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### Adolescent Perspectives on Media Use: A Qualitative Study

April Fiacco

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Adolescent Perspectives on Media Use: A Qualitative Study

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor  
of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology  
at Antioch University New England, 2020

Keene, New Hampshire



Department of Clinical Psychology  
**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA USE:**

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

presented on June 22, 2020

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study looks at adolescents' engagement with media and explores their perceptions of how media plays a role in their lives. For the purpose of this study, media includes watching television shows, watching and reading the news, and involvement in various types of social media. The influence of parents and peers is also explored to examine adolescents' views of whether parent and peer opinions affect the types of media with which the adolescent participants choose to engage. The study used a semi structured interview to collect data with participants from a Massachusetts public high school. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which broke the data into various clusters and themes.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohio Link ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.

*Keywords:* adolescence, young adults, media, social media, television, peer influence, parent mediation, social learning theory, media effects, qualitative research

## Adolescent Perspectives on Media Use: A Qualitative Study

Adolescence is typically a period of time defined by the development of personal identity and an increase in social connectedness. As this time is represented by a growing sense of self, adolescents can be sensitive to social evaluation from others (King et al., 2017). People in this age group tend to be constantly monitored by those around them. Parents and society are often on high alert due to increases in risk-taking behaviors during this age period (Koon-Magnin et al., 2016). Peers might also closely monitor each other by engaging in social comparison. Social comparison is when individuals evaluate aspects of their lives in comparison to others around them (Weinstein, 2017). This comparison can be upward, meaning that individuals compare themselves to someone they perceive as superior, or downward, where individuals compare themselves to someone they view as inferior. By comparing themselves to others, individuals learn about group norms and how to acquire desired social status. Adolescents learn what behaviors are acceptable in their peer group. Engaging in social comparison can lead to depressive symptoms if it leads individuals to view themselves negatively, but can also encourage an authentic self-presentation if the adolescents are confident in who they are.

According to the need-to-belong theory, “a fundamental psychological need is to avoid rejection and be accepted by others, and that social rejection and exclusion impair self-regulatory abilities” (King et al., 2017, p. 2). This is particularly salient for adolescents as they are extremely sensitive to rejection from others in their age group and are greatly impacted by the ability to self-regulate. For example, in the same publication, King et al. discussed that higher self-regulatory abilities were associated with positive outcomes in adolescence, such as better academic and social functioning. Low self-regulatory abilities were associated with alcohol use and abuse, risky sexual behaviors, binge-eating, anxiety, and depression. When considering the

need-to-belong theory, interactions with peers might have a direct impact on adolescents' mental and physical health. While adolescents engage in a high amount of social comparison, "adolescents tend to overestimate the extent to which others are watching and evaluating them, and can be highly preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of others" (Valkenburg et al., 2017, p. 36).

### **Parental Influence**

A decrease in time spent with parents and family and an increase in time spent with peers is another shift that occurs in adolescence. Prior to this age period, most children spend the majority of their time with family members, with parents acting as the main influencers in their lives. As children emerge into adolescence, relationships with peers become more important and occupy more of their time (Zhou & Fang, 2015). Despite the increased influence of the peer group, parents continue to play an important role in their children's lives.

One theory that is often cited in developmental literature is social learning theory, coined by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 2004). This theory states that most behaviors are learned through either observational or instrumental learning (Branley & Covey, 2017; Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Koon-Magnin et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). Observational learning is when an individual sees another person behave and imitates that behavior. For instance, a child will learn how to pick up objects by watching others complete the task. Instrumental learning is when an individual learns about behaviors through rewards and punishment. For example, if a child hits another child, that child will most likely receive a negative response from those around them and will learn that hitting others is not acceptable. Social learning theory focuses on the impact of observational learning, but recognizes the role of instrumental learning. When children are young, most social learning happens through imitating

parents or older siblings and being reinforced for those behaviors. As children approach adolescence, social learning shifts to their peers and parents are relied upon less for modeling in many areas.

