

**Information Behavior of Young Adults**

Hannah Moore

LIS 5053-995: Rubenstein

Assignment 5 – Final Version

April 8, 2018

## **Introduction**

The teen years are often referred to as the “formative” ones. During later adolescence, humans experience more freedoms and responsibility as they grow into adulthood, with societal pressures for them to seek independence increasing. They are no longer young enough to truly depend on their parents, they are too old to feel they can ask anything (and often feel as though they should already know things), but still young and naïve enough to not always be truly prepared to solve their own problems without additional help. Encouraging teens (and showing them how) to seek out appropriate and reliable information for themselves not only helps them mature but also sets them up to become better-adjusted adults later in life.

It would be easy to assume teens are being prepared for independence by their parents and teachers. The influence of technology has adjusted curriculums and parental involvement in the direct teaching of basic life skills until after teens are already on their own; children and teens are learning how to write checks, sew on buttons, and use a clothing iron via YouTube rather than their educators and guardians. The abundance of information available via the internet seems as though it should be all the preparation one needs to face the real world- however, in an age of DIY braces tutorials and Tide Pod challenges, sorting through the veritable circus of information at our fingertips for genuine and reliable sources (especially outside of peer-reviewed, scholarly articles), can be extraordinarily difficult to navigate, if not entirely overwhelming.

## **Related Literature**

As young adults come into their own and work to establish their own identities and independence, they seek information as basic as how to open a can without a can opener to

information about sexual activity and health. They look for this information to help them establish themselves in an adult world, where they no longer wish to be perceived as dependent children. How they seek this information can vary greatly based on their socio-economic status; the prevalence of technology and the internet in modern society can be a convenient tool in information seeking (Kim and Syn 2014). However, this only applies to those young adults who readily have working technology abundantly accessible enough to both use and learn to use the resource.

Those in lower socioeconomic areas may rely more on face-to-face interactions from other people (Agosto and Hughes-Haskell 2005) as their technological savvy may not be up to par with today's advancements, or they may not have access to the appropriate technology (Coates 2016). Teens also struggle to decide which questions they may or may not be able to even ask- either for fear of retribution if the question is deemed inappropriate, or out of fear of being seen as silly, naïve, or even dumb by those they might ask (Moore 2016). These concerns make technology searches on the internet an even more appealing idea, yet behind the issue of technologic skill and availability is the overwhelming and not-always-reliable plethora of expert and amateur information available to be found. Even young adults with regular access to technology may not be aware of proper tactics for seeking *reliable* or expert, rather than a non-expert, answers to their questions (Burford and Park 2014). Sources such as Wikipedia or WebMD are easily found and easy to absorb- but not always the strongest sources of reliable and accurate information.

In cases where technology searches (especially when browser history is considered a privacy issue), face-to-face interactions (due fear of retribution or judgment), or information from peers (for similar reasons as face-to-face interactions, or simply for a lack of how to discuss

the topics at hand) quite cut it, researchers have also found that young adult literature may serve as an influential information source. This appears to especially be true in cases of sexual identity or sexuality, where novelizations may allow teens to relate to characters without fear of judgment or a likelihood of stale information. The information is more likely to be presented as entertainment or sometimes even titillation, giving it far more appeal than journal articles or expert opinions (Pattee 2005).

### **Expert's Information**

According to a Teen Services librarian who has worked in the field as a public librarian for over five years, teens are not likely to go digging any deeper than they feel necessary for information; a belief concurrent with Zipf's Principal of Least Effort (Zipf 2012). Generally speaking, they do not possess the attention span in an age of instantaneous information to seek beyond the first page or two of Google search results, and will seek the information that comes to them first- clicking a link for further information or sources will not appeal to them if they already have something that seems relatively sound. They will rarely consider whether or not the source material turns out to be outdated and/or of a purposely misleading nature.

Teens are also likely to turn to their favorite books for information or find favorite books in novelizations that answer questions and inspire a desire for further information on a subject. Fandom culture, evident through social sites such as Tumblr, reveal teens often "reblogging" favorite quotes about dealing with anxiety issues, questions of sexuality and identity, or even issues of bullying or violence. They cite John Green and Rainbow Rowell books about relationships. They quote Rowlings' Harry Potter to find courage in times of darkness. They analyze favorite pop culture songs or series for "Easter eggs" of knowledge that they string

together into fan-theories in a search for meaning they can apply to their lives in a broader context. They look to these authors or other culture icons to summarize political debates, current events, and other issues, often trusting that these idols are reliable sources and have done the research themselves.

