool that can be used to build community and connect to others (Buckingham, 2019; Hobbs, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2019). However, it emphasizes certain, mainly social justice-oriented, media literacy scholars' idea that educators need to be clear about how young people can make meaningful and beneficial connections through media, including providing young people with the proper tools and resources to do so (Hodgin et al., 2018; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020;

Ramasubramanian et al., 2020). If young people are given the tools and resources needed to join or even create empowering online communities, they may find it easier to avoid the toxic social media communities the participants mentioned.

For example, Maya talked about the knowledge she learned in a media literacy class that helped her to better understand how to refrain from comparing herself to others on social media:

> One of the things we talked about in my communications class was like a benefit to social media is you can portray yourself any way you want to. And I don't think like, of course, like people talk about it all the time. Like, 'oh, like social media is fake,' but like, they don't really *talk* about it. Like a lot of photos on Instagram are photoshopped or like taken like on a certain day at a certain time. Like not all of it is true.

Maya's media literacy instruction helped her go from simply being aware that social media was causing her generation to compare themselves to others, to understanding why and how social media posts are curated. This knowledge provided by a media literacy education can give young people with the skills they need to avoid making these harmful comparisons between themselves and other people.

Although mental health and development was mainly discussed in the comparison context, some participants spoke about other health effects. Examples include anxiety and depression because of news consumption, people becoming hostile because of violent video games, and worries that peers were not physically active enough because they were spending their spare time in front of a screen instead of outside or at the gym. Participants had a few suggestions for how these issues could be avoided with future generations. John suggested education as a way to improve mental health outcomes in the future:

> I think nowadays there should be a class on the dangers of social media. Um, although I know that that probably won't happen. Um, but it's like –you can see the negative effects that social media has on our generation already. And social media- and we got like, we were introduced, really introduced the social media in middle school, um, you know, early high school, and it's already taken a big toll on us. . . So I think that classes that like teach about the psychological affects that media has, should be implemented going forward is since it's becoming such a big part of our lives.

Although John was not hopeful that a media literacy education would be introduced, this indicates young people's desire to learn about the mental health effects of social media, so that they are able to make informed decisions about their social media use. Olivia talked about how she felt as though social media caused "a switch in [her] behavior" and suggested that social media and mental health be addressed in school: "Um, like in maybe like a general health course that like is required. 'Cause I know for public school you have to take health. So maybe in like ninth grade or eighth grade when you're younger and like deciding to get on platforms." Olivia, like many other participants, felt as though a media literacy education could serve as an important warning mechanism for young people, so they could understand the mental health dangers of social media platforms. Unfortunately, as the "guinea pigs," participants did not feel like they were given this warning, and they fear it may affect them for a long time.

Theme Six: Social Media Addiction

A significant skill that participants felt they were lacking was the ability to control the amount of time they spent on their phones. Of the 20 participants, 13 mentioned that they thought they spent too much time on their phones, specifically on social media apps. Cillian talked about how much social media pulls him away from his responsibilities. "TikTok and

Instagram are pretty similar, and you just waste, you can just kind of spend a lot of time, like wasting on that. Like, especially when I have like assignments due and stuff like that. And then I find myself just scrolling through TikTok for hours." Participants such as Cillian felt they lacked the self-control needed to stay off of their phones, even when faced with important deadlines. Some participants attributed their time-wasting habits to social media algorithms, indicating a level of media literacy because they were able to understand tech companies' intent to keep them engaged with the platform (Mihailidis et al., 2021b; Tyner, 2019). For example, Dakota talked about her experience with TikTok: "It's like never ending, 'cause you do get stuck into like that realm and you kind of just get sucked into the screen, which is like horrible. I honestly think that's like so bad." The participants could understand that they were spending too much time on social media, but they didn't have the tools or the skills to stop.

Olivia talked about how she and her friends had even coined a nickname for their social media addiction. "Like my friends and I refer to it as like a sickness, whenever we are just like in the, like a loop of continuously scrolling on and on." It is interesting that when these participants spoke about the amount of time they spent on social media, they were all aware of the fact that it was a problem. However, although there was some acknowledgement of the algorithms, most participants thought of it as a personal problem, not a structural one designed by the creators of these social media platforms. For example, when Madelyn spoke about the addicting nature of social media, she said, "I don't think that's like an app thing. That's more like a me thing." Barry was aware of the algorithms, but still put the blame on himself. "And then also their addictive nature is a little bit concerning. I guess like, that's partially on me due to my, uh, like gotta have some self-control there. But they do like kind of like build them to be like addictive and to keep you scrolling." These young people had the power of self-awareness about their media

consumption habits, but, in some cases, they did not have the skills needed to change these habits or the proper knowledge about how and why these habits had formed.

Many media literacy scholars advocate for the structure of U.S. media to be taught in schools, including critical thinking exercises focused on how the media platform keeps the audience's attention (Hobbs, 2007) as well as who is constructing media content and their intentions behind this construction (Kellner & Share, 2005; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020). When it comes to educating about algorithms, scholars have emphasized that media literacy education can help young people understand that tech companies have allowed their apps to become addicting so that people stay on the app and therefore generate more revenue for the companies (Mihailidis, 2021b; Tyner, 2019). A media literacy education could help young people understand that these apps are designed to be time consuming and that it is not their fault as individuals that they have become addicted to them. Perhaps this knowledge, especially when taught during K-12, could help young people, like the participants, spend less time on social media.

RQ3: What are young adults' perceptions of media literacy education in the classroom?

This thesis mainly focuses on media literacy education in the classroom, with an emphasis on young people's K-12 experience. Therefore, it was important to discuss during the interviews not only participants' experiences, but also their thoughts about media literacy education in the classroom. To better understand young people's perceptions, participants were asked a range of questions about their personal experiences, such as if and how they had learned about media during K-12. They were also asked about their personal opinions regarding media literacy education, such as how they would like to be taught about media, if they thought receiving a media literacy education was important for themselves and their peers, and if they

perceived that their teachers were capable of teaching them about media. Participants were also asked to describe who they thought would benefit the most from a media literacy education. Three distinct themes emerged to address this research question.

Theme Seven: I want to Learn about Media in School

Media literacy education is a topic that has gained public and political support in the past decade and particularly since 2016 (Media Literacy Now). Of course, scholars and educators know the benefits to media literacy education, including (but not limited to) its ability to help create informed citizens and voters, enhance young people's ability to evaluate news, and help young people identify stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media (Altschull, 1995; Ashley et al., 2013; Hyslop-Marginson & Pinto, 2007; Kellner & Share, 2019; Mihailidis, 2009; Mihailidis et al., 2020b; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Darzabi, 2020; Vraga & Tully, 2015; Walsh et al., 2014). However, young people may not be aware of such benefits. Therefore, it is important to gauge young people's level of interest about receiving a media literacy education, to ensure that they feel as though a media literacy education is useful to them as the recipients, based on what they know and what they have experienced.

