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Early adolescents as publics: A national survey of teens with social media accounts, their media use preferences, parental mediation, and perceived Internet literacy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores early adolescents' media channel use to better understand early adolescents as a public relations public. The article offers the results of a national panel survey of early adolescents in sixth to eighth grades ($N = 354$) who have social media accounts. Our analysis shows that adolescents say that they spend more time with television than they do with social media. In addition, adolescents are more likely to observe what other people post on social media than they are to engage in posting information themselves. Data also indicate that even though parents may place limits on adolescents' social media use, these limits may drive use of other forms of media and limits are not associated with less social media use compared with adolescents whose parents do not place as many limits on their social media use. Ethical and practical implications for public relations practitioners are offered.

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1. Introduction

Public relations professionals assist all types of organizations in communicating with audiences, including youth. Today, conventional wisdom assumes that young people lead digital lives and common sense would suggest that the optimal way to engage with early adolescents is through social media (Lenart, 2015; Veinberg, 2015). Recently in the public relations literature, these assumptions have been challenged as public relations scholars have observed that, in general, publics use social media primarily for maintaining personal and professional relationships and hold little intention to interact with organizations (Kent & Saffer, 2014; McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Fussel Sisco, 2013; Vorvoreanu, 2009). It stands to reason that public relations practitioners should thus be concerned with how early adolescents use social media in concert with other media options. The goal of this research is to further our understanding of how social media fits into the repertoire of how early adolescents use media generally for the purpose of informing public relations practitioners who want to reach these youth.

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Marketers have always valued youth. Market research data indicate that teens influence \$75 billion annually in spending on things like clothing, media and entertainment (Bonetto, 2015). Marketers also believe that the relationships youth have with brands when they are young will translate into maintaining those relationships as youth become adults. While advertisers and marketing researchers have invested in building relationships with youth, research on early adolescents as public relations publics is lacking. This is a clear omission from the literature as public relations practitioners play an important role in the conscience of business and there are a myriad of ethical issues organizations must consider when interacting with early adolescents (Montgomery & Chester, 2009).

To address this scarcity of data in the public relations literature and to better understand this critical public, we present the results of a national nonprobability survey of early adolescents ($M = 13.21$ years old) who have social media accounts. Our study adds to the literature by providing (1) comparative data on time spent with traditional versus social media, (2) information on the role parents play in their teen's media use, and (3) comparative analysis of early adolescents based on individual factors and demographics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Early adolescents as public relations publics

Scholars and practitioners have recognized that in the diffuse media landscape, public relations practitioners must strategically target messages to reach their intended publics (Plowman, Wakefield, & Winchel, 2015). It is important for public relations practitioners to study early adolescent use of traditional and social media because they are the next generation of media consumers who are just beginning to develop their media habits. Many early adolescents have parents that mediate their media use, and, as such, also inform and influence their parents' media decisions and behaviors. Some studies of digital natives demonstrate that young people rely on Internet-based media, online newspapers, Twitter, and cellphones for their news information. However, these surveys are often of early adults or college students (Veinberg, 2015), older adolescents (Courtois, All, & Vanwynsberghe, 2012), or adolescents that span a large developmental range (Lauricella, Cingel, Blackwell, Wartella, & Conway, 2014; Pea et al., 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) rather than early adolescents (grades 6–8).

Specific to the public relations literature, only a handful of studies address adolescents. Bortree (2009) examined reaching adolescents as volunteers and Vardeman-Winter (2010) investigated how to reach teen audiences as publics for health campaigns. The public relations studies that address young people focus on millennials, ages 18–34 (Logan, 2014; McCorkindale et al., 2013; Vorvoreanu, 2009). These studies are instructive in that they show that millennials are likely to use social media to maintain relationships with individuals and organizations with which they are already affiliated offline. In addition to having past experience with an organization, adolescents say that they will engage in social media interactions with organizations if they enhance how teens want to present their "identities" online (Vorvoreanu, 2009), if interactions are easy with few transaction costs (Logan, 2014), and if interactions involve receiving incentives for interacting (Logan, 2014; McCorkindale et al., 2013), such as discounts and coupons. Furthermore, millennials were more positive about interacting with nonprofit and local small businesses because millennials see them as more relatable (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

Studying how early adolescents use social media and traditional media is different than examining millennials because early adolescents may have less access to media due to parental restrictions and limits placed on media use at school. Parental mediation and school limits on the use of media are important because studies show that developmentally, early adolescents may have less understanding about the meaning of media messages—are less media literate. Furthermore, public health advocates note that "the prefrontal cortex which controls inhibitions, does not fully mature until late adolescence or early adulthood" (Montgomery & Chester, 2009, p. S24), which suggest that adolescents might make impulsive or risky choices in viewing and posting content. From a communication perspective, marketers and public relations professionals, need to better understand the environment in which early adolescents access media as well as consider the opportunities and ethical implications for reaching out to these young people through their preferred channels.