The information found by the teen is then broadcast to their peers, especially if the information-seeking teen was merely the first to ask the question or do the research. The prevalence of social media gives teens yet another avenue to share information- YouTube is an extremely popular medium that has started intense (and sometimes dangerous) “challenges” or tutorials amongst many more reliable how-to videos. Examples such as the DIY braces trend, started by a YouTube video prompted warnings of the adverse health effect from doctors (Behrants 2014) after some teens were reported to have lost their teeth from following the videos instructions.

While teens are far from stupid, our expert believes that they are not fully equipped to understand research methods. Teachers are overwhelmed in classrooms, parents expect the teachers are teaching them, and their quick ability to pick up technology means adults often expect them to figure it out for themselves, despite having little to no basis upon which to begin their research, discouraging them from doing more than minimal effort in their searches, unless their results prove entertaining enough to keep their attention.

### **Discussion**

The difficulty in addressing information seeking behaviors in young adults is the vastness with which they occur. Though the internet may be a single point, teens are accessing thousands of various information points within that one medium. It may well be that “librarians, schools,

and other adult stakeholders need to utilize what we know about teens' social network site use and reliance on social media for cognitive and emotional adjustment" (Moore 2016), however "these adolescents exhibit self-protective behaviors (e.g., deception, risk-taking, secrecy) in seeking out information" (Coates 2016 ) that can make it difficult to control the narrative of information to solely reliable sources, if teens even chose to follow the narrative of reliable sources in exchange for trusted sources- such as friends or personal mentors. The internet may be a quick convenient search for answers on the spot when a trusted source is not present (Kim and Syn 2014), but does not entirely replace face-to-face communications. Our expert explains that while teens seek to be independent, they're still in a stage of where they have more questions than they do answers. While they may seek out answers on the internet, the confusing influx of information often leads them right back to trusted sources such as teachers, parents, or friends to sift through the information they found.

While both Coates (2016) and Moore (2016) agree that the social capital teens gain from social media information, found and shared, heavily influences their information seeking behavior, Agosto (2005) and Williamson, Qayyan, Hidder, and Liu (2012) all found that social media was less of a news source than a means of casually communicating with friends, not a place to formally seek information in answer to a question. Our expert clarified that teens are far from stupid. They share the information they have, but sharing information and believing it are two different things. Sometimes they will share things solely for the humor or the shock factor. This idea is concurrent with Pattee's (2005) theories on the attractiveness or entertainment factor of information. Consistent with Burford and Park's (2014) findings, questions from young adults may be temporarily satiated with information from Wikipedia, but our expert believes they are

likely to continue to seek out further information or discuss it with a trusted source if it is an item of merit that requires a reliable answer.

This does, however, suggest a certain amount of influence, as teens are likely to use kernels of knowledge from casual communications to influence their information searches. This method is consistent with the berrypicking methodology in that it is ever-evolving throughout the search process, adapting to need in the moment and further evolving until it's next evolution (Bates 1989). The information they heard from watching a John Green interview, for an example previously mentioned by our expert, could very likely be shared on social media and influence another teen to disregard an opposing statement from another source, as they had previously found information from a name they recognize, pass on from a friend they trusted. They then begin to berry pick information from other sources based on their previous knowledge until they have cultivated their own information identity.

### **Conclusion**

As teens begin to become adults, they are also becoming the new generation of decision-makers. They are the newest future, and will eventually take over the workforce from the previous generation. It is important, then, that we ensure they can properly wade through the information available to them through various means. This skill will allow them to form an identity and belief system that can be influential in the decisions they make that shape our world. It even influences their basic ability to survive as independent adults as older generations become unavailable to them for guidance. As information professionals, understanding how they search for information can help us prepare them to narrow down their searches and find reliable

information from verified experts, and then weigh that information against other known information to find the truest information.

The difficulty in guiding their search is the pace at which those searches and search methods change- how quickly their influences and goals change. The only real way to keep up with the trends in their information seeking behavior is to simply continue to have those conversations with them. What are they currently using? How do they know it is trustworthy information? Not only will asking these questions of teens themselves help educators and information professionals study their sources and guide their information journeys, but it will also encourage teens to question their own sources and reflect on their own behavior- refining it themselves, to some extent.

Understanding the information seeking behaviors of young adults also cements libraries and information seeking professionals as relevant. In the age of the internet, information professionals are often dismissed as unnecessary, and without open lines of communication to information-seekers (and young ones, who are experts on relevancy to the modern world), information professionals doom themselves to the way of the dinosaur. Teens have no reason to seek out information professionals' expertise if they feel information professionals do not understand their behaviors or methodologies- or worse, do not care to. The last thing any teen wants to be is dismissed; educators and librarians who show a genuine interest in working with teens and utilizing the new technologies and information avenues they have an interest in will remain trusted and relevant to those teens.

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HANNAH MOORE, MLIS