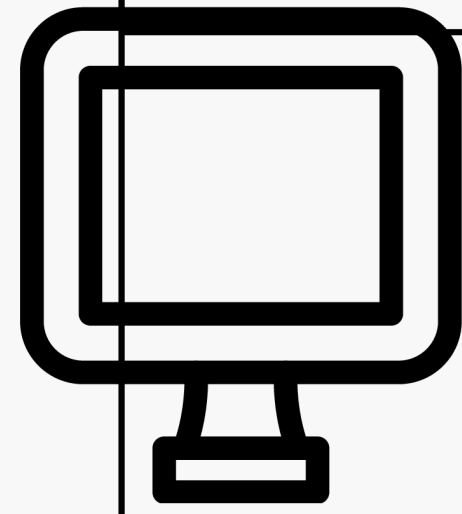


Media in the Lives of Teens: A Grounded Theory study of Teen Informal Information Behavior (Work in Progress)



INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study identified how teens used media for the informal information gathering of everyday life. The results provide a detailed explanation of what digital media tools are used most often for the purpose of **informal information gathering**. This information provides a perspective different from other studies, many of which have focused on the amount of media usage as a metric of impact (Rideout & Robb, 2019; Rideout, 2017). Of particular value is the voice of the teens, themselves, in this reporting.

This study examines how teens gather information for everyday life information seeking from digital media. Using **grounded theory methodology**, I interviewed teens to learn about what media tools they use most often and the motivations for doing so. A broad overview of relevant research and theoretical frameworks serve as the foundation for the research questions and study design.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do teens gather information from digital media to answer the questions of everyday life?

1. What sources of digital media do they use?
2. How do teens find the digital media sources they use?
3. What motivates teens to use specific digital media sources and in what formats?
4. What do teens do with the information they find?

METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory study based on Human Information Behavior theories of Everyday Life Information Seeking (Savolainen, 1995) and Information Encountering (Erdelez, 2005) and the Mass Communication theory of Uses and Gratifications (McQuail & Deuze, 2020)

Study Design

- Participants: 24 13-18 year olds in a small Midwestern city
- Data sources and collection
 - Two semi-structured interviews for each of the teen participants; approximately 30 - 45 minutes each. Interviews occurred in person and via Zoom based on interviewee preference
 - Four audio-journals submitted per teen participant
 - Short survey of media used

