Staying Relevant: Public Libraries Look to Social Media to Engage Teen Patrons

Research Team 5

Sandra Findley, Lori Ross, Dawn Edelen and Greta Kliewer

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Emporia State University

**ABSTRACT**

In this research design, we present our plan for determining the reasons teens 12-17 in the Kansas City Metropolitan area use social networking and public libraries. By doing so, we hope to understand what public libraries need in terms of social networking in order to make them more relevant places for teens to congregate and learn. In order to achieve this we have provided a mixed-methods questionnaire to distribute to a random sample of households in the Kansas City Metropolitan area, in order to give the teens themselves a voice in the process. We discuss the largely qualitative bent of our research in addition to the analysis methods with which we approach our research problem. Informed consent forms and our questionnaire are attached as appendices.

Keywords: social media, social networking, public libraries, relevance, teens

**Introduction**

Our research design addresses the challenges U.S. public libraries face as they struggle to stay relevant to teens in an age of emerging social media. Rapidly changing processes in information science involves more than just changes in technology. The way in which we relate to each other and to information as a result of those changes occurs as well. Teens, as some of the primary users of social media, are at the forefront of discovering new ways to curate, store, categorize, and retrieve information - particularly through social networking.

While adults also use such networking, today’s teens are among its primary users, in forms as varied as their information-seeking behaviors: blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds and Twitter, social platforms such as MySpace, Facebook and Friendster, and online virtual worlds and roleplaying games. Contrary to the days when libraries were paper-based information repositories, these digital media are becoming a normal form of interaction. At times this changes the way teens relate to each other, and certainly affects the way they conceptualize and use the public library.

Granted, most libraries have evolved past the paper-only point as well. Still, as new media gives library patrons the opportunity to voice their opinions, enjoy digital entertainment, and learn with new online tools, teens aren’t necessarily following the technology into the library. For them, online communities have become more of a “place” where they can “hang out” and “mess around” (Doyle, 2008) - and sometimes even learn. Yet traditional libraries are dropping away as a place where they tend to congregate and feel at home.

Public libraries have forayed into the use social media themselves in order to bridge this gap. Based on the disconnection we have highlighted between what teens want and what libraries provide, we have designed a questionnaire. With this research instrument we aim to investigate how teens use social media so that public libraries can better understand how to draw teens in. A 2007 Pew Internet study found that more than half of American teens ages 12-17 who are online use social networking sites (Lupa, 2009). Additionally, in 2007, 85 percent of teens surveyed had a profile on MySpace and 7 percent had a user profile on Facebook, and these numbers were increasing (Lupa). Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, wikis and blogs have skyrocketed in use over the past few years, and teens are a big percentage of those using these social networks.

As social networking sites become more common destinations for interaction and learning, these numbers continue to grow, and use of these sites (let alone knowledge that they exist) becomes imperative to the success of libraries in engaging teens. Our research design asks several key questions regarding how libraries aim to accomplish this connection. We previously examined literature regarding the implementation of social media in libraries. By asking these questions while researching, we related the articles to our research problem. The questions which we aim to answer with our further research are as follows:

1. Why aren’t teens using the library?
2. What kind of social media do libraries use?
3. How do they use this media to draw teens in?
4. How effective are these programs/technologies?

**Research Paradigm**

In order to answer the questions above, we have chosen to employ a mixed-methods approach with a bent towards the qualitative in asking teens about their social media use habits. Qualitative research seeks a deeper understanding of human behavior through text and description rather than numerical (quantitative) terms (Bryman, 2008, p. 366). While it is inevitable that we will need to know ‘how many’ of some type of software libraries are implementing, or ‘how much’ technology the library is going to have to offer before teens will make it a regular destination, we wanted to give the teens themselves a chance to answer questions spontaneously, with perspectives as unique as they are.

For this reason, our questionnaire is comprised of open-ended questions allowing for individual response, in addition to some closed-ended questions regarding the quantities that inevitably accompany such a research inquiry. We follow Hammersley’s complementarity classification for mixed-methods research (Bryman, 2008, p. 607), which indicates that the strengths of both qualitative research (detailed, individual responses unconstrained by the questionnaire) and quantitative (easily interpreted, unambiguous numerical data) can play off each other in getting us closer to our answer.

Quantitative research is inductive in nature (p. 366), allowing people to observe behavior in the world around them, and proceed to find out why this behavior takes place. This is the foundation of our research problem as indicated by our reviewed literature. By delving deeper into the types of social media that we have observed draw teens to the library, we can ensure that the work we are doing to understand our problem is based on actual behavior rather than abstract theory or conjecture. This fits with the ontological position of qualitative research as well, enabling us to demonstrate that social behaviors (in this case, teens’ choice of whether or not to use the library), are “outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena ‘out there’ and separate from those involved in its construction” (p. 366).

