Information Needs and Seeking Behavior of Teens Aged 12 – 18 Years: An Annotated Bibliography

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Part I User Information Needs and information Behavior

Introduction: Teens as Volunteers

Teens between the ages of 12 and 18 years who are enrolled in many Sacramento, CA public and private schools are required to complete community service hours in order to graduate. Youth Librarians with the Sacramento Public Library share reports of students approaching them to request to serve at the library, often just days before their volunteer paperwork is due. This behavior frustrates staff because the students expect to be able to volunteer without training and cuts into librarians' limited planning time. Conversely, Volunteer Coordinators at SPL deal with parents who are micro-managing their child's volunteer experience, often signing them up for events regardless of their child's interests or abilities. This goes against the spirit of the volunteer experience, keeping students from learning about the process of seeking a volunteer opportunity, engaging in the application process, and discovering more about themselves.

While no studies have been made about the information seeking behavior (ISB) of volunteers as a population, looking at the ISB of teenagers may provide insights on how to match coordinators' efforts to these volunteers' behaviors and needs. This bibliography annotates articles of studies conducted between the mid 1990s to 2009 and published primarily in journals of the field of library science. The bibliography contains articles describing teens' information needs, ISB and resources in a variety of situations: in the online environment and with the use of electronic resources, of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) needs, in the use of personal, school and public libraries, in the use of non-fiction books, and for future life perspectives. Findings provide insight in teens' habits and assist librarians and volunteer coordinators to best target their efforts to inform teens of volunteer opportunities both in the library and in the greater Sacramento non-profit community.

Description of User Group

The unifying characteristics of the selected user group is English speaking persons between the ages of 12 to 18 years. Researchers refer this group as teenagers, adolescents, youth, young adults, Millennials, young people and for younger teens, as tweens, preteens or children. No other characteristic was used to exclude a subset of the age defined population for the purposes of the bibliography. The investigations represent teens from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia and from diverse economic strata, urban and suburban geographic locations, various cultures and ethnicity, and
on both female and male perspectives.

New methods for studying teen information behavior include having them participate in the design process as well as providing input in the results. There seems to be a lack of study on urban teens, with a call for more study by Denise Agosto. The largest discrepancy between urban and other teens is urban teens claim not to use books, while non-urban teens claim not to use books, but reveal through other survey answers that they do.

**Summary of Research Findings**

The information needs of teenagers are similar across geographic location and economic status. Teens seek information to support their present lives and their future lives. Various researchers tried to create typologies of teens' needs and resources, however, when teen's input was sought to validate the developed frameworks, teens consistently proved the complexity of their lives by rearranging typologies based on the social context of their relationship to a human resource, the perceived stigma of certain needs and other “it depends” factors.

**Information Needs of Teens**

Teens report the following types of generalized needs:

- Family and interpersonal relationships
- Health and drugs
- Current education: school assignments
- Everyday life needs: Time and date information, social/leisure activities
- Career: career planning process, learning about the correct types of questions to ask
- College planning
- Financial responsibilities

**Information Seeking Behavior of Teens**

- View their needs as less stigmatic as they age because they recognize their peers share the same types of problems; Assume more ownership of their problems and needs, and see their needs as more serious and more intimate. (Boldero & Fallon)
- Frustrated by lack of time for research, dispersed career information. Distrust adults to speak plainly about the career process; View it as complicated. (Julien)
- Teens are aware of having future college and career needs from a young age, but will seek
information based on social cues of time appropriateness. The “correct” time is when teens are older and is supported by examples such as college materials targeted to junior year students (Edwards & Poston-Anderson).

- In the electronic environment, more successful at browsing than keyword searching. Like the electronic environment but frustrated when there are insufficient results or too many results. (Bilal & Kirby, Shenton 2007, July) Search style includes frequent looped searches and use of the back button on the navigation bar. (Bilal & Kirby) Teens don't trust or use e-reference (chat) because of the lack of an interpersonal relationship with the librarian. They want to avoid appearing ignorant and to avoid bothering the librarian. Knowing the librarian would increase their likelihood of using e-reference. Teens may prefer telephone service to chat. (Connaway)

- Teens need and use information grounds (places where people gather for one purpose, but use for other purposes, such as sharing family news at church). Younger teens use informal grounds such as school yards instead of formal spaces such as libraries. (Meyers)

- Non library users feel libraries are not for teens. Think libraries don't have books about them, treat them rudely, and have too many rules which limit the use of the space and computer resources. (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, Shenton 2007, April) Teens find library structures and organization confusing, especially the Dewey Decimal System; Prefer fiction arranged by genre. (Shenton 2007, April)

- Use libraries information grounds as well as a secure space that supports their social and entertainment needs. Identify the library as useful for academic support, but want to use it for its social meeting space. (Agosto et al, Shenton 2007)