While parents will play less of a role in social learning as children become adolescents, the reinforced and learned behaviors in childhood can act as a protective factor as adolescents encounter more difficult social interactions (Nathanson, 2001). Parents continue to communicate their thoughts to their children in various ways. One of these ways is through monitoring of media usage. While time spent using media as a family decreases during adolescence, prior experiences can affect how adolescents approach media usage as they get older. A study by Nathanson (2001) looked at family communication patterns and found that parents continue to have an influence on adolescents' media usage, media-related attitudes, and levels of cognitive activity while viewing media. It was also suggested that while viewing media, parents often convey messages about the desirability of the media and their attitudes regarding the content presented. These messages might be communicated out loud, or more subtly, and could become internalized in children, acting as protective or risk factors as they reach adolescence. For instance, if children have internalized negative attitudes toward violent television programs, they will be less likely to watch those programs in adolescence, thereby reducing violent media effects.

Albeit parents can influence their child's media attitudes by subtly communicating their own preferences and ideas, research is inconclusive about the general development of preferences. Rozin et al. (2004) studied how people acquire preferences. They stated that a person's cultural background does not fully explain individual preferences and hypothesized that the development of preference might be genetic or influenced by others vertically (i.e., parents),

horizontally (i.e., siblings), or obliquely (i.e., media, teachers, or role models). They also discussed the “family paradox” which showed that, in past research, correlations between preferences of children and parents were surprisingly low. Researchers even created “pseudo” parents and siblings; people that were unrelated to the participant, but expressed similar preferences as the participant’s parents and siblings. Results showed that while there were more similarities to biological parents and siblings compared to pseudo-parents and siblings, the differences were not significant. Rozin et al. examined participants’ preferences in comparison to their roommates’ and best friends’ preferences. Although participants were more likely to show similarities with their roommate and best friend rather than a random other, the difference was not enough to suggest that close relationships contribute to preference development. This is an important consideration for the analysis of this current study. While social learning is a large part of how individuals learn and develop, it does not fully explain developed preferences.

As previously mentioned, parents are an important socialization influence in their children’s lives and their impact can directly affect the development of positive outcomes, including avoidance of substances and engagement in prosocial behavior. Positive outcomes in adolescents have been found to predict healthy functioning in adulthood (Lee et al., 2017). These researchers also found that parental warmth is linked with higher prosocial behaviors and self-regulation, and fewer problematic behaviors. They also stated that parenting could shape how adolescents view and think about their peers, which in turn, might have a small influence on which peers they choose for their peer group. Furthermore, parental supervision has been shown to predict involvement in fewer deviant behaviors during adolescence (Koon-Magnin et al., 2016). One study by LaGrange and Silverman (1999) found that adolescent males have less

self-reported self-control (represented by risky behaviors) than adolescent females, but that females had less opportunity to engage in risky behaviors due to closer monitoring by parents. It is important to think about how differential treatment can lead to gender differences.

In summary, although we consider adolescence as a time period where the influence of parents declines, the lessons learned throughout childhood, as well as messages conveyed during the adolescent years, continue to impact the decisions teenagers make, even with the strong desire to conform to peers.

## **Peer Influence**

### **Peer influence is present in childhood years**

When thinking about peer influence, most people think about adolescence. Peer influence is strongest during this time, but it is present even when children are young. When social learning theory is considered, it can be assumed that children learn from their peers even from a young age in daycare, at the playground, and in elementary school. Several past studies have examined the influence of peers during these early years. Anderson et al. (1981) studied a group of preschoolers to observe whether they had an influence on each other's television viewing behaviors. Results showed that peer influence was present in many areas including watching television, looking away from the television, and overt involvement with the television show. This was found to be mutual (peers influenced each other) regardless of age or sex.

Another study looked at preschoolers' food choices, preferences, and consumption and how they were shaped by peers (Birch, 1980). This study found that exposure to peer models increased the likelihood that children would pick and consume previously nonpreferred foods. These preferences were still present several weeks later during a follow-up, which suggests that peer influence might have long-term social learning effects in the preschool age group even

when peers are no longer present. Furthermore, younger children were found to be more influenced by peers than the older children in this scenario. While this might suggest that peer influence decreases with age, results of this preschool study cannot be generalized to adolescence. This study is used as an example of how influence of peers is present early on in the development of social relationships. In another study, Brody and Stoneman (1981) hypothesized that children would be more likely to imitate same-age or older peers than younger peers. Results supported their hypothesis.