2.2. Traditional media use among U.S. early adolescents

While traditional media companies bemoan the fragmentation of media audiences caused by the many different channels available to audiences, research data show that television, just behind music, is still the top media with which young people invest their time. Data from C+R Research Youthbeat's 2014 survey of 12- to 17-year-olds shows 51% report watching TV on the most recent school day, which is slightly more than reported going online (49%) (Bonetto, 2015, May). A multivariate study of young adolescent females shows that adolescents typically multitask with various technologies. For instance, they listen to music, talk on the phone and add online updates to their social media accounts all at the same time (Pea et al., 2012). This research suggests that early adolescents may not have focused attention when using media. In addition, these authors found that having a television in one's room was associated with more multitasking with media. Further, youth who reported greater face-to-face communication had more positive emotional outcomes than did those who engaged more frequently with others online.

2.3. Social media use among U.S. adolescents

Researchers have conducted more recent research on adolescent social media use than on adolescent use of traditional media. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, more than 75% of adolescents (ages 13–17) reported using social media (Lenhart, 2015). Older adolescents (ages 15–17) reported using social media more than did early adolescents (ages 13–14)—81% vs. 68%. More than 70% of adolescents said they used more than one social media site. Facebook (71%) and Instagram (52%) were the social media platforms most used by adolescents. Adolescents from middle and upper income families used Instagram and Snapchat more in comparison to adolescents from lower income families. A higher percentage of girls reported using visual social media sites such as Instagram and Snapchat in comparison to boys (Lenhart, 2015). Another national survey of 8–17 year olds found that 66% of youth 13–17 said they had a Facebook profile, and nearly one-fifth said they checked it more than five times a day (Lauricella et al., 2014).

Blackwell, Lauricella, Conway, and Wartella's (2014) study of 8–12 year olds, found similar results—that social networking sites (SNS), specifically Facebook, were among the most preferred. The researchers found no significant differences in SNS use by gender, suggesting girls and boys in middle childhood favor social networking sites equally. There is limited research examining early adolescents' interaction with social media and even less about their specific activities regarding various social media (Blackwell et al., 2014; Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010).

To further our understanding of early adolescents' use of media, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1. How does early adolescents' time spent with social media compare to their time spent with traditional media?

RQ2a. Does having a greater number of social media accounts affect the time early adolescents spend with traditional media?

RQ2b. What are the most frequent types of activities that early adolescents engage in on social media sites?

2.4. Parental monitoring of social media

Given the ubiquity of interactive technology use by children and adolescents, parenting tasks now include not only monitoring of television and movie viewing but also attending to youth Internet use and social media participation. Parent mediation theory (Clark, 2011; Valkenburg, Krccmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999) suggests that parenting practices around youth media use, including restrictions and limits on use, co-viewing and co-use, and discussion of media content, impact youth usage as well as influence important emotional and behavioral outcomes, both positive and negative (Vaala & Bleakley, 2015).

Although the majority of research on parent mediation of media content has focused on more traditional outlets such as television (e.g., Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006; see Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), there is emerging work on parent strategies with Internet and video games but there is still very little focused on tablets and smartphones (Connell, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2015). One recent study showed that parental mediation, and restrictions, specifically, were effective in reducing online interaction including email use, engagement in chat rooms, instant messaging, and downloading, but did not impact high risk Internet use (i.e., viewing pornographic or violent content, taking privacy and contact risks) (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Similarly, parental mediation has been shown to reduce the association between adolescent Internet use and online risk but not eliminate it (Lee & Chae, 2012).

Recent interest in parent-youth co-use of new forms of technology, such as video games, suggest positive outcomes, including higher levels of family connectedness (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012) and more youth prosocial behavior and lower levels of internalizing symptoms, such as suppressing emotions (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Stockdale, & Day, 2011). As media grow more complex, parents must contend with challenges to effective monitoring, including potential lack of technical skill and accessibility of the technology (i.e., smartphones and tablets in youth bedrooms rather than in shared family spaces). In the current study, we are interested in whether parental limits on social media use are associated with actual social media use, i.e., do parental limits actually lead adolescents to spend less time with social media? In addition, if youth are limited in how much time they use social media sites, is this associated with increases or decreases in their use of other forms of media?