The idea of constructivism is also a key component in qualitative research, and is grounded in the idea that each individual is constantly creating his or her own reality based on their understanding of the world (p. 692). In an online sense, this is consistent with the behavior our literature review indicated teens are undertaking as users of social media. Teens create their own identities on any number of social networking sites, whether these identities are real or fabricated. In the offline world, where public libraries exist, each teen also relates to the pursuit of information based on any number of factors in their day-to-day life. Time, availability, interest, convenience and a number of other factors may all play a part in deciding whether a teen walks into the library, or doesn’t. As our literature review indicated, allowing the teens themselves to explain what these factors related to their individual identities and daily lives is an important part of implementing programs and resources in the library that will actually cause them to want to use it (Helmrich, 2004).

Finally, the research design includes a small quantitative component. Quantitative research is based in positivist philosophy, which posits that the gathering of facts is first necessary in order to create a theory – an approach often taken in science (Bryman, 2008, p. 13). This is the opposite tack taken by the ontological/constructivist theory of qualitative research, but the two methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This brief component of our questionnaire allows us to apply some straightforward numbers to quantify the factors we discuss in terms of what brings teens to the library. It provides a numerical compliment to the qualitative questionnaire responses, which will comprise the bulk of our data. It is the analysis of both these responses that we hope will lead us to a more realistic picture of how teens use social media, and how they view the library – and where these two perspectives can overlap for a positive result.

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

Population

For the purpose of this study, our geographical area of analysis is the greater Kansas City area. We have created a paper copy of our questionnaire (Appendix B) that will be mailed out to 1500 households in the Kansas City metro area. We believe a sample size between 500 and 1000 would be ideal in giving us useful data to work with. We have anticipated a significant non-response rate as households we contact may have no teens living in them, or other inhibitions to returning the questionnaire may arise.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire targets teens, ages 12-17. It inquires in regard to any experiences they have had with social media use in public libraries in the Kansas City area. If we receive results from younger children or teens older than seventeen, we will remove the data from our results, as they do not fit our criteria for this study. We hope that our methods will reach all types of teens, from those who never use the library to those that frequently use the library. Our random sample of the Kansas City Metropolitan area also aims to target teens of varying incomes, and with varying access to a public library. Though it is possible that it will be difficult to get results from those who rarely use the library due to lack of interest, by using a geographical area instead of specific libraries, there is a greater opportunity to reach all types of teens.

Sampling

Households selected to receive mailed questionnaires will be chosen randomly, and there will be no face-to-face meeting with any of the participants. Since the Kansas City area is so large our sample size is only a fraction of the teens living there, but with a mailing method coupled with an online questionnaire option, we are confident that we will get a large amount of return. There is also the possibility that teens may share the online questionnaire link with other teens they know. We will also distribute flyers around the Kansas City metro area and in public libraries in the area to encourage participation via the online format. This encourages more return and a greater sample of the city. Despite these possibilities, the selection remains random. A drawing for a laptop will be conducted among those who submit a complete questionnaire in order to increase incentive to participate.

Data Collection

The questionnaires will be mailed out around mid-April, with a deadline of mid-May, allowing approximately four weeks for responses. This time concludes the school year, and is prior to summer activities. The questionnaire is not excessively time consuming, and we feel it will not be a burden to participants.

Because mailing back the questionnaire may be inconvenient, there is also a link on the questionnaire where teens can go to answer the questions online instead of mailing in their copy. The link may also encourage a quicker response. The questionnaire itself is mainly qualitative, since we believe it is important to know more about what teens are interested in and what problems they see in relation to public libraries and social media. Our reviewed literature explains how powerful a tool social media can be and how libraries need to use it in order to better understand how to truly cater to the needs of teen patrons. Our research is designed to give them a voice.

We will use only the questionnaire as a research instrument. We chose this as the best method for our research because it was the least invasive. The literature that we reviewed made it clear that public libraries lack some understanding as to how to truly meet the needs of their teen patrons. Since this is clearly an issue, we need to reach out to teens where they are instead of expecting that they will come to the library, and give them the space to respond as openly and honestly as possible. The questionnaire also gives the option of filling it out on the teen’s own time, as well as when it is most convenient for the parents. This also allows for parents to have the opportunity to look over all the questions and decide without any outside pressure - or with the presence of an interviewer - if they wish to allow their teen to respond. We hope that these convenience factors in addition to the incentive of the laptop prize will optimize the response rate for our questionnaire.

Methodological Issues

One of the primary problems that could arise would be the instance of multiple questionnaires being submitted from the same person. Since this questionnaire is anonymous, and therefore difficult to monitor, it will be clear that only one questionnaire per teen per household can be submitted and it must include a consent form to be included into the drawing. Any results that are received with identical consent forms will be discarded to prevent results from being skewed by repeated responses.