### **Peer influence increases during adolescence**

Children and adolescents are continually impacted by those around them, but susceptibility to the influence of peers peaks during middle adolescence (King et al., 2017). Peer mediation and peer contagion are two common phenomena during this period of life. Peer mediation occurs in groups where norms are established and pressure is present to encourage the acceptance and following of those norms. This can be both positive and negative depending on the norms within the group. If a peer group values high grades, there might be positive peer pressure to do well in school. On the contrary, if a peer group is involved in substance use, a member might feel pressured to engage in that activity to avoid rejection. Peer contagion is the tendency for youth to imitate the behaviors of their peers (Zhu et al., 2016). Peer contagion could also be negative or positive, but it more commonly has a negative connotation referring to adverse behaviors. Peer pressure is another common occurrence that could increase peer influence. While males and females report a similar presence of peer pressure, males are more likely to be affected and persuaded to modify their behavior as a result of peer pressure (Werner-Wilson & Arbel, 2000).

Youniss developed the Sullivan-Piaget Thesis to further explain the experiences of adolescents (as cited by Nathanson, 2001). This thesis discusses the mutuality of peer relationships, meaning that each person in the relationship is expected to reciprocate and engage in creating a mutual representation of the world. During this process, adolescents start to view themselves as active participants in relationships and in the creation of norms. This is unlike previous relationships with parents where the youth were expected to follow family rules that might or might not have made sense to them and with little explanation as to why they existed. While relationships with parents typically promote conformity, knowledge of social standards, and good relationships with others, peer relationships encourage sensitivity, intimacy, and mutual understanding. Youniss proposed that this is the reason why adolescents are so greatly affected by peers around them (as cited by Nathanson, 2001). Collaboration with peers and construction of group norms increases one's commitment to the group and decided-upon standards for participation. When people are invested in relationships, they are more likely to do what they can to keep those relationships intact.

Although peer pressure and contagion are often thought of as negative phenomena, adolescents crave independence and separation from their parents and peer relationships provide a place for the creation of new standards that allow for the sense of mutuality they are searching for.

### **Positive peer influence**

It is common to think about the negative impacts of peer relationships as they are of concern during adolescence, but peer relationships can have a positive impact on adaptive, emotional, and social development as well as adaptability in adolescents (King et al., 2017; Nathanson, 2001). Some studies have suggested that positive feedback from friends can improve

social and global self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2017). High social and global self-esteem have been linked with positive outcomes later in life. According to Lee et al. (2017), prosocial behaviors of peers increase adolescents' prosocial goals and behavior, and prosocial behavior toward peers is related to higher self-esteem and higher likelihood of graduating from college. These prosocial behaviors have also been suggested to decrease substance use, violence, delinquency, and smoking. Also, positive peer pressure is linked with more sympathy and social initiative compared to negative peer pressure. Although there is a tendency to be concerned about the negative impacts of peer relationships during the adolescent years, these studies show that there are many positive impacts on youth as well.

### **Negative peer influence**

Peer influence can also be undesirable and might include negative peer pressure, rejection, victimization, and bullying (King et al., 2017). These negative interactions are often linked with poor outcomes academically, socially, and psychologically, including an increase in problematic externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Although positive peer relationships could help promote well-being, they might also exacerbate problems if peers are engaged in deviant behaviors. For instance, an adolescent might have close, positive friendships, but if those peers are engaged in deviant activities (i.e., substance use), the adolescent is more likely to engage as well, if the friendship is viewed as beneficial to them. Previously, it was mentioned that positive feedback from friends could improve self-esteem. When feedback from friends is negative, social and global self-esteem decrease (Valkenburg et al., 2017). This represents the importance and influence of friendships during this age. Often when adolescents view their relationships as close and trusting, friends' negative feedback could be detrimental to adolescents' views and evaluations of themselves.