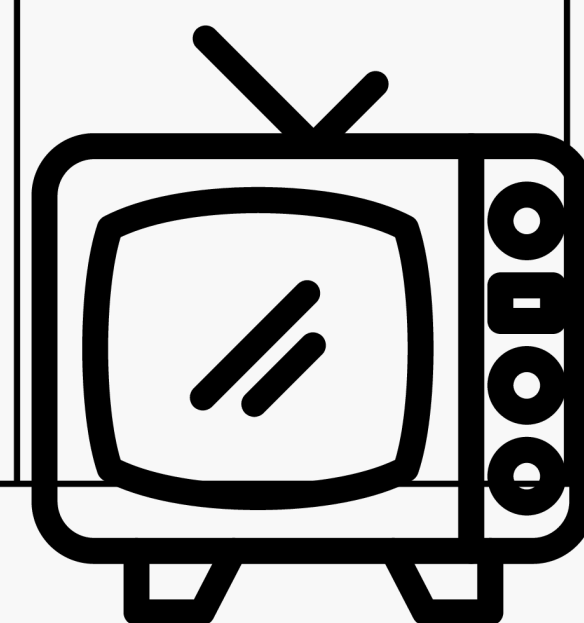
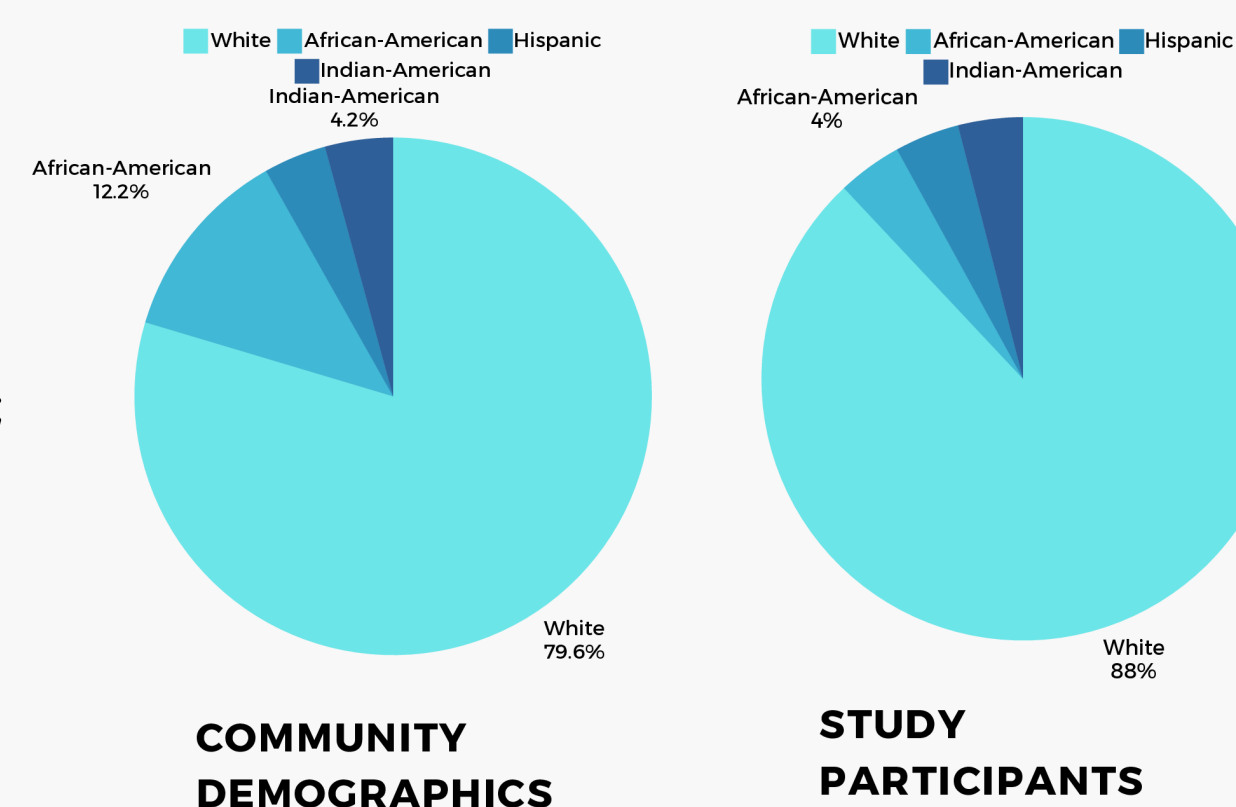
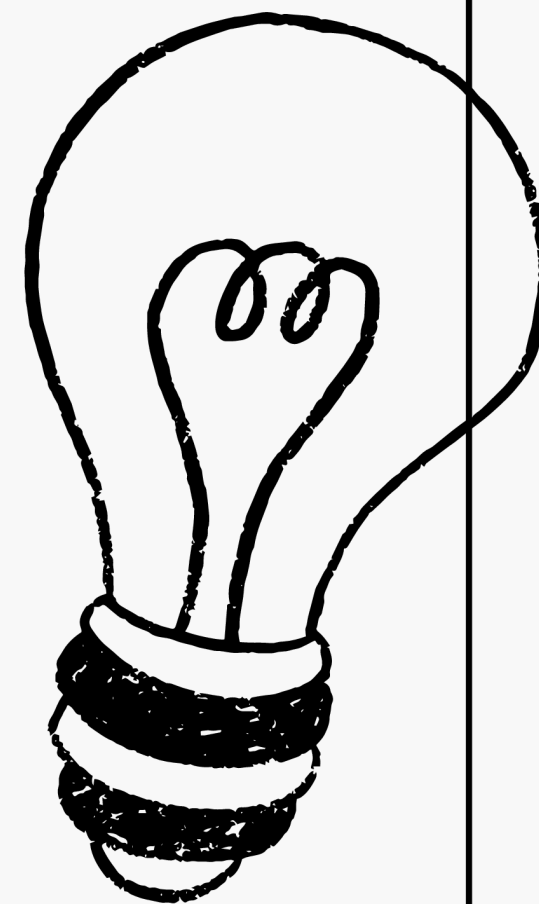
Data Analysis

