



Evidence Summary

Disadvantaged Youth in Southern Scotland Experience Greater Barriers to Information Access Resulting from Poor Technology Skills, Information Literacy, and Social Structures and Norms

A Review of:

Buchanan, S., & Tuckerman, L. (2016). The information behaviours of disadvantaged and disengaged adolescents. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(3), 527-548. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JD-05-2015-0060>

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Abstract

Objective – To describe the information behaviours of adolescents living in disadvantaged and disengaged circumstances in relation to social integration and self-efficacy.

Design – Mixed methods design using observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

Setting – Public agencies offering drop-in support services for employment and training at three locations in South Ayrshire, Scotland.

Subjects – Adolescents aged 16-20 not in education, employment, or training (NEET status) seeking public agency support services in South Ayrshire, Scotland; and public agency support workers.

Methods – The South Ayrshire region was identified using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (2012) and selected because nearly 20% of the region fell into the most deprived decile. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling of NEET youth attending drop-in support groups. Over a period of 4 weeks, the 36 NEET youth attending these sessions were observed regarding their information behaviours, social interactions, and experiences with support workers.

Following observation, the investigator used the critical incident technique during interviews to discuss real life scenarios and needs with 15 participants. One focus group of four interview participants was held to explore how groups discuss information behaviours. An information resource sorting activity was used as a discussion prompt. To gain further insight into the information needs, sources used, and barriers experienced by the adolescents who sought support, six support workers were also interviewed. These data were analyzed using iterative deductive coding and thematic analysis.

Main Results – Internet usage of participants is similar to general population peers, with general browsing, social networking, and music and gaming usage as the most popular activities. Information needs included employment, education, and training such as finding appropriate job vacancies, identifying employer addresses and contact details, and accessing public transportation schedules. Other personal needs such as financial, health, and housing were identified. Some of these information needs were unmet, which could have implications for their wellbeing. Approximately one third of the interview participants described challenges identifying or meeting needs.

Teens frequently rely on people as sources of information, preferring face-to-face interactions. They turn to family, friends, and support workers for information as important members of their social network who listen and “usually have the answer.” Other frequently used sources include the Internet and television news. A third of the interview participants described scenarios in which they used multiple sources – the Internet, family and friends, books and leaflets, and local youth clubs and health clinics. A majority of interview participants (73%) did not use the public library because they were not interested (“I don’t read books”) or thought there was nothing there for them. Of the four who used public libraries, none considered themselves regular users. Focus group participants rated support workers and television news as having high credibility, friends and family as

having low credibility, and the Internet as having medium credibility.

The information seeking behaviours of NEET teens are often passive and non-motivated, with abandonment and incompleteness occurring frequently. Many observation participants appeared visibly withdrawn and were reluctant or unable to engage in discussion with support workers. Throughout the study, participants demonstrated an unwillingness to engage in lengthy discussions. Support workers noted that attendees rely on them to find the information, evaluate it, and give the teens advice about what to do next. Participants exhibited bonding social capital with family and friends, though evidence for bridging social capital was found only with support workers. These adolescents appear to be relatively isolated and have more inward-facing social capital, which puts them at risk for social exclusion.

Though nearly two thirds of interview participants reported no barriers to finding information, evidence from observations and support worker interviews suggest that deficits in technology and literacy skills are substantial. Despite assistance from support workers, NEET youth often abandoned tasks before completing them due to literacy and technological barriers. Support workers described a variety of barriers to meeting information needs: home life, isolation, literacy and access, institutional regulations, motivation, lack of confidence, and poor social skills. Common circumstances relating to motivation are familial unemployment, substance abuse issues, and inability to focus.

Conclusion – NEET youth faced increased access and behavioural barriers beyond those of typical adolescents. Access barriers are influenced by technology and literacy skills deficits, while behavioural barriers are influenced by social structures. Considering the range of personal needs expressed to support workers in combination with pervasive barriers to information, further study of everyday information needs is warranted. Public and third sector (e.g., typically voluntary and community

organizations, associations, etc.) agencies should make remedial literacy education a priority. Since the perception of public libraries is poor, librarians should collaborate with third sector agencies to develop tailored outreach and services to build sustained relationships with these disengaged adolescents. Generally, these adolescents exhibit self-protective behaviours (e.g., deception, risk-taking, secrecy) in seeking out information as well as situation relevance of information sources and inward-facing social networks, all of which suggest they live in an impoverished information environment.

Commentary

This study examines an unstudied population of users – adolescents who are not currently students. As the first study, the authors use concepts from social network theory, social capital, and information behaviours to develop a theoretical framework that describes the factors influencing the information seeking behaviours of teens in Scotland. Additionally, it places information behaviours and information literacy within the context of authentic social, personal, and technological barriers. This is an important early exploration of a complex but everyday issue.

The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), a list of criteria for reporting qualitative interviews, was used to evaluate this study (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). The strength of this study lies in the design. The use of three methods to gather data representing three perspectives (adolescent, support worker, and investigator) on the information seeking behaviours of NEET adolescents offers triangulation. Although there are gaps in the reporting, the design is thoughtful and takes into account the particular challenges in studying this population.

The reporting is less robust for the description of the research team (domain 1) and analysis and findings (domain 3; Tong et al., 2007). The specific roles of each author and their training and credentials are not provided. It is also unclear whether the investigators established

relationships with the participants and shared information about the study's purpose. Although the methods for developing the theoretical framework and designing the study are clearly described, procedures for recruitment and analysis are not. Further description of the coding scheme along with examples would be valuable for evaluation and replication studies. As a qualitative study, the findings may not generalize to adolescents in other regions or countries or teens who do not seek out public services.

Despite some reporting gaps, the authors provide compelling evidence to suggest that these teens are living in an impoverished information environment. It is an excellent first step towards documenting the information needs and behaviours of adolescents seeking employment and training outside the traditional educational system. We simply do not have an adequate understanding of the information seeking needs and behaviours, as well as the interplay between social networks, in teens. Future studies could adapt this study model for examining local populations of teens receiving support services. It would be particularly interesting to combine this rich qualitative approach with a broader survey of teens across Europe and North America to compare information needs, sources, and perceptions of public libraries. The value of public libraries in fostering community engagement is not yet well documented. Neither do we understand how to recognize and prevent disengagement, which is often reliant on apparent failure to meet societal expectations, such as dropping out of school or being unemployed. Considering the participants' perception of public libraries, there is tremendous potential value in situating information literacy training within the context of other job and life skills training opportunities. As public libraries increasingly serve as community anchors, it is also worth considering how programs can foster community engagement of disadvantaged youth as much as they develop their digital and information literacy skills.

References

Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal of Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349-357
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