It has been found that peer factors are the “most salient, robust correlates to adolescents’ deviant behavior” (Zhou & Fang, 2015, p. 232). When peers are engaged in undesirable behaviors, an adolescent’s risk for substance use and abuse increases for alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana (Lee et al., 2017). Warr and Stafford (1991) showed that peer behavior was a stronger predictor of individuals’ attitudes towards crime than peer attitudes. They also showed evidence for peer behavior as a predictor of delinquent behavior in adolescents.

### **Media Influence**

Approximately 90% of American adolescents have used social media websites and about 75% of 13 to 17-year olds have at least one social media account (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018). Furthermore, it is reported that adolescents spend an average of nine hours per day online (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018). These numbers have likely risen over the past few years as technology has become more complex and engrained in our society and it would not be surprising if they continue to rise as technology improves. Changes in technology keep people more connected than ever through radio, television, online news, and social media. Information continues to become more and more accessible for people of all ages. As accessibility has ascended, research has shifted to look at the implications of this availability, especially for youth. On one hand, it can be beneficial to have information at one’s fingertips, and media access has been linked to some positive outcomes for adolescents. On the other hand, considerations must be made around the potentially negative impacts of media usage in regard to mental health and possibly brain development.

### **Media and Adolescence**

As stated by Berryman et al. (2017), “social media use is an important element of the developmental process for youth and young adults as they interact with others and present their

forming identities online” (p. 1). Formation of peer relationships and self-identity are major developments during adolescence. Increased communication through new forms of media have given adolescents more ways to approach this developmental piece. Relationships don’t have to stop at the end of the school day, after sports practice, or after a peer goes home at the end of the day. It is now possible to have constant contact with others. This can be positive as it supports the need for affiliation during adolescence, but it can also increase the amount of pressure that adolescents feel in their relationships and can create pressure to monitor social media constantly. The exploration of identity can be overwhelming and exhausting. Before technology allowed for continuous communication, adolescents had their own time away from peers to learn about themselves. Now that people can be reached at all hours of the day, it is rare to have time to unwind and process the identity exploration process; influences on identity become continuous. Furthermore, as technology becomes more familiar, parents are less involved in the supervision of technology use. It is now common for adolescents to have their own private computers and cellphones which further increase the opportunity for exploration and communication with others and decrease the availability of time for exploring one’s own identity.

When using media, adolescents are active and able to create their own experiences. Much like in peer relationships, media engagement allows adolescents to exhibit some control over their world and become more active participants in their own lives. Different from peer relationships, there is more flexibility to be an individual. While group norms are still important, media presentations allow for youth to present themselves in whichever way they choose. The use of social media encourages self-disclosure and development of self-presentation, both of which have been linked to identity and intimacy development and increased well-being (Michikyan & Suarez-Orozco, 2016). Whether adolescents choose to present their true self, ideal

self, or false self, they are learning about their personal identity in the process. Use of social media also encourages youth to present their emotions and thoughts to others in ways that might be difficult in face-to-face interactions. One example is the use of emojis which assign feelings to online conversations that might be difficult to interpret on their own. Affect could also be expressed through posts, statuses, and comments. The absence of direct, in-person feedback could make personal expression less intimidating. The act of “liking” peers’ posts and receiving “likes” in return fosters social and emotional support (Michikyan & Suarez-Orozco, 2016). “Likes” could act as positive social feedback which, as previously mentioned, could increase self-esteem in adolescents. Through social media, adolescents now have access to greater diversity and the ability to be in contact with people from all over the world. This could also impact personal identity development as they learn what truly makes themselves and their experiences unique.

Like exposure to social media, exposure to other forms of media, such as the news, have been found to contribute to development in adolescents (Kleemans et al., 2017). As with interpersonal interactions, it is suggested that media adds to adolescent socialization, encouraging them to be more autonomous and prosocial. Exposure to media enables adolescents to form their own opinions of the world and helps them to make decisions regarding their own behaviors. It could also be a way to connect to the events of the world and learn more about their personal intersectionality.