When the participants were asked if they were interested in learning about media literacy, the feedback was a resounding affirmative –all 20 participants said they want to learn media literacy in some capacity at school. This demonstrates that young people are not only willing but hoping to get a media literacy education, and therefore media literacy is certainly a topic relevant to their lives. Participants had varying opinions on what aspects of media literacy were the most important, as well as how in-depth media literacy should be taught, but certain distinct patterns did emerge.

Although all 20 participants wanted what they identified as a media literacy education, not every participant received one. Most participants did report learning about media safety, such as cyberbullying, proper posting etiquette on social media sites, and tips to avoid speaking to strangers on the internet. Some participants were taught media safety in a class dedicated to the topic, some as part of a unit of another class (such as health or English) and some with teachers who would mention it from time to time (media safety is elaborated upon under the "protectionist" theme). Two had classes where they would watch media content – one watched the news, and one watched movies (both said that very few assignments were given in their classes, as they were mainly consumption/observation classes).

Out of the 20 participants, only four reported taking a class dedicated to media literacy. These four participants had classes that focused on how to "access, analyze, evaluate, create and act" (NAMLE) using media. Two of these participants took a class that taught communication in steps –starting from face-to-face interactions and working up to using media to gather news, assess credibility, and create videos and podcasts. One participant had a class that focused mainly on news media, particularly aimed at fact-checking and interpreting bias. Another participant took a class that was focused on production, with a teacher who took care to teach lessons about media access, analysis, and use. Of these four, only two took more than one media literacy class. Both groups –the four participants who did receive a media literacy education and the 16 who did not –had suggestions as to what they would like to learn in a media literacy class.

The four participants who had a media literacy class all said that they were grateful they had the opportunity to take it. Of these four participants, three had started college and they noticed how beneficial it was to them, and how much more prepared they felt, even to do basic information literacy tasks, than their peers. Barry, who attended Catholic school in Ohio and is

now a first-year student at a public college in North Carolina, said “I'd say like, I'm definitely much better prepared than some people. Because we'll like do it [use a computer] in class, and I feel like some people still don't know how to like cite a resource in like a paper.” Maya, who attends a charter school in Upstate New York, pointed out some specific benefits of her media literacy class:

> At first I didn't realize, I didn't even realize that media was like more than just like your phone. And like music, like, even just finding out that like media is just like everywhere. That was like a shocker. And, um, yeah, I think it was really important because like, I don't think anybody, like, of course, like a lot of people like might think to themselves like, ‘oh, I'm on my phone too much,’ but like, you never really think about how big of a problem it is. And so then like learning about it in class was like, okay, yeah, this is definitely an issue.

Although Maya’s experience with her media literacy class is not universal, it is clear that her media literacy education drastically altered the way she thinks about media. Barry, as well as the other two participants who had a media literacy education, felt more comfortable transitioning into college. The benefits these four participants described make it clear that media literacy education plays an important and positive role in their lives, and it is understandable that these four participants were grateful to have this educational experience.

Other participants, as mentioned previously, learned about media in classes that could not be described as media literacy-focused, but still learnt skills that they felt were important and worthwhile. Dakota, who attended public school in the Greater Philadelphia Area, talked about a class she took in which students would spend the class period watching the news. “That was one of my favorite classes actually, just because it was so like laid back and we got to see like stuff

that was going on because at my, like in my family, we don't really watch the news. It's just like we go about our days." Even though the class did not teach every facet of media literacy, learning about the news media was still largely beneficial to Dakota, and an expansion of this class to include more elements of media literacy, such as access, production and action would only further benefit young people.

Many other participants, who did not take a class like Dakota did, were also interested in learning more about the news. Charlotte spoke about how it's important for people to learn about disinformation in news media. "I feel like it is a big aspect of people's lives and the –since it's such a big aspect, people should know how to like use it and to like, be able to tell what's real and what's not real and be able to just decipher all of that." News consumption, such as what Dakota learned in her class, is of course commonplace and worthwhile. However, learning to analyze the news that is being consumed, like Charlotte mentioned, perhaps through open discussion, would help young people enhance their news media literacy skills.

The idea that media is prevalent in young peoples' lives of course expanded beyond just news media. As mentioned in theme four, it was common for participants to associate the term "media" with technology use. Therefore, participants talked about how they wanted to be taught about media because of their constant connection to the technology associated with it. Participants like Madelyn described what she wanted out of a media literacy education:

> I mean, I think it would be a good thing to be taught because it's so like, it's right here, it's right now, and it's so a part of all of our lives right now. So I think that would be helpful because some people don't know how to do . . . like, I feel like it's good to be informed about what we're using every day.

Many participants viewed the technological world of today as something inescapable. Participants like Brittney felt like it would be hard to be fully functioning members of society without the knowing how to use this technology.

> Like you can't do a lot of things without having a phone or just like knowledge of how to like, use a computer. Like even if like you go to the store, like they now have the big iPads and they'd like, twist them towards you and you have to be able to know, like, you can tap that and you can do this and you can do that.

An understanding that technology is omnipresent in their lives was a major reason behind participants' ideas for a media literacy education. The association of technology with media makes sense, since most participants engage with media mainly through technology. Lessons about the technology that houses most of young people's media could be helpful to these participants, both with helping them navigate this technology, but also with helping them understand the similarities and differences between media content and technology.

Some participants also talked about how they wanted to learn how to produce media at school. Most of these participants were interested in a career in media production, or simply thought these types of courses should be offered to those who were interested in taking them. For example, John did not have many opportunities to learn media production in school. He talked about how he felt as a first-year college student studying film: "I'm a terrible editor. I'm like, that's like the bane of my existence. And there are some people who like, took like Premiere classes in high school. So they're like, you know, leagues above. So I'm now kind of, I'm kind of behind on that aspect." John felt that those in his film school cohort who had learned media production in their K-12 experience were better equipped than him to edit films, and this unequal

education was having an impact on his college experience. This emphasizes that the production component of media literacy education is invaluable, especially to students like John.

Media production is a main component of media literacy, and most of the participants who spoke at length about it wanted to learn how to produce media because of their future goals. Other participants mentioned creating YouTube videos and FlipGrids, and while they found these exercises to be enjoyable, they did not view them as being highly important. This could be because production was not a part of the classroom learning, but rather students were told to make a YouTube video or FlipGrid as homework, and then had to figure out how to produce these videos on their own. This became especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were asked to use technology to create content in their homes as a replacement for standard, pre-pandemic classroom activities. Incorporating media production lessons into classroom instruction would help to create a collaborative space in which students could learn several components of media literacy by gaining a better understanding of how to access and utilize production media. Perhaps if participants had a more collaborative media production experience, they would have found media production assignments and tasks more fulfilling and worthwhile.