Based on this review of the literature, we pose the following research questions:

RQ3. Do parental limits on early adolescents' social media use affect their media use?

RQ4. Is household structure associated with early adolescents' social media and traditional media use?

2.5. Adolescents and Internet literacy

Research on early adolescents' interactions with the Internet is slowly increasing, but there is still a dearth of research documenting their online literacy skills (i.e., searching for information, evaluating websites for content accuracy), and how youth engage with online content from SNSs (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram). Scholars who have engaged in the study of

youth's interactions with the Internet have focused on digital literacy identities (Alvermann, 2010, 2015); the socioeconomic disparities regarding who has online access and what that access limits or affords (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hundley & Shyles, 2010; Hutchison & Henry, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010); whether age and/or gender influence online skills (Hundley & Shyles, 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010); how online access might increase online literacy skills and benefit those at risk of dropping out of school (Hutchison & Henry, 2010); perceptions of and responses to online risks (Livingstone, 2014); and what social conditions might be more conducive to different online skill levels (Park, 2014). However, most of the seminal work focuses on young adults (15- to 19-year olds) (cf., Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008), or spans across a broad age range (between 11 and 19 years old) and mostly takes place with youth outside of the United States (for U.S. studies on early adolescents, specifically, see Alvermann, 2010, 2015; Hundley & Shyles, 2010; Hutchison & Henry, 2010). The current study, then, adds to our understanding of early adolescents' perceptions of the value of the Internet in helping them make decisions, and their ability to find information that is helpful to them.

The research on Internet literacy suggests that early adolescents might not feel comfortable in their ability to navigate the Internet. Further, we wonder whether there are differences based on audience demographics, and thus pose the following research questions.

RQ5. Do early adolescents who spend more time with social media perceive themselves as more literate about information they get from online sources?

RQ6. Are there demographic differences (by sex and income) in how early adolescents engage with traditional media compared to social media?

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey procedures

A national Qualtrics cross-sectional research panel was engaged June 2–June 11, 2015. The Institutional Review Board at The University of Georgia approved the study.

The survey was intended to measure the social media use among early adolescents in 6th–8th grades. A Qualtrics survey manager recruited adult panel participants who indicated in their panel registration packet that they had adolescent children. Furthermore, the investigators used a screening questionnaire to ensure (1) participants had children in 6th–8th grades, (2) participants lived in the United States, and (3) the adolescents had a social media account. If the parents met the criteria for the survey, they then read about the study, were offered an opportunity to preview a PDF version of the entire survey, and provided their parental permission. If they gave permission, and if they had more than one child, we asked them to invite the child with the most recent birthday. The adolescents read a youth assent form, and by clicking their assent, they could begin the survey. The response rate for the survey was 10%. The final number of eligible completed surveys was $N = 354$.

3.2. Participants

Of the 354 early adolescents who participated in the study, 50% ($n = 177$) identified as male and 50% ($n = 177$) identified as female. The average age was 13.21 years old, with 11% ($n = 39$) in 6th grade, 36.4% ($n = 129$) in 7th grade, and 52.5% ($n = 186$) in 8th grade.

Participants represented 42 states, with the greatest number of participants coming from more populous states, e.g., New York ($n = 35$), California ($n = 32$), Florida ($n = 26$), Illinois ($n = 22$), Texas ($n = 21$), Ohio ($n = 20$).

The race or ethnicity of the participants was as follows: 71.5% white or Caucasian, 10.5% African American or Black, 9.3% Hispanic or Latino/a, 4.8% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.6% Native American or American Indian, 3.1% multiracial/multiethnic, and 0.3% other.

In terms of annual household income, 40.1% reported household incomes below \$50,000; 40.2% reported household incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,999; and 19.7% reporting living in households with incomes above \$100,000.

An eligibility requirement of participation in the survey was that early adolescents have a social media account. The most common social media account that early adolescents said they had was Facebook (88%), followed by YouTube (55%), Instagram (50%), Twitter (42%), Snapchat (27.7%), Google Plus (25.7%), Tumblr (7.1%), YikYak (2.5%), Secret (0.8%) and Other (7.1%). Only 25% of participants had one account. It should be noted that Facebook requires youth to be at least 13 years old to register for a Facebook account (Facebook, 2015).