### **Media and Adolescent Mental Health**

With the increase of accessibility to media, there has been an increase in research around the pros and cons of this exposure for mental health. Many researchers study the adolescent population, which might be due to their increased susceptibility to influence of others compared

to other age groups. Studies linking media to mental health issues are not always reliable due to causality issues, and therefore, have been controversial. One example is that social media use has been linked to high levels of depression, stress, and social anxiety, but the direction of causality has been debated (Michikyan & Suarez-Orozco, 2016). For instance, symptoms, such as depression, stress, and social anxiety, could be caused by frequent social media use or the opposite might be true where depression, stress, and social anxiety lead to a high level of social media use. The following sections briefly cover other issues of concern related to media exposure in adolescence.

### ***Vaguebooking***

A study by Berryman et al. (2017) looked at the impact of vaguebooking. This term refers to vague posts and statuses that individuals make to increase others' curiosity. These posts usually lead readers to become concerned about the writer and might be a "cry for help." The researchers stated that this behavior might indicate that the writer is experiencing mental health issues. In this study, participants were given measures of qualities such as the need-to-belong, social functioning, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, social desirability, and histrionic symptoms. Researchers then looked at mere exposure to (or familiarity with) social media, participant ranks of the personal importance of social media, and engagement in the act of vaguebooking to look for trends. Their results found that participants who were more likely to engage in vaguebooking, were also more likely to report feeling lonely and having suicidal thoughts. More time spent online and a higher rating of social media importance were not associated with negative outcomes as one might have suspected. When participants reported high social desirability, they were less likely to report negative symptoms. Also, a high need-to-belong was associated with more empathy and fewer suicidal thoughts, and the presence of histrionic traits was a protective

factor for social anxiety and loneliness. These results indicate that it is important to notice when vaguebooking occurs, as it could be an indication of mental health difficulties or loneliness in adolescents. It also indicates that people should be less concerned about importance of social media and time spent online and more concerned about what is being posted, as this is a better indicator of troublesome issues.

### ***Digital Self-Harm***

Another study looked at digital self-harm, also referred to as self-cyberbullying, cyber self-harm, and self-trolling. Digital self-harm is “anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017, p. 761). In other words, those who engage in digital self-harm might create a fake profile and use that profile to harass themselves, making it appear as if another person is the culprit. Patchin and Hinduja suggest that adolescents engage in this act to gain attention from others. More specifically, females use digital self-harm to worry others or gain adult attention, while males use it to express anger or start a fight. The authors wanted to learn about the number of teenagers who engaged in digital self-harm and the predictors of it. Results showed that one in twenty adolescents, ages 12 to 17, has participated in digital self-harm in their lifetime. Factors such as bullying, depressive symptoms, and offline self-harm were associated with the likelihood of engagement in digital self-harm.

### ***Addiction and Compulsive Use***

Technology addiction and compulsive use of technology has been another area of research. Technology addiction has similar symptoms to other behavioral or chemical addictions and is on the rise (Savci & Aysan, 2017). It has been found to be related to biopsychosocial problems and associated with depression, impulsive behaviors, loneliness, poor sleep, decreased

well-being, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance. Being addicted to technology has some positives, such as increasing interpersonal communication which can lead to stronger friendships, a sense of belonging, and social connectedness. On the contrary, it can decrease real, face-to-face relationships and therefore, decrease in-person social connectedness which can in turn lead to feelings of isolation (Savci & Aysan, 2017). It has been noted that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to becoming addicted to technology due to lack of supervision and the use of social media as a coping mechanism. Savci and Aysan looked at the role of social connectedness in regard to internet usage. They found that when individuals reported low social connectedness, they were moderately more likely to be internet addicted and mildly more likely to be game or phone addicted.

In another study, the compulsive use of internet applications was explored. This was defined by an inability to control or cease use even when there were harmful consequences, for example, social media use while operating a vehicle (Turel & Osatuyi, 2017). The compulsion often leads to symptoms such as mood modification, intrusive thoughts, withdrawal, infringement on normal functioning, and conflict with other important, daily activities. He et al. (2017) reported that social media usage can sensitize reward circuits in the brain, thereby altering the brain. It was also mentioned that compulsive use of media could lead to low inhibition and heightened susceptibility to peer pressure in youth, resulting in a decreased ability to rationally think about consequences when peer influence is present.