While production was important to some participants, others talked about the benefits of incorporating a variety of media into the classroom, even if it was something as simple as watching a movie or a video. Antonio said:

> I feel like just implementing media is just a way to tie kids' attention back. Like honestly, that's always what it's done for me. I instantly like I'll perk up in my seat and I'll pay attention to whatever video we watch in class. And yeah, I feel like it's a great supplemental tool to really like hammer in the knowledge.

This was a common sentiment among participants. Other participants talked about how watching videos, playing Kahoots, and even playing interactive games with Smartboards were memorable and exciting experiences. Clearly, media is viewed by young people as something fun and different, and many participants could vividly recall ways they used media when they were in elementary school. Perhaps media production would add another layer of excitement to young people's educational experience –by creating an experience that is not only memorable but also worthwhile as a contribution towards media literacy.

Theme Eight: Learning Media Literacy

Although all of the participants did want to learn about media literacy, they were particular about how they wanted to be taught. Of the 20 participants, 17 thought that their teachers could only teach them what they considered the basics of media (such as media safety and how to use technology like PowerPoint). Most of these participants felt this way because they thought there was a generational disconnect between how young people use media and how older people use media. Most participants believed this disconnect was because of social media and smartphone use. The participants acknowledged that most of their teachers had social media and smartphones, but since they did not grow up with this technology, they cannot understand it the way young people do. Henry acknowledged that this disconnect may not be intentional, but it does exist:

> A lot of teachers are just, uh, totally unaware, really of what happens. Like obviously, like they call it the wrong names. They don't even care to learn about it. And like, not that I blame them, but I would definitely say that maybe the older generation of teachers is a bit out of touch and clueless with that, but it's, it's understandable. I mean, they didn't grow up with it.

Participants believed that social media was beyond the scope of their teachers' knowledge, but they did believe that they were able to effectively teach information literacy. Valerie addressed this capability, but also expressed her doubts about their ability to teach media literacy, especially in terms of social media:

> Of course, I had classes like Excel and Microsoft and PowerPoint, and those are kind of like- have kind of been timeless things. Like they don't change all that much. Um, but I definitely don't think like with media today, like social media and stuff, they could have taught it to the, you know, um, extent it's like around today.

Antonio said technology was "ingrained" in their generation and therefore young people's experience with media was not only different than their teachers, but also more advanced. "I feel like if anything, the students were better with media than most the teachers. Even when they'd show, like YouTube videos and stuff in class, I feel like most of the time it was the students like pulling it up for the teacher, like putting it on the projector." Participants like Henry, Valerie and Antonio did not believe that their teachers could teach them about media literacy. It is interesting, however, that the participants did believe their teachers could teach information literacy. This could be because information literacy was more commonplace in participants' schooling, and they therefore knew their teachers could teach these skills. Since there is no requirement for teachers to teach media literacy, and most participants were not taught it, it is understandable that they did not believe their teachers were capable of teaching it.

When these 17 participants were asked what kind of teacher would be effective at media literacy, 11 of them said that they would prefer someone younger. These participants thought that a younger person was more equipped to understand their media use, because of their personal

experiences with media. John spoke about how a younger teacher would make a media literacy class feel authentic.

> Um, I feel like if, if a 60-year-old dude was teaching that class, it would not have the same effect –just because, younger generations, like I could believe that they get it. But I couldn't believe that a 60-year-old man or woman could understand just media as a whole. Because it's like, when they were our age, the only media they had was like a four-station television set, that they would sit in front of and eat dinner with their families.

Again, the idea that younger teachers would be the best people to teach media literacy was mostly tied to social media. The participants felt that a younger teacher would have experience with social media, and therefore they'd be better equipped to teach about it. Nora thought that older teachers didn't understand the negative effects of social media the way that younger teachers could. "I had some young teachers who were like, 'I know you guys spend way too much time on that and it's not good. And I'm sorry.'" Participants like Nora and John wanted a younger media literacy teacher because they thought younger teachers had a more well-rounded view of media, especially social media, which is incredibly important to young people. Other suggestions for a media literacy teacher included: three participants who thought that a teacher with teenage kids would be better equipped to teach about the media, and four participants who thought the teacher should have a thorough understanding of media and technology.

It should be noted that three participants did think their teachers could teach them about media literacy. These three participants thought that since media is so prevalent in students' lives, and the teachers are involved in the students' lives, they were able to understand and teach media literacy. Grace spoke about how teachers don't have to be tech-savvy to teach media

literacy, they just have to understand their students' relationship with media. "I'm sure that if you probably gave them a phone, they wouldn't necessarily know how to use it, but I think they understand why we use it. Definitely to like post pictures of ourselves or to communicate to each other for like entertainment reasons." Grace's explanation is interesting, because the media landscape changes quite often, and it would be a lot to demand that teachers are constantly up to date on the latest trends. However, if media literacy education focuses more broadly on mutual understanding and collaboration, the same media literacy lessons could remain effective for many years.

Interestingly, none of the three participants who thought their teachers could effectively teach them about media literacy had taken a media literacy class during K-12. Further, when these three participants were asked to define media literacy during the interview (as expanded upon in Theme Two), two had definitions of media literacy that did not focus on learning, but rather broader definitions of media that diverged from most of the participants. For example, Dakota, who believed her teachers could effectively teach her about media, related media literacy to media effects, defined media literacy as "kind of how the media maybe influences like the society." Perhaps these three participants' more general outlook on media literacy and their lack of exposure to media literacy education led them to have a different conceptualization than their peers about what a media literacy class would look like.

Although participants did have opinions about what type of teacher would be able to teach media literacy, most did not want to be taught exclusively by their teachers. Isabella talked about learning media literacy through classroom collaboration "Maybe it's just like an open discussion in class. Like not like, like, a PowerPoint in front of everyone, but like each classroom having like a discussion about like their thoughts on it." Media literacy scholars, especially those

part of the social justice-oriented and critical media literacy disciplines, believe an approach like Isabella's leads to more fruitful media literacy instruction, because it gives space for multiple interpretations and understandings about media content (Kellner & Share, 2005; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021). Indeed, of the 20 participants, 12 suggested learning media literacy through peer collaboration. Participants spoke about how if they wanted to learn something new about the media, they would turn to their peers for help. Barry spoke about his experience with peer collaboration.

> Honestly, like in like a social setting, if you're like with your friends. Um, I guess like, if I didn't like, know how to use, like –I didn't know how to like, make a TikTok at all. Um, and so like, I was like, I would ask like '[name of girlfriend], like, how do I, like, how do I make a TikTok?' And then she would teach me that.

Participants spoke of this peer collaboration as something that felt natural, because they felt as though they were learning from people who understood media the same way that they did. Chloe spoke about how she learned new things about media from her older brother, as well as her peers. "Probably just like your friends and family, if it's not like school or education teaching you. Because they can teach you different things than like school could." Chloe, who was one of the 17 participants who did not think her teachers could give her a media literacy education, thought that her peers had more to offer in terms of learning who to navigate the social media landscape. In both of these cases, the participants wanted to learn about media from someone who they knew well and trusted. Cillian spoke about how learning about media his peers served as a good way to check in with them.