3.3. Variables

3.3.1. Media use measures

To examine media use, we adapted a measure from Pea et al., 2012. We asked participants "How much time on a typical weekday (school day) do you spend with the following media?" Media measured were (a) watching television, (b) reading magazines, (c) listening to music on a radio, iPhone or other device, (d) viewing videos on YouTube, Netflix or another

Table 1

Means, median and standard deviations for hours spent during a typical week day (school day) with media.

Media Type	M	Mdn	SD
Television	2.32	2.5	1.32
Streaming video	1.96	1.5	1.28
Music	1.88	1.5	1.26
Social media	1.85	1.5	1.35
Books	1.21	0.5	1.14
Email	0.99	0.5	1.15
Magazines	0.64	0.5	0.98

Note. Items coded 0 (*never*), .5 (*less than one hour*), 1.5 (*about 1–2 h*), 2.5 (*about 2–3 h*), 3.5 (*between 3 and 4 h*), and 4.5 (*more than 4 h*).

streaming device, (e) checking email, (f) checking social media, and (g) reading books. Responses were recorded on a scale of 0 (*never*), .5 (*less than 1 h*), 1.5 (*between 1–2 h*), 2.5 (*between 2 and 3 h*), 3.5 (*between 3 and 4 h*) and 4.5 (*more than 4 h*).

3.3.2. Number of social media accounts

Participants were asked whether they had accounts on the following social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Tumblr, Google Plus, YikYak, Secret, or other. We created a measure to represent the breadth of social media accounts by summing all the different social media accounts participants identified possessing.

3.3.3. Social media activities

Items used to gauge social media activities were derived from Rosen, Whaling, Carrier, Cheever and Rokkum's (2013) Media and Technology Usage and Attitude Scale. Participants were asked whether they engaged in the following behaviors on a typical day: (a) check your social media page; (b) post status updates to your social media account; (c) browse profiles and photos on social media; (d) read postings on social media; (e) comment on postings, status updates, photos, etc.; (f) click "like" to a page, photo or comment; (g) log on to someone else's social media account to check it out; (h) check your social media account while at school. Responses were recorded on a scale where 1 (*never*) and 5 (*all the time*).

3.3.4. Parental monitoring

Items were adapted from Gentile, Nathanson, Rasmussen, Reimer, and Walsh (2012) that address parental limits placed on children's television viewing. We adapted four items for our use here ($\alpha = .85$): "How often do you have to ask for permission before you can go on social media?", "How often does a parent/caregiver put limits on how much time you may spend on social media?", "Does your family have rules about how much time you can spend on the computer?", and "Does your family have rules about when you can access social media?" Responses for the first two items were recorded on a scale where 1 (*not at all*), 2 (*seldom*), 3 (*sometimes*), 4 (*often*), and 5 (*all the time*). The last two items were recorded on a scale of 1 (*no*), 2 (*sometimes*), and 3 (*yes*).

3.3.5. Internet literacy

The scale of Internet literacy was adapted from the eHEALS scale (Norman & Skinner, 2006). We used four-items ($\alpha = .78$) related to whether participants knew how to look up, find, assess information reliability, and evaluate information they discovered on the Internet. Ranges for responses were 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

4. Findings

Our first research question addresses how much time early adolescents spend on social media compared with other media. See Table 1. Early adolescents reported watching more daily hours of television compared to any other activity ($M = 2.32$) and reported they spent the least time reading magazines and with email. The descriptive statistics show that time spent watching television and streaming video was also greater than time spent with social media.

Next, we analyzed whether having a greater number of social media accounts was associated with time spent with traditional media. We used Spearman's correlations to assess whether the number of social media accounts and the media use variables were related. Data show that having a greater number of social media accounts was positively related to time spent with magazines, $r_s = .14$, $p = .01$; music, $r_s = .22$, $p < .001$; streaming TV, $r_s = .26$, $p < .001$; email, $r_s = .22$, $p < .001$; and social media, $r_s = .28$, $p < .001$. However, the number of social media accounts was unrelated to hours spent with television, $r_s = .05$, $p = .39$; or with books, $r_s = .06$, $p = .25$.