Additionally, adolescents might use social media in this addictive manner as a way to relieve anxiety. In a society where adolescents are used to knowing what is going on at all times, anxiety can occur when they do not frequently check social media platforms (Rosen, 2014). Adolescents want to know what others are doing, thinking, and commenting. When they post a

status or a picture, they might feel anxiety about the number of “likes” and comments they receive. While checking social media can also be pleasurable, it also could provide negative reinforcement by removing anxiety-related feelings that are experienced.

### ***Passive Browsing***

Passive browsing, or social browsing, is a popular use of social media sites. It occurs when an individual scrolls through a site without actually interacting with others (i.e., comments, likes; Weinstein, 2017). As social media is often used for impression management through curated self-presentations, passive browsing can encourage social comparison. Social comparison can be problematic via social media for that reason. According to the correspondence bias, people infer that others’ behaviors are a result of their personality traits rather than the situation (Weinstein, 2017). When this is considered, passive viewers become more likely to believe that others’ presentations online are true and they might be more likely to engage in upwards social comparison as people tend to present themselves in positive ways. Weinstein was curious as to whether social comparison during passive browsing was related to well-being after browsing. The study found connections between negative social comparison and decreased well-being following passive browsing, meaning that these adolescents experienced less positive and more negative emotions following browsing that led them to engage in upward comparison. Teenagers who were more critical of the social media portrayals of others (e.g., questioned truthfulness), were less affected by the negative influences of passive browsing.

### ***Relation to Offline Behavior***

Branley and Covey (2017) were interested in how social media behavior influenced offline behavior after finding that social media use was linked to online risky behaviors. The

offline behaviors of interest included alcohol use, substance use, eating disorders, self-harm, unprotected sex, and violence. The study focused on young adults ages 18 to 25. Results of their study suggested that risky online behaviors were a significant and direct predictor of all risky offline behaviors studied.

In another study, researchers explored how antisocial or violent media influenced aggressive behavior in youth, Browne & Hamilton (2005) showed that there was an increased likelihood of aggression following exposure to antisocial, violent media if the participant was male, had pre-existing mental health issues, had a predisposition for violence, used alcohol or other substances, or had environmental risk factors. Also, according to studies cited by Browne and Hamilton, one in four youth with a criminal history have attempted to imitate crime in the media. They also cited the cognitive neo-association model, which proposed that media violence might promote aggressive thoughts or emotions that are already present (Berkowitz, 1984).

### ***Cyberbullying and Suicide Contagion***

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), suicide is the third most common cause of death for youth ages 10 to 14 and the second for youth ages 15 to 24 (2016). Suicide is clearly a big issue for today's youth, and media might have an influence on its increase. While bullying has been an issue for a long time, cyberbullying, or bullying via technology, has added another dimension, as bullies can hide behind their screen (Young et al., 2017). The use of technology to bully can lead to desensitization of victims' reactions by the bully because the bully can act anonymously and does not have to face the victim.

Suicide contagion, the modeling and imitation of suicidal behavior, is another issue affecting adolescents. This is a potential product of problematic media reporting of suicides. For instance, research has shown that reporting methods of suicides, showing images of the

deceased, glamorization of suicide, simplistic reporting of suicide, and discussion of suicide note content in the media all increase the likelihood of suicide contagion in youth (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2016). This continues to be a problem in news stories as well as fictional portrayals on television and in films. Through technology, adolescents have easy access to news reports. They no longer have to read a newspaper or watch news on the television. Just by scrolling on social media, adolescents are exposed to numerous news stories reporting on various topics, including suicide. The likelihood of exposure to problematic reporting of suicide makes suicide contagion a relevant worry.

### **Parents and Peers Impact on Media Usage**

Knowledge about the effect of media on youth, has led researchers to explore how parent and peer interaction might mitigate or exacerbate potential negative effects. This has been explored for social media, music, television, and other types of media.