> Like everyone's kind of like learning together. So kind of like comparing experiences, like through your peers I think is probably very important. So kind of just like hanging

> out with friends, like obviously like media will sometimes like come up into conversation. So, um, I think that's probably the most important way is making sure that like, you feel like you and your friends are, uh, all being safe.

Participants like Barry, Chloe, and Cillian thought that learning about media collaboratively with their peers was akin to an act of friendship and rooted in mutual trust. This supports media literacy scholarship that claims learning media literacy should be a discussion-based, collaborative instruction model (Kellner & Share, 2005; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021) especially since many of these participants are already engaging each other this way outside of school, it makes perfect sense to incorporate this type of collaboration into media literacy education instruction.

Further, ten participants suggested, as Olivia put it, "learning about media through media." In these cases, participants described using YouTube or Google to find out more information on a subject, or to find out how to perform a task on software such as Excel or Adobe. These cases involved a lot of learning-by-doing. Antonio spoke about experimenting with their identity on, as they put it, "every different, like platform I could name," and how this experience was "fundamental" to them. "I went through a phase where I was basically on every different, like platform I could name. I was just like trying to kind of teach myself how to like conduct myself on different apps." The idea of learning about media from the media exemplifies young people's natural curiosity. This type of learning could be strengthened in the classroom through the production approach to media literacy education because students could learn about media in a hands-on way. They could also express themselves through media, like Antonio did, through an arts-based production approach (Tyner, 2014).

Lastly, the participants had suggestions about when young people should start learning media literacy. Of the 20 participants, 16 said that media literacy education should start before high school. Most of the participants suggested that pre-teens and early teens (middle school age in the U.S.) would benefit from a media literacy education the most. Participants talked about how they got their first smartphones and subsequently social media accounts at this age, making an important stage of life for a media literacy education. Participants, like Grace, worried about the effects of young kids having access to smartphones without any formal instruction about how to navigate social media.

> I feel like –by the time we get older, we're a little more responsible on the media. We're not just posting every other thing or, or like we're being more careful about what we post. I feel like as kids, we were all posting random things that we saw or just honestly being meaner to each other. As we grow up, we get a little nicer, sometimes, and a little bit more responsible. I feel that like 10- to 13-year-old age group would really benefit from that [media literacy education].

Most participants thought that media literacy education should begin with basics (such as media safety, e.g. sharing your personal information on the internet) and continue into more complicated topics in high school. Kayon talked about how she found it beneficial to begin learning about media in sixth grade. "I learned in like the seventh, sixth or seventh grade, I think that people should, like now that kids are getting older and like more aware, I feel like they should emphasize that more. Like, while- like while we're in high school and stuff." Kayon was thankful for the introduction to media education that she received in middle school, but she felt as though it could have been expanded upon at the high school level. Alice also spoke about how

she was thankful she learned these basic media skills in middle school, but she wished they would have built to something more substantial.

> Fifth to sixth is a really good time. By eighth and ninth, like, especially if you're still trying to teach high schoolers about cyber bullying- don't, we're not paying attention. We don't care. You're just getting on our nerves and you're telling us the same thing we've heard since sixth grade. Teach us stuff about it. Teach us about how we can use it, teach us how we can promote ourselves on it. 'Cause I still don't know stuff about that, you know, and I, I that's something that I'd genuinely like to learn about, so.

This finding is consistent with past research about young people's perceptions of media literacy education, in that the older teen participants in this study thought the younger teens were more susceptible to the dangers of social media (De Leyn et al., 2021). However, participants in this study were still concerned for their own age group's overall knowledge of media literacy as well.

Theme Nine: Protectionist Learning

By far, the most popular way for the participants to learn about media was through the protectionist approach. The protectionist approach regards modern media as having exclusively negative effects on its users, and claims young people should be taught to avoid it (Hobbs, 1998; Kubey, 1998; Mendoza, 2009; Pasquier, 2001; Winn, 1977). Of the 20 participants, 14 recalled being taught that modern media, in this case the internet and social media, were scary and unsafe spaces. The result of this was that many participants' primary form of media education was being told what not to do. Many participants expressed frustration with this approach, including Alice, who joked, "Well for one, it would be nice if they stopped trying to scare us. And if they gave up on saying like the computer is gonna come and try and take our soul." Alice went on to say that

this approach was ineffective for multiple reasons, including the fact that she and her peers often made friends through the internet and social media, so it was hard to take these lessons seriously. Nora also took issue with the protectionist approach and suggested a more comprehensive approach to media literacy education.

> I almost think we need to be safely, but actively, introducing the consumption of media. Like to young, to like super young people just so that they know from the beginning, how to approach it because, I understand like the 'let's keep kids like out of media, let's not have them be accessing these things.' But it doesn't, it doesn't –for me, it doesn't seem like it'll- it'll uh, fare well later when people actually, when those, when those young, like kids are actually real people and have to like access media, no matter what.

What Nora expressed is also the philosophy of most media literacy education disciplines, excluding the protectionist approach. As has been oft repeated throughout this chapter, participants felt as though media would always be in their lives, and that teaching them how to use it would be more effective than the protectionist approach.

Some participants also talked about how the technology at their schools had firewalls to prevent students from accessing certain websites. They also found this to be ineffective because they were able to find other ways to access these websites in their free time, in a potentially less safe environment. Brittney talked about the firewalls in terms of sexual health and safety:

> Like God forbid, I mentioned that [porn] in a public school, although the students were talking about it, like the teachers would never, um, I think like in high school, safety was- I guess it was just like, cause they didn't really have to teach us anything about safety cause they had the firewalls. So that was the kind of like, um, like, uh, oh, like they're protecting us when we're on school websites.

Brittney points out the connections between media literacy and sexual health, which are shown to enhance knowledge of both when taught together (Attwood et al., 2015; Pinkleton et al., 2008; Pinkleton et al., 2012). She also points out a major flaw in the protectionist approach to media literacy education, and one that exists when any educational subject, such as sexual health, is approached from this philosophy –creating obstacles or choosing to ignore certain subjects does not satisfy young people's curiosity.

It is worth noting that most of these participants did not mind being taught about media safety as part of this protectionist approach. For example, some participants, like Cillian, were happy to be taught about internet safety, such as avoiding scammers and knowing not to post his address on the internet: "I mean, there definitely are still like dangers to kind of look out for, which I think also should be like mentioned. Kind of like safety on the internet and stuff like that." Participants felt that these lessons in internet safety needed to be taught, so that young people were able to be safe online. Participants also brought up the benefits to being taught about their digital footprint. Henry talked about the potential benefits of a class with this focus. "Like if you had a class that just would've said, like, 'be careful you say, like the stuff doesn't go away, it's online forever, so just think more about that.' I think a lot of people, it would have a huge impact on their lives. If they were to take a class about it." Although the majority of participants thought that media safety education was not enough, and was sometimes alarmist, they also were appreciative of these lessons. This is important for media literacy scholars and educators to acknowledge, so that media safety lessons could be incorporated into a comprehensive media literacy education design.