**Teens' Preferred Resources in Order**

1. People: Family (parents and especially mothers serve as intermediaries), friends, teachers, and then professionals, who are seen as back up to other sources. (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, Boldero & Fallon)

2. Media: Telephones, television, and computers due to convenience and fun factor. (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell)

3. Print resources: when present in the home, these will be used to the point of consulting materials that are not appropriate due to their convenience of location. Only when personal materials are deemed insufficient will teens use the library. (Shenton 2004) Urban teens report never using the library or books. (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell)
• Teens will not seek help for family problems. They will target their information requests to parents for any need other than interpersonal relationships. Friends are a primary source for information on interpersonal relationships (Boldero & Fallon), but friends are not consulted for career and college related needs. (Boldero & Fallon, Edwards & Poston-Anderson)

• Based on items purposefully removed from the library, likely to use items in the 700s (arts and recreation), biographies, and books about sexuality and drugs. (Burek Pierce) Want more books that are culturally relevant and about them. (Agosto et al) Teens find adult subject books difficult to read and consult encyclopedias for school assignments because the information is concise, presented in small chunks and often comes with pictures. (Shenton 2004)

**Annotated Bibliography**


**Abstract Excerpt:** The results indicate a heavy preference for people as information sources and that urban teens hold generally unfavorable views of libraries and librarians.

**Annotation:** Participants' combined log of information needs and sources searched (980 total) and four group interviews demonstrate that urban youth do not use libraries. Used QSR NVivo 2 software to translate data into a coded scheme of most frequent to least frequent sources and types of information seeking questions (from log book data). Scheme contextually rearranged by participants into order of perceived importance. People followed by telephones for mediated information topped participants' list of identified sources. Presence of "televisions playing in the background" (151) would make libraries more inviting. Possible limitation of results attributed to ethnicity as 93% of participants were African American. Five tables depict the original coded scheme and the recommended changes from successive group interviews. Sixth table compares results to past studies, emphasizing the shared information needs of urban teens to other teens.

Abstract Excerpt: In addition to exploring gender-related variance in the reasons for which teenagers use public libraries, the survey investigated how frequently the respondents needed information relating to twelve major topic areas and how useful they considered public libraries...

Annotation: Absorbing article on three part survey of 97 fourteen to seventeen year olds' demographic qualities, motives for library use, information needs, and usefulness ratings of two east coast public libraries. Obscure tables; Makes some arguable conclusions about individual results. Conspicuous omission of categorization by age within the gender profiles, which might have provided further insights of boys' and girls' information needs and library use. Ten tables and division of discussion into the separate survey parts pace the report, inviting exploration of the data. Only statistically significant gender difference: females' greater perceived usefulness of libraries to meet their information need, supporting cited references of past studies' findings.


Abstract Excerpt: [This Study] investigated these users' cognitive, affective, and physical behaviors as they sought the answer for a fact-finding task. It analyzed and compared the overall patterns of children's ... Web activities, including searching moves, browsing moves, backtracking moves, looping moves, screen scrolling, target location and deviation moves, and the time they took to complete the task.

Annotation: Evaluates seventh graders' information seeking actions and uses the Web Traversal Measure to assign a weighted score to rate how effectively and how efficiently teens locate answers using a specific search directory. Uses charts to visually compare youth performance to graduate students' performance. Excellent suggestion that training programs "must consider levels of cognitive development and... pay attention to the process skills students need to plan and evaluate all aspects of information utilization and retrieval" (665)." Unclear why article makes suggestions to improve Yahooligans functions. Appendix illustrates the Web Traversal Measure and formulas used to produce weighted scores.


Abstract Excerpt: Respondents were also required to rate the intimacy, seriousness, and stigma
attached to their problems as well as the degree to which they caused the problem. ... Help seeking behavior was found to be predicted by problem type and gender...

Annotation: Outside the library field, yet helpful collection of data from over one thousand 11 to 18 year old youth in Melbourne VIC, Australia concerning their "help"-seeking behaviour defined as, "requests for assistance and advice from friends, relatives, and neighbours as well as professional agents (194)." Identified categories of needs analogous to those discussed in LIS literature. Provides detailed discussion of behavior as correlated to sex, age, perceived intimacy of need, and statistically supported predictions for source type selected. Data summarized within three tables measuring the frequency of problem type by sex and year level, how intimate or personal the problem type is perceived by teens, and describing other problem characteristics as relates to teens' sex and year level. Questions and conclusions of adolescents' perceptions of the suitability of professional help sources possibly illustrative of teens' ideas of the suitability of library resources.


Abstract Excerpt: This research sought to examine the information seeking processes employed by junior high school students... when using CD-ROM encyclopedias and when completing inquiry based learning activities. ... Both studies found that participants wanted time to talk and discuss and that instruction was important to help students move forward in their searching and learning.