To prevent participation from teens who may forge the signature of a parent or guardian, or be otherwise dishonest simply to be included in the drawing, we will require contact information in the form of an email address or a phone number. We believe this will reduce the amount of multiple responses submitted and protect the reliability of our research. This also allows for verification of consent if necessary, especially for those who use the online format. The winner of the prize can also be contacted with ease.

However, this complicates issues of privacy; consequently the consent form will assure the parents or guardians that their contact information is for the purposes of the study only, and that it will not be sold, distributed, or seen by anyone outside the research team. During the study the information will be locked away and/or password protected, and once the study is concluded all information will be destroyed as to prevent their information from being compromised.

Parents or teens are not obligated to complete all questionnaire questions, although only completed questionnaires will be entered in the prize drawing. A parent or teen may decide to withdraw their questionnaire entirely within three weeks of submitting it, and can ask to receive a copy of the study once it is complete.

Pilot Questionnaire

Our research team created the questionnaire used for this study, and it was uploaded into an online questionnaire program for an alternate format. In order to test the ease of usability for the questionnaire, a pre-test of approximately 300 questionnaires will be distributed to public libraries in the Kansas City area. This pre-test will remain random because it will be available to any and all teens 12-17 who enter the library for any purpose. This pre-test will be used to refine and reword any questions that need better explanation to be clearly understood, but these will not be entered into the incentive drawing or used in the final data analysis.

For the research itself, we will need external permission from all of the places where we hope to place flyers to advertise our study in their establishment. For the pre-test we will need to obtain permission from several metro area libraries to leave the questionnaire at the teen reference desks or in the front of the library, as well as obtain a secure place within the library where the questionnaire can be returned for retrieval by a member of our research team.

The purpose of this questionnaire is not simply to gain an understanding of how teens feel about libraries in general or how they use or do not use each specific library service, but how they feel that libraries are reaching out to connect with them most specifically with social media. At this point in time we did not feel it would be the most beneficial to conduct an interview or to put together a focus group because we need to find out basic information about how libraries can meet the needs of teen patrons, as they interpret the issues. When researching specific teen services or resources to implement as a result of what we find in our study, it might be more beneficial to employ an interview process or focus group, as the more intimate methodology of data collection could help in narrowing and selecting technologies or programs to implement. Our aim is to understand the issues that will lead to the implementation of such technology, using the questions we stated in our research problem. With these questions ever in our minds, we hope that this questionnaire will give all public librarians a better understanding of what is working and what isn’t working in their libraries, as well as how social media can best be utilized to reach out to teens as library patrons.

**Ethical Considerations**

In this research design, we had to take into consideration the ethics of using human participants – and particularly those who are not yet legally adults. Because getting the perspectives of young people is so important to our research question, we wanted to aim our questionnaire specifically at teens 12-17 years old rather than at the librarians who currently control what types of social media are implemented in U.S. public libraries.

Accompanying each questionnaire we disperse is a letter of informed consent (see Appendix A), which tells parents how their child’s responses will be used. The letter indicates that the child’s responses cannot be used without the guardians’ consent, and that there is no compulsion to complete the questionnaire. For online questionnaires, verification takes the form of an Adult Verification System where a parent or guardian must log an electronic signature indicating their child’s age, and the parent’s consent to participate before the questionnaire will open.

The questionnaire is entirely anonymous, aside from the parents’ signatures, which are not disclosed to parties outside the research team. The parent can request a copy of the completed research at any time.

References

Bryman, A. 2008. *Social research methods: Third edition.* New York: Oxford University

Press.Doyle, M. (2008). Go where the teens are. *Voice of Youth Advocates,* 30 (6), 504-505.

Lupa, R. (Ed.), (2009). *More Than MySpace: Teens Librarians and Social Networking*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

**Appendix A: Informed Consent**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

The teens in your household have been randomly selected to participate in a questionnaire that will enable local public libraries to gauge what types of social media will make the library useful for teens. The following information is provided in order to give you the most transparency possible regarding our research so that you may decide whether you will allow the teens in your household to participate. The questionnaire contains 14 questions, and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire is entirely non-compulsory, and respondents may refuse to answer any question, or decline to return the questionnaire if they wish. Participants may choose to withdraw their responses completely within three weeks of completing the questionnaire. Results are completely anonymous; the questionnaire does not ask your child’s name. Names of parents and guardians which are provided as consent signatures are not disclosed.

The research being conducted is investigating the reasons that teens do or do not use public libraries in Kansas City. Previous research indicates that a lack of social media, or properly implemented social media, may be leading to a decline in teens’ use of the library. We want to give your child a voice in the process of making the library relevant to them. As an incentive for participation, a drawing will be conducted at the close of research for a Toshiba Satellite laptop ($499 value). The winner will be drawn from among those who submit a completed questionnaire.