This chapter covered the main findings of this thesis. Each of the nine themes provides insight into young peoples' perceptions of media education. The first theme, New Generation,

New Communication, New Education, provided an overview of how the participants used media. This theme demonstrated the prominence of social media in young people's lives, and detailed their media habits, such as using Snapchat as a texting service. Theme Two, titled Reading and Comprehension, was the first of two themes that explored how the participants defined media literacy. Out of the 20 participants, 10 defined media literacy as knowing how to "read," the media, signifying the importance of the word "literacy" in the term media literacy. Media Use, the second theme that explored how participants defined media literacy, outlined seven participant's understanding of media literacy as the ability to properly use media. The fourth theme, Computer Kids, showcased how relevant computers and technology are to young people today, with half of the participants stating that they need to know how to use a computer to succeed in life. "We Were the Guinea Pigs," Theme Five, details participants' frustration and worry with growing up during the rise of social media without proper guidance from adults. Theme Six, Social Media Addiction, focuses on participants' desire to have more self-control when it comes to social media use, specifically highlighting participants' desire to learn how to control their social media addictions. Theme Seven demonstrates that all 20 participants want to learn about media and media literacy inn school, and Theme Eight describes how and what students want to be taught media literacy. Finally, Theme Nine focuses on how most participants were taught about media in school, which was mainly through the protectionist approach. Table Three, below, demonstrates how each theme correlates with the three research questions.

Table 3
Research Questions and Corresponding Themes

Research Question One: How do young adults define and conceptualize media literacy?	Research Question Two: What knowledge and skills do young adults associate with media literacy?	Research Question Three: What are young adults' perceptions of media literacy education in the classroom?
Theme One: Theme One: New Generation, New Communication, New Education	Theme Four: Computer Kids	Theme Seven: I want to Learn about Media in School
Theme Two: Reading and Comprehension	Theme Five: "We Were the guinea pigs" - Barry	Theme Eight: Learning Media Literacy
Theme Three: Media Use	Theme Six: Social Media Addiction	Theme Nine: Protectionist Learning

The following Discussion chapter will focus on what was learned throughout the course of this research, how this thesis can add to the scholarly literature, and the limitations of this thesis along with recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter concludes the thesis by discussing the key findings that contribute to the research areas of media literacy and media literacy education. These findings include young peoples' willingness to receive a media literacy education, which contrasts with their opinions about their teachers' abilities to educate them about media literacy. It also highlights how young people define media literacy, and what aspects of media literacy are the most important to them. The next section describes the limitations of this thesis. This chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

Key Findings

As advocacy for media literacy education in K-12 schools continues to grow both within the research and the law and policy spaces, it is imperative to understand how young people perceive media literacy and media literacy education. This thesis took a broad approach to media literacy in order to determine young people's opinions and understandings of the subject. Because this is constructivist research, this thesis aimed to understand the participants' interpretations of media literacy and media literacy education based on their own subjective views. Interestingly, participants' depth of understanding of media literacy and media literacy education most often depended on if they had taken a media literacy course (or courses) or not. Identity also played a major role when participants who identified as women spoke about how social media affected their body image and self-esteem. However, participants' understanding of media literacy education in schools was central to their views of media literacy and media literacy education.

The first major finding of this thesis is the resounding affirmative response from participants when asked if they would find media literacy education worthwhile. All 20

participants agreed that they would like to learn media literacy in school. The participants who had taken a media literacy class were grateful that they did so, those who did not wished that they had. Many believed that because media and the technology that powers it are ingrained in their lives and will continue to be prevalent, that learning media literacy would benefit them both personally and professionally. Participants were particularly interested in learning news media literacy and the production approach to media literacy, both of which have been thoroughly researched in the classroom setting (Cheung, 2009; Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs, 2003; Mihailidis, 2009; Norton & Hathaway, 2010; Tyner, 2014; Vasudevan et al., 2010; Vraga & Tully, 2015). Participants were also interested in learning information literacy, which, while not completely aligned with media literacy, was a common wish for many participants. Of course, information literacy focuses on academic texts, and media literacy focuses on mass media (Lau, 2013) but the association of the two literacies supports Mackey & Jacobson (2011)'s idea of a metaliteracy, which includes both media and information literacy, among others. This finding is especially important because the United States school system is intended to follow Dewey's (1934) philosophy of education, which indicates that students should learn about things that are personally relevant to them. Clearly, the results of this thesis indicate that media literacy education would be relevant and therefore beneficial to students.

The second key finding also serves as a challenge to the above finding –although the participants did want a media literacy education, they were not confident that their teachers would be able to provide it. Many participants felt that their educators were too out of touch – especially because the media landscape has changed so much since most of their teachers were school-aged. Specifically, participants did not think that teachers understood social media, especially apps like Snapchat and TikTok, as well as unique functions of social media such as

private stories. Most participants indicated that a media literacy educator would have to be someone younger, because they would know more about social media, which corresponds with De Leyn et al.'s (2021) study of young people's perceptions of media literacy education in Belgium. It is important to note, however, that incorporating media literacy education into K-12 schools does not have to be the sole responsibility of already overworked teachers. Many participants stated that they'd rather learn media literacy through discussions with their peers than through a lecture from a teacher. This sentiment is consistent with both social justice-oriented and the critical approaches to media literacy education (Kellner & Share, 2005; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021).

Since this thesis is about young people's perceptions of media literacy education, it was important to ask them how they defined the term "media literacy." Many participants related media literacy to traditional literacy, focusing essentially on how to read and comprehend the media. This definition is particularly poignant, as learning to both write and read media is a fundamental media literacy goal (Buckingham, 2003). The other popular media literacy definition is the ability to use media. In most cases, these participants spoke about how to navigate and effectively use social media. These definitions are also important, because social media use in general is more popular with Generation Z than any other generation (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), but when used improperly or without guidance, can lead to serious problems such as a greater intake of biased news (Mitchell et al., 2020), mental health and self-esteem issues (Lin et al., 2016; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Marengo et al., 2018; Primack et al. 2017; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; Shensa et al., 2016) and addiction due to tech companies' negligence (Mihailidis, 2021b; Tyner, 2019). While both of these definition categories are important, there is certainly room for improvement. No participant was aware of the full scope of

media literacy, such as “to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act” using all types of media (NAMLE). However, these definitions do show that participants have some idea about media literacy, and more extensive media literacy education could help them fill the gaps.