- Thematic coding using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software.
- Themes from audio journals aligned with themes that emerged in interviews.



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HOW DO TEENS GATHER INFORMATION FROM DIGITAL MEDIA TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE?

WHAT SOURCES OF DIGITAL MEDIA DO THEY USE?

There is no "one way" teens use media.

Digital media (social media, streaming services, video games, etc.) was the most commonly used form of media amongst the teens interviewed. Over a third of teens interviewed also shared examples of using print media (books). Several teens also mentioned non-digital media like Dungeons and Dragons and other board games.

All teens interviewed shared multiple memorable experiences using media. The most common experiences connected teens to one another.

Teens use media for learning. Each teen described a suite of tools personalized for their own learning process. These included Google Docs, FaceTime, TikTok, websites, school district databases, iOS utilities, Youtube, social media, and others.

"This was a really long time ago. I'd say like 2019. We were still on that Amino app. It was that group chat where I had these two friends that I was really close with. We still talk. She helped me discover that I'm gay. She's a year or two older than me. We were just talking. I think she asked me, 'When you envision yourself in the future, who do you picture yourself waking up next to?' I was like, 'Oh, neat. all right.' So that was big for me (MTI Interview 1, 2022)."

HOW DO TEENS FIND THE DIGITAL MEDIA SOURCES THEY USE?

Teens use social media to discover other media.

Teens with a deeper understanding of how media is created were more likely to use media in more sophisticated ways. Teens interviewed who knew a little about a particular subject, were more likely to keep learning about that topic.

Trusted sources of information (teachers, parents, peers) helped build background knowledge for future information discovery for teens.

One-third of the teens interviewed discussed how they used algorithms to find the information they desired. Other technology affordances also helped teens discover information.