Please feel free to contact members of the research team with questions about your child’s participation at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood this information regarding the nature of the project and the conditions of your child’s participation.

Guardian’s name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Guardian’s signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I wish to exempt my child from participation in the questionnaire.

Research team: Dawn Edelen, Lori Ross, Sandra Finley, Greta Kliewer

Contact phone: 555-5555 E-mail: [social\_media\_research@emporia.edu](mailto:social_media_research@emporia.edu)

**APPENDIX B: Mixed-Methods Questionnaire**

We are sending out this questionnaire to random households that have children the age 12 – 17 years, to help the Big City Public Library find ways to connect with teens in our community through social media. YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN! Your response is very important to us! All your answers will be kept confidential because we respect your privacy. This questionnaire will take about 10 minutes of your time. For your help and time, after you have completed the questionnaire your name will be put into a drawing for a Toshiba Satellite laptop. This questionnaire can also be found at **www.bcpubliclib.org/teen/questionnaire** if you would like to fill it out online.Completed questionnaires will be entered into a drawing for a Toshiba Satellite laptop ($499 value). A completed questionnaire and informed consent form are necessary for eligibility in the drawing.

**Forms must be returned by MAY 12th.**

PARENTS MUST SIGN ATTACHED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RESULTS TO BE INCLUDED, AND FOR YOU TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE LAPTOP!! One application per teen, please.

1. What is the main social networking site you use?

a. Facebook b. MySpace c. Blogs d. Twitter e. Other

1. How do you mainly access your social networking?  
   a. Cell Phone b. Home Computer c. School Computer d. Library Computer

e. Don’t use social media

1. How many hours a day do you use social networking?
2. Less than 1 hour
3. 1 – 2 hours
4. 3 – 4 hours
5. 5 – 6 hours
6. 7 – 8 hours
7. 9 – 10 hours
8. More than 10 hours
9. When looking at new media what do you look for most.
10. Easy access
11. Easy to use
12. Graphics
13. Games
14. Networking with other users of that platform
15. Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
16. What do you use Social Media for? (Check all that apply)
17. School
18. Keep in touch with friends
19. Work
20. Games
21. Learning new things
22. Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
23. What is the age of people you talk to on social networking? (Check all that apply)
24. 12 or younger
25. 13 – 15
26. 16 – 18
27. 19 or older
28. When using library resources, which of these do you use? (Check all that apply)
29. Available books
30. Electronic books
31. Computers
32. Librarian for questions
33. Meeting rooms for homework
34. Meeting rooms for outside of school meetings
35. Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
36. Would classes at the library on social networking be something that you would go to? Yes or No
37. If equipment that is used for social networking (computers with internet, cameras for video blogging, etc.) was available at the library, would you come into the library more often? Yes or No
38. What types of social networking would you like to see the library use? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
39. If offered, would you be willing to run a digital chat group or participate in one offered by the library? Yes or No
40. Do you believe that the library should have more options available for teens to communicate with each other while in the library? Yes or No

If Yes, please give examples \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What would you like to see added to the library in a social media setting?

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1. Other comments to improve your experience in the library: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking your time to help your local library!

Return envelopes are enclosed. Please mail your questionnaire, or return in person to:

Big City Library Survey Group

26596 S. Straightrow Rd.,

Big City, KS 66222

**APPENDIX C: Cover Letter**

Big City Library Survey Group

26596 S. Straightrow Rd.,

Big City, KS 66222

April 23, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian and Teen:

We are graduate students with Emporia State University earning our Masters in Library Science at Emporia, Kansas. You have been randomly selected as a teen 12 – 17 years old from your city to participate it our questionnaire for the Big City Library. With our research we are finding out how to improve the resources available through the library for teens by using social media. By taking the time to fill out the enclosed form you are not only helping the library connect with teens in the area, but giving the library insight in what can be improved. Social media, for our purposes, includes websites, podcasts, wikis, feeds, gaming interfaces, etc. – in essence, all the platforms used in social networking. Examples include social sites like MySpace and Facebook, RSS feeds and Twitter, job-search sites like LinkedIn, and online interactive games like World of Warcraft.

This questionnaire is available in the paper copy accompanying this letter, or online at **www.bcpubliclib.org/teen/questionnaire.** Completed questionnaires will be entered into a drawing for a Toshiba Satellite laptop ($499 in value). A completed questionnaire and consent form are necessary for eligibility in the drawing.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Research Team: Dawn Edelen, Lori Ross, Sandra Finley, Greta Kliewer

Contact phone: 555-5555

E-mail: [social\_media\_research@emporia.edu](mailto:social_media_research@emporia.edu)