The final key finding is the aspects of media literacy education that are most important to the participants. First, as has been the most common thread throughout this thesis, young people greatly value social media. The participants spend considerable time using social media, and social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are important parts of their social lives. To these young people, their social media presence is like an extension of themselves (Riccio, 2020). and it is therefore worthwhile to include with media literacy education instruction. Many participants felt as though they were thrust into the world of social media in their developmental years, and they were now paying the price with social media addiction and body image issues. Many expressed regret and frustration that their teachers did not educate them about social media –they felt as though the adults in their lives had failed to keep them safe. The participants wanted a better for future generations, and many expressed that people who were younger than them (in about the 12-14 age range) should begin receiving a media literacy education so that they understood social media and its effects. This finding is also consistent with De Leyn et al.’s (2021) results –the young people in their study (ages 14-16) thought that their younger peers would benefit the most from a media literacy education.

These findings indicate that young people want a media literacy education that serves them as a generation that grew up surrounded by different types of media without much guidance about how to navigate it. It also demonstrates that young people believe media literacy education should be collaborative, because the participants felt they could learn more from a discussion with their peers than through a lecture with their teachers. Finally, it shows that media literacy is

a helpful tool for young people, that can help them navigate their daily lives, and give them necessary skills to be responsible, conscious media users.

Implications for Educators, Parents, and Policy Makers

As stated throughout this thesis, the findings are intended to inform not only the research community, but also educators, parents, and policy makers about how to best approach media literacy education. Based on the above findings, it is clear that young people value learning media literacy, and it is a subject that educators, parents, and policy makers should continue to learn about and advocate for. Further, media literacy education should be taught in the form of an open discussion, during which all members of the discussion are able to participate and learn from each other. This style of learning media literacy was preferred by many of the participants, many of whom felt their teachers may not be equipped to teach them about media literacy, but that their peers are equipped to teach them about this subject. This can also be applied to the home setting, in which parents should treat discussions about media as open conversations.

It is also important to note how young people engage with the media. For example, participants mainly spoke about social media, specifically Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, as the media platforms they use the most. Educators and parents should be aware of these young peoples' social media use, and take time to understand these platforms and why they are attractive to young people. This could help foster productive discussion and collaboration about media use and media literacy. Further, it is important to note that many participants were not satisfied with the protectionist approach to media literacy education, even though this was how most participants were taught about the media. Educators, policy makers, and parents should instead focus on a more holistic approach to teaching media literacy that acknowledges the presence of media as well as its benefits and dangers.

Limitations

As with any research study, this thesis comes with limitations. First, there only six states where participants received their K-12 education, and they were mainly concentrated on the east coast. This is largely due to the researcher's ties to this demographic region. Secondly, most of the participants self-identified as white. The perceptions of the world that white Americans have comes from a place of privilege that is not afforded to minoritized populations, and therefore the sentiments expressed by many of the participants in this study come from a place of privilege that may affect the results. Thirdly, as with all qualitative research, the researcher views the world through their subjective lens. As a straight, white, woman from a middle-class background, who is passionate about the subject of media literacy, this affects the way the researcher interpreted and reported the data. Finally, this research was done amid an unprecedented global pandemic. While this study fills a gap in the research, the context could have affected the participants' responses, primarily because data collection was done on Zoom, during a time when many young people were experiencing "Zoom fatigue" (i.e., they felt burnout by having constant interactions through a screen). In general, young people had experienced an unprecedented two years of their lives during the time of these interviews, and their perspectives may have shifted dramatically compared to people who received a "normal" high school education that was not suddenly shifted to online and hybrid learning.

Further Research

In congruence with the limitations, future research should focus on wider recruitment, beyond participants from the six states that were included in this interview. Education and culture are different depending on the state, and it would be worthwhile to hear from participants from other parts of the United States. This thesis also focused on media literacy education in the

classroom. However, media literacy education can also take place in the home. Studies that focus on media literacy education in the home could provide deeper insights into media literacy education that occurs outside of the classroom. Past research demonstrates that family-centered media literacy education improves healthy eating habits (Austin et al., 2020) and educates young people about the effects of substance abuse (Scull et al., 2017). Further research on family-centered media literacy could expand on these topics, or some of the topics discussed in this thesis, such as social media addiction, or self-esteem issues related to media use. This future research could include interviews with both young people and their parents. Of course, interviewing media literacy educators (such as teachers) to better understand their perceptions and understandings of media literacy education would be worthwhile, especially when comparing the results from such a study to the results in this thesis. Mihalidis et al. (2021b) recently conducted a survey research study with media literacy educators. The information in this thesis, paired with the findings of the survey serves as a starting point for in-depth interviews with educators about the topic of media literacy education, in order to understand the similarities and differences between young people's perceptions of media literacy education and their teacher's perceptions of media literacy education. Further, since the results of this thesis demonstrated that young people do indeed want to receive a media literacy education, greater inquiry into what and how young people would like to learn in a media literacy class would be worthwhile. For example, further research could focus on what type of media literacy approach (i.e. protectionist, critical, production, or social justice-oriented) is most appealing to young people. Further research could also focus more directly on how young people's social identities (such as their sexual orientation, gender identity, and race) affects their understanding and interest in media literacy and media literacy education. Lastly, this thesis focused on the

perceptions of media literacy education with 18 and 19-year-olds. Further research could expand this population to include younger K-12 students.

Summary

This thesis approached media literacy and media literacy education from a broad, open-ended angle to understand young peoples' understanding and perceptions of media literacy education. This was done through semi-structured qualitative interviews (n = 20) using the constructivist worldview. The researcher's primary goal was to understand young people's thoughts about media literacy education during a time when scholars and lawmakers are calling for media literacy education to be integrated into classroom learning. This was the goal because young people should have a say in what and how they are taught, and this thesis gave participants the opportunity to express their thoughts.

It is clear that young people want a media literacy education. Particularly, they want a media literacy education that allows for peer discussion and collaboration, because they believe they could learn more from their peers than their teachers. Unsurprisingly, social media plays a big role in their lives, and they want to learn about it in school. They also want younger people to learn about media, so that they are better informed than they were. Participants also expressed interest in learning about information literacy, news media literacy, and the production approach to media literacy. As was expressed by many participants, the media environment is becoming increasingly saturated and integrated into daily life, and it shows no signs of slowing down. The results of this thesis contribute to the knowledge of media literacy education, and provide insights into how young people want to be educated about media literacy.