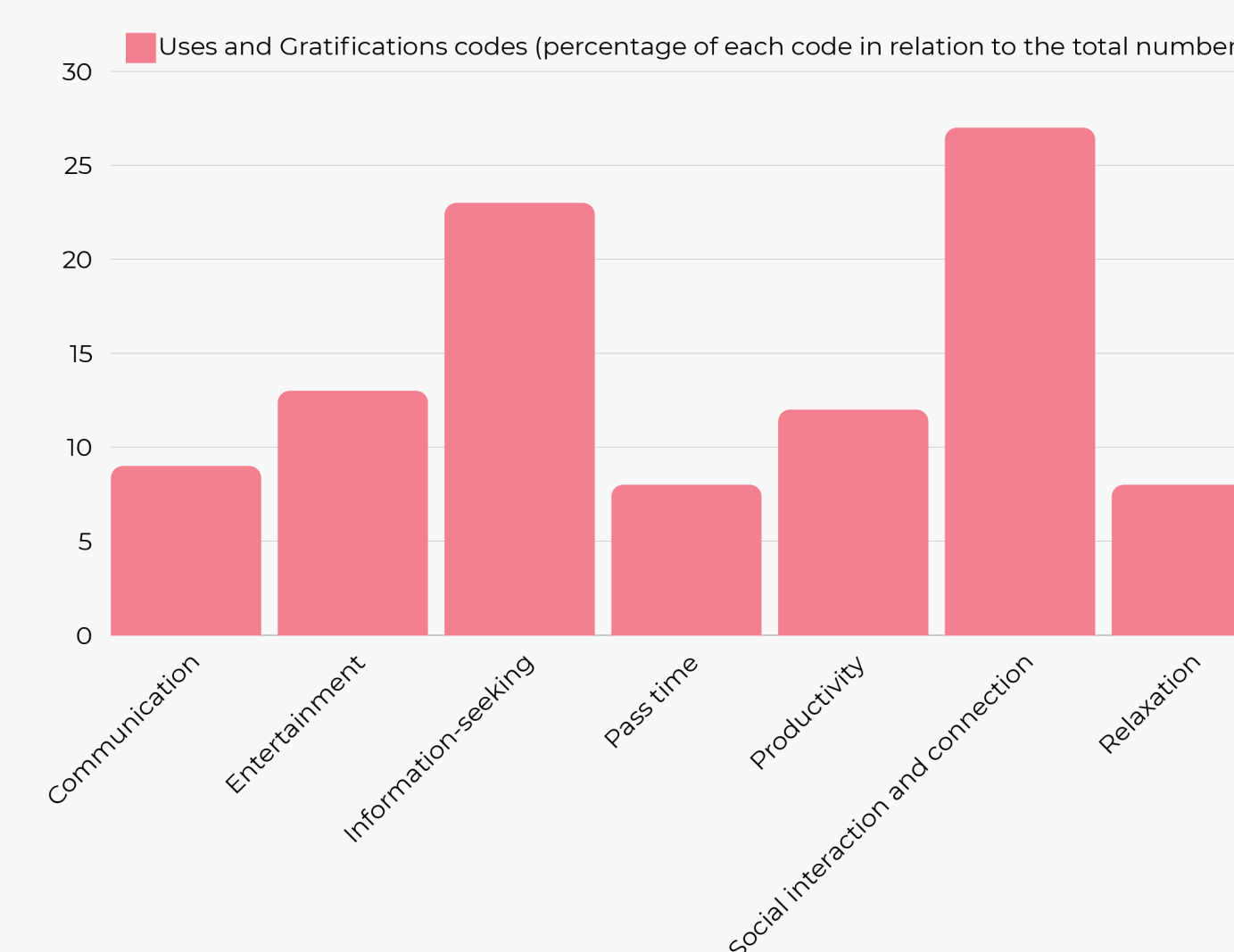
"I don't always actively go look for information. Like, sometimes I'll just find it, you know" (AP Interview 2, 2023).

WHAT MOTIVATES TEENS TO USE SPECIFIC DIGITAL MEDIA SOURCES AND IN WHAT FORMATS?

The teens interviewed use social media to connect with friends. Teens connected with individuals and participated in group conversations, using different media for each of these purposes based on the level of personal connection they had to users in each platform.

Accessing social media platforms for the first time served as a rite of passage for teens and was noted as a memorable media experience by more than half of the teens interviewed.

Topic and format mattered when teens were deciding what media would be used to satisfy a gratification. When moving to formal learning settings from informal learning, more than half of the teens interviewed described how they preferred text-based data sources than multi-media resources.



WHAT DO TEENS DO WITH THE INFORMATION THEY FIND?

Teens consume media to solve the "project of life" (Savolainen, 1995).

- Teens utilizing news sources returned to them daily. They gathered news from social media such as TikTok and Instagram. Only a few of the teens interviewed interacted with more traditional media resources such as The Today Show, ABC World News Tonight, and news sources aggregated by Apple News.
- All teens interviewed used apps and other digital resources to help keep track of their responsibilities and school requirements

Teens interviewed discovered and developed hobbies using the affordances of digital tools. The discovery of new hobbies was often supported by information the interviewed teens found online through social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest and Youtube. The teens interviewed explained how they were constantly exploring topics of interest to them.

Information gathering helped teens solve the problems of everyday life. They gathered and curated information found on social media, looked for answers on Youtube and sought answers from peers using digital communication tools.

A lot of my school studies are now digital and that is interacting with media, which is learning. Most definitely, I learn [with media] every day. I learn on the surface level how [others'] experiences are different than mine. I learn as they learn it. (KL Interview 1, 2023)