The second part of research question asked for early adolescents to report the frequency with which they engaged in social media activities. Results are presented in Fig. 1. These data show that adolescents spend more time looking at and reading social media pages than they do spend time posting information. Also, only one-third of respondents say that they "never" check their social media pages while at school, indicating that two-thirds of participants do check social media at school, and one-quarter do so "often" or "all the time." When looked at by age, 48.7% of sixth graders never went online at

Percentage of Social Media Activities Engaged in by Early Adolescents

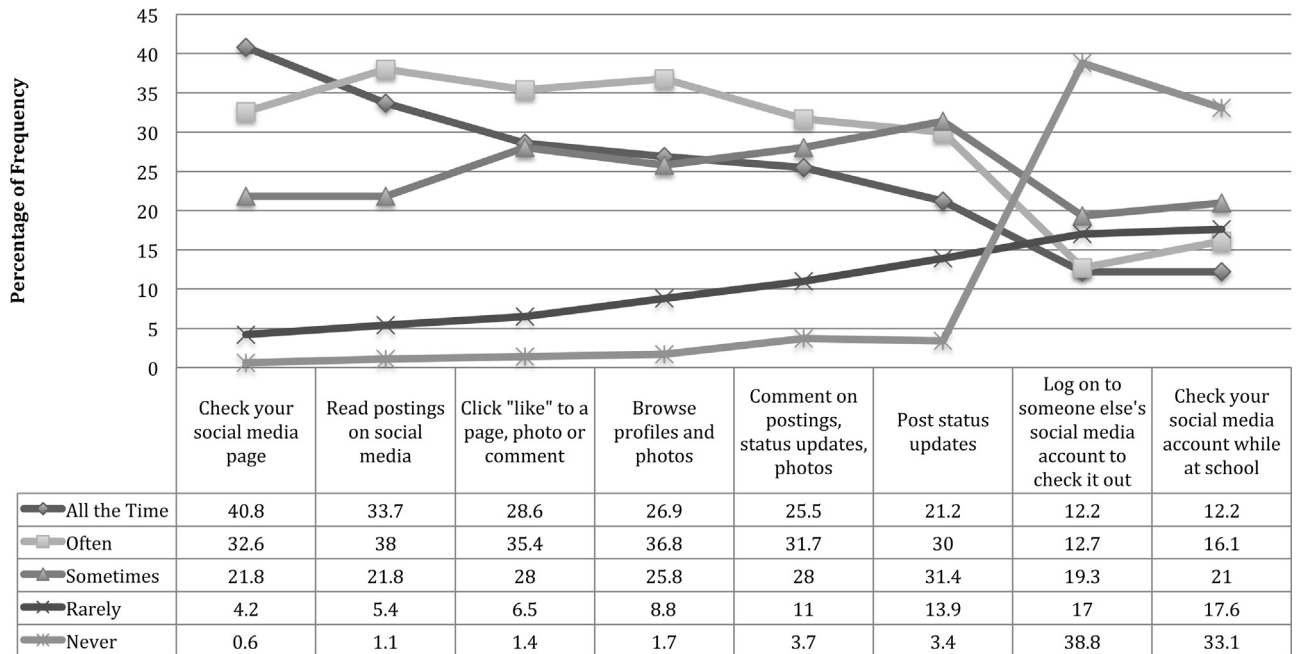


Fig. 1.

Table 2

Summary of Spearman intercorrelations for parental time limits on social media and hours spent with traditional and social media.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Television	-							
2. Magazines	.34**	-						
3. Music	.37**	.40**	-					
4. Streaming video	.35**	.27**	.49**	-				
5. Email	.25**	.55**	.40**	.27**	-			
6. Social media	.41**	.37**	.57**	.57**	.48**	-		
7. Books	.23**	.46**	.28**	.26**	.37**	.20**	-	
8. Parental limits on social media	.12*	.33**	.07	.01	.21**	.02	.31**	-

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.
 ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

school compared with 38% of seventh graders and 26% of eighth graders, illustrating a relationship between increasing age and access to social media at school.

Our third research question had to do with whether parental limits on social media use affected media use. Increased parental limits on social media use was associated with youth reporting they spent greater time with television, $r_s = .12$, $p < .05$; magazines, $r_s = .33$, $p < .001$; email, $r_s = .21$, $p < .001$; and books, $r_s = .31$, $p < .001$. There was no association with use of music, $r_s = .07$, $p = .21$; or streaming TV, $r_s = .01$, $p = .91$. Furthermore, we might have expected a significant negative correlation between parental limits on social media and reported hours spent with social media, however, there was no such relationship, $r_s = .02$, $p = .70$. See Table 2.