Appendix A: State Media Literacy Education Laws in the United States

Table 4
State Media Literacy Education Laws in the United States

State	Law
California	The California Department of Education must provide a list of media literacy resources/tools for educators. These tools can be found on the department' website.
Colorado	The Colorado Department of Education must provide a list of media literacy resources/tools for educators. These tools can be found on the department' website. The law further states that the Department of Education must begin to implement media literacy education into "reading, writing and civics standards."
Connecticut	Connecticut requires schools to teach social media safety and recently adopted guidelines to assist teachers in instructing media literacy, including digital literacy and internet safety.
Florida	Florida requires media literacy to be taught as part of every subject in K-12 schools.
Illinois	Illinois started requiring media literacy courses to be taught in high schools in 2022. The instruction includes: teaching students how to navigate media platforms and messages; teaching students how to analyze media messages; teaching students how to create media; and teaching students how to engage in social media and online discourse in a "respectful, thoughtful, and inclusive way."
Massachusetts	Massachusetts requires that students study media messaging to know what to avoid while intaking media texts.
Minnesota	Minnesota has an information literacy law. As part of this curriculum, media literacy must be assessed by educators. However, this law does not define the term "media literacy."

New Jersey	New Jersey educators are required to teach about social media literacy. Educational standards also require educators to teach about how media can influence decisions and actions.
New Mexico	In New Mexico, media literacy can be offered as an elective. In 2020, significant funding was provided for media literacy teacher training.
Ohio	Ohio’s education standards has required the development of media literacy and technological literacy skills since 2009. The curriculum focuses on vertical progression through grade levels based on the students’ ability to regurgitate media knowledge via an assessment, such as a test.
Rhode Island	Rhode Island established a committee aimed at developing media literacy education legislation based on their recommendations. The recommendations have been made, yet the curriculum has yet to be developed and there is no law mandating media literacy education.
Texas	The Texas education curriculum has mandated the instruction of digital citizenship. Media literacy is included as part of this digital citizenship education law, which states that students should be able not only to access but also critically think about digital media. However, this law is limited to just digital media, ignoring the other components of a media literacy education.
Utah	In Utah, public schools have community councils. In 2015, a law was passed that allows these councils access to funding in order to teach digital citizenship as well as the ability to reach out to nonprofits to teach digital citizenship in schools.

Washington	Washington passed a law in 2016 that required a committee to develop best practices for teaching media literacy. In 2019, the legislature implemented many of the committee's recommendations, and provided significant funding for media literacy teacher training.

Note: The above information is derived from Media Literacy Now's 2020 Media Literacy Policy Report and Media Literacy Now's 2021 Media Literacy Policy Update.

Appendix B: Interview Topic Guide

Before the interview began:

1) Interviewer shares screen to show consent form.

2) While participant is reading, interviewer reminds them that the interview is being recorded but will remain anonymous.

3) Once participant reads the form and consents, interviewer stops sharing the screen.

Introduction

1) Can you tell me a bit about your K-12 edu?
    a. Specifically, what state/town did you go to school in and what was that like?

2) Can you tell me what year you are in college and what your major is?

3) What do you like to do in your free time?

4) What are your favorite classes in school?

5) What kinds of media do you like to use?

    a. Why do you like to use it?

    b. Is there anything that you don't like about it?

Main Questions:

1) Have you heard of the term media literacy?

    a. If yes, where have you heard it?

    b. What do you think media literacy is?

2) Have you ever taken a class about media?

    a. If yes – can you describe it to me?

3) How should media be taught in school, if at all?

4) How important is it for you to learn about media?

5) How important is it for *other* young people (like your friends and peers) to learn about media?
6) Who do you think will benefit the most from learning about media?
7) Do you think your teachers are able to teach you about media?
8) Do you think your teachers understand the way you and your friends use media? (like TikTok or finsta?)
9) When you hear adults talk about education, what kinds of topics tend to come up?
10) Describe what you've about media and education, if anything.
11) Does it seem like adults think young people should learn about media?
    a. If so, what types of things do adults want you to learn?
12) Could you describe another place where you could learn about media other than school?
13) Explain how your parents have taught you about media.
14) Are your parents able to understand the way you and your friends use media?
15) What kinds of topics do you usually search for when your using media?
16) When you want to learn more about [topic mentioned above] describe how you gather more information about that topic.
    a. Do you think other young people (i.e. your friends, your peers) know how to use media to gather information about something they are interested in?
17) Do you create media? *(Remind them that even making a TikTok or Instagram post is part of media creation).*
    a. What kinds of media do you create?
    b. Do your friends create media?
        i. What kinds?

c. Can you tell me about any experiences you've had creating media in school?

    i. If yes, is there anything missing from the way you learn to create in school?

Conclusion

1) Is there anything you'd like to add before we conclude?
2) This interview will go towards my thesis, which will hopefully be done by April 2022. Your responses today will be used when I report my results in the thesis. I may use a quote that you said today, but I will not use your real name. Do you have a pseudonym you'd like to use? If not, I will choose one for you!
3) I always want to be transparent with my research participants. Would you like to see a copy of the results section before it's published?
4) I will send you the gift card in the coming days – where would you like it for?
5) Please share with your friends! https://syracuseuniversity.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eRkeNLX2YIMnel0

Appendix C: Qualtrics Qualifying Questionnaire

Opener

The following questions are to ensure that you qualify for an interview about media and education. Please answer all the questions to the best of your ability.

The interview is intended for those who are *18 or 19 years old.* If you are below or above the ages of 18 or 19, you will not qualify for the interview.

Screening and Education Questions

1) Please write your full name.

2) Please write your email or phone number (however you prefer to be contacted, if you choose phone number, it will be a text).

3) What is your current age?

4) Are you currently attending high school?

    a. YES, I am currently attending high school.
    b. NO, I am not currently attending high school.

5) In which country have you received MOST of your K-12 education?
    a. The United States
    b. A country other than the United States

    If "B" is selected, skip to:

6) Where have you received MOST of your K-12 education?

7) What type of high school do you attend?

Demographic Questions

The following questions are about identification information, such as your pronouns, your race, your sexual preference, etc. If there is any part of this section that you are not comfortable sharing, you can leave it blank.

1) What are your pronouns? *(ex: she/her/hers; he/him/his; they/them)*

2) What is your race? *(ex: Black, Latinx, white, Asian)*

3) What is your ethnicity? *(In other words, what is your ancestry, religious and/or cultural background?)*

4) What is your nationality? (*In other, words, what country where you born in?)*

5) What is your sexual orientation? *(ex: heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, asexual)*

6) What state do you currently live in?

Closing

Thank you for taking this survey. If you qualify for the interview, you will be contacted via this email address: alpowers@syr.edu or this phone number: (717)574-3740. The subject line will be: "media and education research participant." Thank you for your time.

Appendix D: Recruitment Flier

MEDIA AND EDUCATION INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITY FOR 18 AND 19-YEAR-OLDS

Do you think that media is an important part of our society? If so, you are invited to participate in a research study!

This study will involve a one time 45 minute - an hour interview about media and education

Interviews will focus on how students feel about media and education & will be held on Zoom.

Each participant will be given a $20 giftcard to Target, Starbucks or Chipotle

for more info contact alpowers@syr.edu

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Vitae

Alanna Powers

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Education

Syracuse University — S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Master's: Media Studies — Expected Graduation: May 2022
GPA: 3.9/4.0

- Newhouse Dean's Scholar: Merit-based scholarship based on academic accomplishments and potential.