Annotation: In contrast to Bilal's effective/efficient analysis of youths' electronic media navigation skills, Branch reports how (solicited) intervention improves seeking abilities and bolstered students' emotional stages during research. Employs methods of "Think Alouds," "Think Afters" and "Think Togethers" of students' perceived IS processes and video/audio/observational recordings to track physical movements. Interprets data from two studies tracking different search tasks (fact finding versus research). Lacks consistency in summary of population characteristics, especially of the four person group. Comprehensive discussion of intervention results, including five suggestions for practitioners. Graphs of students' progress and number of instructional interventions over the course of the studies would have further illuminated the conclusions.

Burek Pierce, J. (2003, July). Picking the flowers in the "fair garden": The circulation, non-

**Abstract Excerpt:** ...*publications offer indications of the importance of nonfiction materials to young adult information needs. ... Collection analysis indicates that there is evidence that high-use items disappear from the collection at significant rates, that these items have monetary value, and that cover topics ranging from sex and drugs to rock stars.*

**Annotation:** Interesting approach to study the presence of non-circulating materials to draw inferences on the actual use of nonfiction items by youth. Explores five points about non-circulating materials, including the price and circulation history of "not on shelf" non-circulating items compared to those of "on shelf" non-circulating items. Statistical analysis of data reveal significant information about the status of non-circulating items. "The average number of circulations for items not on shelf was 6.56, contrasted with averages of 3.9 and 2.41 for items withdrawn and kept respectively." (70) Expressed limitations are useful to avoid overly extrapolating conclusions.


**Abstract Excerpt:** *The studies indicate that both generations consistently identify Google and human sources as the first sources they use for quick searches. The younger Millennials mentioned consulting parents most frequently, while the older Millennials consult friends and professors.*

**Annotation:** Merges data from two separate projects, both funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., with separate under-funders, to interpret the behaviors of two user groups that present “a dichotomy for library service and system development.” (123) (They also encompass the largest actual (Millennial) and projected (Boomer) volunteer populations at SPL). Review of literature omitted in favor of detailed population descriptions and positioning the study in context of complex sociological and communication theory frameworks. Overly broad user groups created through "Generations", possibly lumping unique user sets. No surprise in the result that both user groups expect different services. Most generally inclusive finding: "...both Millennials and Boomers demand attention and want librarians to be available to them as guides and assistants, but not as gatekeepers (132)."

**Abstract Excerpt:** ... girls think they are “too young” or it is “too early” for them to get answers to their questions. They are also constrained by their perceptions that adults, such as parents, teachers, and librarians, think it is “not the right time” for information seeking.

**Annotation:** From the University of Technology in Sydney Australia and an Australian Research Council project that gathered qualitative data from 28 female students from grades seven through nine about their future education and career information needs. Thorough evaluation of interviews and diary entries confirm cited literature that adolescent girls develop an awareness of their future self and needs, with this study group projecting information needs that would affect them two to nine years down. Surprising finding: teens also refrain from seeking career information from peers. Suggests practices on how to market information to a user who does not ask questions.


**Abstract Excerpt:** Forty percent of youth do not know where to go for help in their decision making, and 38% feel that they need to go to too many different places for the information they require. As well, the respondents revealed that trustworthiness of information sources is critical to the ultimate usefulness of the help received.

**Annotation:** Perplexing application of "sense-making" theoretical frameworks, bewildering tables and repetition of information obfuscate the hidden gems. Often times data cited in the text had no accompanying table to illustrate it. Unclear which institution commissioned the six part study, of which only one part is reported. Lack of bibliographic citation to other five parts leaves reader frustrated, especially when references are made to data collected under the other parts (e.g. gender differences). Highest number of perceived barriers reported by participants who have information gaps pertaining to career decision making; Least number of barriers reported by those seeking information to further education. Suggestions made to improve services by overcoming information
scatter and finding higher quality, detailed resources for career exploration.


**Abstract Excerpt:** "Tweens' are a sandwiched population with behaviors, circumstances, and needs distinct from children and young adults.

**Annotation:** Supported by the National Science Foundation, research focuses on a specific age population of the "Millenial" generation that is in the middle of maturation from dependent child to independent teen. Breaks down the thirty-four participants by socioeconomic and geographic characteristics. Methodology meticulously described and includes five tables of data. Seven research questions around ELIS guide the study including types of needs, tweens' process to seek and assess information, barriers to and management of information, the roles social "types" (i.e. adults) play in information flow, and the use of information grounds such as school hallways. Of most concern for a youth librarian, "in discussing everyday-life information problems with tweens, ... it is access to other people that often makes or breaks an information search." (337)


**Abstract Excerpt:** This article draws on the findings of a wide-ranging qualitative research project ... to investigate, in particular, the nature of the volumes within home libraries that are consulted, the circumstances in which they are used, youngsters' attitudes to the books they employ and the problems that they encounter when exploiting them.