Next, we examined whether household structure (*two biological parents, a single parent, or a blended family*) was associated with social media and traditional media use. To analyze these relationships, we conducted chi-square analyses. Cross tabulations and chi-square analyses showed no association of household structure with hours spent with television, magazines, music, streaming television, email, social media use, or books.

Research question five addressed whether those who reported spending more time with social media feel more literate about getting information from the Internet. To determine this, we examined the correlation between perceived Internet literacy and hours spent with social media, and we found no relationship, $r_s = .08$, $p = .13$. In essence, those who spent more time on social media did not report they felt they had a greater Internet literacy skill set. It is important to note that overall, adolescents reported perceiving they had high online literacy ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .55$).

Lastly, we looked at whether demographic characteristics are associated with traditional and social media use. When it comes to gender, we found no differences in reported hours spent on social media $r_s = .07$, $p = .20$. However, female participants reported spending more hours with music $r_s = .12$, $p < .05$ and books $r_s = .18$, $p = .001$. Income was only related to hours spent with television, with those who reported greater household incomes reporting spending more time watching television, $r_s = .11$, $p = .05$. It should be noted that the associations between demographics and media usage were small in magnitude.

5. Discussion

Our data reveal that early adolescents with social media accounts spend more time with television than they do with social media on a typical weekday. The data also show that the more traditional media outlets remain appropriate targets for youth. Public relations professionals can still send messages via television, streaming video and magazines, for example, despite the rise in interest in social media. Music, although not thought of as a traditional message vehicle, clearly plays an important role in young people's lives.

Furthermore we found that having a greater number of social media accounts was correlated with time spent with magazines, music, streaming video, email and social media. This suggests, as previous research has shown (Pea et al., 2012) that early adolescents, like other adolescents, are most likely multitasking when engaged in these behaviors. For public relations practitioners, this may mean that it may be more difficult as a communicator to find ways for quality engagement with these multi-taskers. Having a greater number of social media accounts was not associated with time spent with television or with books. This suggests that books and television have unique content that young people want or need that cannot be supplanted with social media use. The finding may also indicate that it is difficult to multitask well when reading or watching television.

In looking at how parental limits on social media may affect how early adolescents use media, we failed to find that increased parental limits were significantly related to early adolescents reporting they spent less time with social media. It may be that these young people are accessing media without parental knowledge. Parents may also not know how often young people access their social media accounts while at school. We did find that increased parental limits were positively associated with more time spent with other media. The largest correlations were with time spent with magazines and books, but also with email and television. This may mean that parental limits on social media may shift the type of media adolescents use. Further research is needed to determine how parental limits may encourage youth to spend time with other forms of media.

When we look at what early adolescents report they do on social media, we find that 73.4% said they check their social media pages "all the time" or "often," and 71.7% reported they read postings on social media "all the time" or "often." However, they are less likely to comment on postings, status updates or photos, with 57.2% saying they do so "all the time" or "often." Also, only 21.2% reported they posted status updates "all the time" and 30% saying they posted status updates "often." The implication is that if public relations professionals are looking for message evangelists, i.e., adolescents who will spread their organization's messages online, they need to identify social media activists. Those who post more often may have potential as "opinion leaders."

Our study provides insight into how early adolescents who use social media say they engage with media. However, our findings are limited in that our sample, while national, was purposive. Participants had parents that belonged to and registered with a national marketing research panel. Therefore the descriptive statistics are not representative of the national adolescent population. Nevertheless, our findings add to the literature by focusing on more than one type of social media and by comparing social media use to traditional media use. Future research should also look at the role smartphones play in social media use and the ability for early adolescents to access media that is less mediated by their parents and school officials through these devices.

The ubiquity of technology offers the prospect to reach early adolescents with health, educational, political and promotional public relations campaign messages and should consider the involvement of parents and schools. Many early adolescents appear to have some autonomy in how they access social media, even when their parents have set limits on their social media use. Because adolescents appear confident in their abilities to evaluate information, we need to ensure that expressed confidence truly matches their ability. Even though our findings offer opportunities for practitioners, social media are merely one of the communication channels early adolescents engage with. Practitioners, who often pride themselves as serving as an organization's ethical conscience, should also consider the ethics involved with using these channels for engaging with early adolescent audiences.

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