Pennsylvania State University — Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications
Bachelors: Public Relations; English — College of Liberal Arts
Minor: International Studies — Graduation: May 2019
GPA: 3.7/4.0

Research Interests

- Media Literacy
- Media Literacy Education
- News Media
- News Media Literacy

Teaching Areas

- Media and Society
- Communications Law
- Media Research

Conference papers

- *Policing the media agenda: News, sources, and the "Missing White Child Syndrome"*
    - Accepted to the Minorities in Communication Division of the 2022 Association or Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference
        - Award: 1st Place, Top Faculty Paper

Academic Experience

Newhouse School of Public Communications | June 2021 – May 2022 |
Research Assistant – Dr. Carol Liebler

- Co-authored a paper focused on the reporting of missing children in the news media.
- Analyzing multiple data sets using SPSS.
- Organized content using Excel, NewsBank and LexisNexis databases.
- Analyzed hundreds of academic publications for a content analysis of methods sections.

Newhouse School of Public Communications | January 2022 – May 2022 |

- Developed and piloted an interview guide for qualitative, in-depth interviews with communications
- industry leaders.
- Conducted a systematic review by gathering relevant academic and industry research materials using
  LexisNexis, NewsBank and Google Scholar.
- Prepared and presented research progress reports for weekly meetings with the research team.

Newhouse School of Public Communications | August 2021 – December 2021 |
Teaching Assistant – Television, Radio and Film Law

- Assisted the professor with teaching a 500-level law class.
- Created, administered and proctored exams.
- Held office hours to work individually with students.
- Graded tests and essay assignments.
- Kept track of attendance and classroom management, specifically related to university COVID-19 protocols.

Newhouse School of Public Communications | July 2021 – August 2021 |
Research Assistant – 'Cuse Grant - Dr. Kyla Garrett-Wagner and Dr. Rebecca Ortiz

- Researched public health messaging pertaining to sex and COVID-19.
- Collaborated with fellow researchers to refine search strategies.
- Compiled all health messaging documents pertaining to sex and COVID-19 throughout all 50 states.

Newhouse School of Public Communications | August 2020 – May 2021 |
Teaching Assistant – Communications and Society (Introduction to Communications)

- Assisted the professor with teaching the 80-person media literacy-centered class.
- Created and taught lectures about communications and media research.
- Held weekly office hours to work individually with students, specifically focused on their writing and essay skills.
- Graded all tests and essays.
- Coordinated hybrid-style lectures held simultaneously on Zoom and in-person.

Fulbright Program | August 2019 – June 2020 |
English Teaching Assistant – Fulbright Czech Republic - Střední škola informatiky a služeb - Dvůr Králové

- Recipient of the U.S. government's prestigious Fulbright international scholarship.
- Received a grant from the United States Embassy Prague to organize and lead a "Media Day" workshop focused on media literacy, including presentations from communications scholars and members of the Czech media.
- Taught English as a foreign language to secondary school students in a remote area of the Czechia.
- Served as an ambassador of the United States, promoting mutual understanding between American and Czech culture.
- Wrote articles for the Czech Fulbright blog, sharing my experiences with the greater Fulbright community.

Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications | January 2017 – May 2017 |
Teaching Assistant – Introduction to the Sports Industry

- Worked with a Sports Communications class of over 100 students.
- Graded and provided feedback on assignments.
- Assisted with classroom organization.

Penn State University | January 2016 – May 2019 |
Writing Tutor – Penn State Learning

- Collaborated with students to review their papers and better their writing ability as a whole.
- Helped English as a foreign language students improve their English writing ability and understanding.
- Lead in-class workshops focused on the benefits of tutoring and the services offered at Penn State Learning.

Work Experience

Pennsylvania Office of the Auditor General | June 2019 – August 2019 |
Legislative Intern

- Interfaced with various members of the PA House and Senate to discuss key issues pertaining to the auditor general's office.
- Monitored legislative sessions, specifically discussions pertaining to the issues key to the Auditor General.
- Read proposed legislation with the goal of debriefing the Auditor General on upcoming bills.

Penn State Office of Strategic Communications | September 2017 – May 2019 |
Intern, Office of Social Media

- Balanced nine different social media accounts to cultivate content relevant to both current Penn State students and alumni.
- Managed Penn State's official Snapchat and Instagram stories, including covering events, responding to viewers, and keeping track of analytics.
- Monitored Penn State's platforms to recognize and respond to relevant issues involving the university.
- Mastered Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Hootsuite, Canva, Iconosquare and Pinterest.

Hello Tierney | June 2017 – August 2017 |
Intern, Public Relations

- Collaborated with key firm clients such as VisitPA tourism and the PA Department of Community and Economic Development
- Wrote and distributed press releases and pitches to reporters.
- Collaborated with fellow interns to create a public relations campaign for KIND snacks.
- Created media lists of valued bloggers, journalists and influencers for clients.
- Drafted and published content on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for clients.

Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications | January 2017 – May 2017 |
Intern, External Relations

- Communicated with members of the alumni boards of the Bellisario College of Communications to coordinate events.
- Researched and wrote bibliographies of notable Penn State alumni.
- Organized and assisted at alumni networking events.

The Daily Collegian | September 2015 – December 2016 |
Reporter and Promotion Representative

- Reported on campus life and events.
- Promoted stories via social media posts.
- Increased the circulation of the newspaper through promotional events.

Study Abroad

National University of Ireland at Galway | January 2018 – May 2018 |
Student

- Spent a semester living and taking courses at one of Ireland's top universities.
- Partook in classes and seminars pertaining to Irish representation, culture and literature.
- Participated in immersive homestay weekends within the greater Galway community.

Masaryk University, Czech Republic | May 2017 – June 2017 |
Student

- Participated in a highly selective study abroad program, Czechmates, run by Penn State and Masaryk professors.
- Learned about media through the lens of the post-Soviet press.
- Attended talks and workshops at Radio Free Europe, Česká televise (Czech Television), Google Prague and IBM Prague.

Skills

- Experienced in both qualitative and quantitative methods of research.
- Analyzing data using SPSS and NVivo software.
- Teaching individually and collaboratively at the high school and university level.
- Qualtrics survey creation and data collection.
- Content analysis.
- CITI certification.
- Microsoft Suite, including Excel, PowerPoint and Word.
- Writing comprehensive academic research papers.
- Knowledge of APA Style.
- Knowledge of AP Style.
- CisionPoint certification.

References

- Dr. Carol Liebler, Newhouse Endowed Chair, cmlieble@syr.edu
- Dr. Bradley Gorham, Newhouse Associate Professor and Chair, bwgorham@syr.edu
- Dr. Anne Osborne, Newhouse Professor, anosborn@syr.edu