**Annotation:** Reports on a subset of research data collected in a four year project funded by the British Academy. Data heavily weighted toward the younger child, however examples are included for 12 -18 year old in all "non-fiction genre" discussions. Convenience, access, familiarity and having the correct reading level book for the task form the themes throughout. Heavily qualitative in presentation with the frequent use of quotes from focus groups and interviews rather than a summation into tables. All participating children come from families with adults who actively built large in-home library collections.

**Abstract Excerpt:** While many pupils felt that the foremost mission of a school library should be to help users meet their academic needs, there was a general preference for greater comfort and a more informal atmosphere within the library...

**Annotation:** Fourteen percent of 900+ students aged 13 to 18 respond with contradictory ideas to a north-east England school library use survey. Comprehensive discussion of students' preferences versus students' perception of the school library's purpose: Teens prefer fiction to nonfiction, yet believe a school library's first duty is to help with school work; Teens want a place to socialize, yet think the school library should be place to get work done. Appendices provide complete blank survey, screen shots of online survey and interface of database used to analyze responses. Survey results presented in percent of respondents. Recommendations include more coordination between teachers and library to encourage use of library for school assignments, provide more electronic content, such as CD-ROMs as resources, and hold orientations to the library.


**Abstract Excerpt:** Although thousands of articles about information behavior have been published in recent years, little attention has been given to the paradoxes that emerge in terms of either the features of such behavior or the investigation of it though research.

**Annotation:** Analyzes research from the past 35 years with heavy emphasis on research from 1990s to present, including several studies by the author. Proposes ten contradictions between youth information behavior and the library systems with which youth interact such as "Young people are often highly critical of particular information resources, yet continue to use them habitually (4)." No specific age group of "youth" targeted. Three paradoxes reflect the librarian or research perspective rather than youth IB. Succinctly explains the paradoxes using illustrative examples with the aim to raise awareness of the "chicken and the egg" syndrome in IB research and teen behavior rather than propose solutions. Over sixty-one references cited for further exploration of past youth
IB studies.

**Part II Selection and Evaluation of Resources for Teen Volunteers**


The Volunteer Match Website is a national registry service which matches volunteers to non profits with service opportunities. Users may create a profile and have emails sent on a regular basis alerting them to opportunities which meet their interests. Allows for keyword searches and will limit results to a desired geographic range (searches are not boolean supported; results are relevancy ranked). Online presence both a strength (a volunteer may view several types of opportunities at once, which shortens the overall research time) and a weakness (for teens with limited computer access, there is no print version or telephone service to increase entry points).


Hands on Sacramento (HOS) is a regional chapter of a national network promoting volunteerism and providing volunteer matching services. Screens organizations in order to ensure their non-profit status and allow their users the confidence of serving a trust worthy cause in their community. The project calendar shows one time volunteer events on a monthly basis, allowing time constrained teenagers who "just need to fill hours" to quickly scan service opportunities and pin point the one that best fits their schedule. Provides telephone support for those who do not have computer access. Find ongoing projects through multiple search styles from advanced search to browsing a complete list of current opportunities.


Print resource which lists Sacramento non-profit organizations that welcome youth as volunteers, which reduces frustration of the volunteer experience. Categorical and alphabetical listing of organizations with basic description of each organization's mission, volunteer opportunities, contact
information and minimum age of volunteer. Includes brief tips on the process of volunteering to assist teenagers to have a positive experience and teach them more about themselves and their interests. Compiled on an irregular schedule, directory may not be up to date resource. Also available at the City of Sacramento Volunteers Office located at 915 I Street, Second Floor, Sacramento, CA 95814.


Volunteer search interface hosted by Myspace, using the Volunteer Match database which provides all the same search functions. Graphically pleasing webpage with picture slideshows, videos, and flash elements which break up the text and make volunteering "cool." Hosting on Myspace facilitates the building of a greater volunteer community through friend lists, forums, and posting comments which allow volunteers to share thoughts of their volunteer experiences with each other. This is an online space where teens are already present, which teens are comfortable using and where they've built their trusted networks.


Teens familiar with the cable television show may appreciate this extension of the Music TV world. Targets young adults (14 and older) to raise their consciousness about current issues. Allows users to build community with favorite celebrities, friends and featured members by creating profiles, tagging, and writing blog entries, comments and forum posts. Ideal for volunteers who want to learn more about the plethora of community service areas including environment, politics, health, education, and poverty and who need inspiration in finding a cause that they (or their role model celebrity) care about. Excellent web design heavy on visual graphics, judicious on its use of text will greatly appeal to teens who bore easily or struggle with long verbose web pages.