#### ***Social Media Sites***

Constant access to social media also means that adolescents are constantly influenced by others' behaviors and easily notice when those behaviors change. As stated by social identity theory, these noticeable changes in others' behaviors cue adolescents to information regarding in-group behavior and teach them what the social media norms are, including the amount of time spent and the level of engagement with social media required to fit in (Turel & Osatuyi, 2017). An adolescent might begin to notice that their peers are spending more time on social media and that their engagement with others online has increased. This then sets the norm for them and they might begin to feel obligated to fit in by participating equally, as mutual engagement is the expectation for peer relationships. Adolescents might feel that they have to respond to others' posts due to the expectations of reciprocations. This is potentially harmful for them if it affects

the amount of time sleeping, engaging in class, or working (Turel & Osatuyi, 2017). Also, when adolescents are not monitoring social media, there is a concern that they might be missing out on an event (i.e., drama with classmates) or that others might be posting negatively about them (Turel & Osatuyi, 2017). Being vigilant about social media keeps adolescents in the loop and helps them to have control over their online appearance and reputation.

### ***Music***

A study by Larson et al. (1989) examined the influence of music during adolescence. They stated that listening to music is generally associated with peer group values and engagement with music increases during the adolescent years. This study found that teenagers who listened to music most heavily had lower academic success, spent more time with friends, and spent less time with family and in the classroom. However, Southgate and Roscigno (2009) suggested that participation in music (i.e., not just listening to music), inside of or outside of school, can act as a mediator for school achievement. For example, if socioeconomic status negatively impacts school achievement, but the child participates in band, socioeconomic status has less of an effect.

### ***Television and Media***

Several studies have been conducted to explore the role of parent and peer mediation in combating the negative effects of media exposure. Parental mediation can occur in three different forms: (a) active mediation, (b) restrictive mediation, and (c) covieing (Nathanson 1999, 2001). Active mediation occurs when the content of the media is discussed. Restrictive media is when access to particular medium is cut off, and covieing occurs when parents and children watch or engage in media at the same time. In the 1999 study, Nathanson found that parental mediation, particularly restrictive mediation, counteracted negative media effects and enhanced positive

effects. This was especially true for younger adolescents. Coviewing was less successful because pure coviewing communicated parental approval of the media presented and was linked to increased television-induced aggression.

Because time spent with peers supersedes time spent with parents in adolescence, it is important to look at peer influence. Television and other media can be an important aspect in peer relationships and can be the center of discussions. If this is the case, there is an inherent pressure to view the same program as one's friends to fit in and be a part of discussions. To address this, Nathanson (2001) conducted a study on peer mediation. The study required retrospective reporting from undergraduate students back to their years in high school. The results indicated that peer coviewing and discussion of the program was more common than parental coviewing and discussion. Also, teenagers were more likely to perceive that their peers viewed antisocial television as positive if they co-viewed. While watching television with friends was shown to build connection in the relationship, adolescents commonly took cues from others. If a peer was engaged in an antisocial program, the adolescent was more likely to engage, and have a positive view of the show. A more positive attitude toward antisocial television programs was related to more aggression. These effects were found to be more prevalent in male than female participants.

### **Previously Proposed Solutions**

A few solutions have been proposed to decrease negative impacts of media exposure. In one study, researchers investigated the effect of constructive journalism (Kleemans et al., 2017). Constructive journalism requires writers to give possible solutions to problems and foster a positive perspective on the issue being reported by including positive emotions. Writers were encouraged to construct a positive coherent resolution where a difficult event was reported,

creating a more positive ending to increase a sense of closure for the reader. The researchers were also interested in the role of peer discussion around a news report and whether it was helpful for viewers. Therefore, participants in this study were spread across four conditions: (a) constructive-discussion, (b) constructive-no discussion, (c) nonconstructive-discussion, or (d) nonconstructive-no discussion. Participants were shown a news report of a natural disaster, which is inherently negative and led to a decrease in positive emotions for all conditions, but those in the constructive conditions had less of a decrease. The presence of discussion made no difference in the constructive conditions, but those engaged in discussion after the non-constructive presentation experienced more positive emotions than those who did not engage in discussion. This implies that a change in the way journalists report negative events can be beneficial to viewers and that discussion afterward might also help to reduce negative effects.

Another solution that has been implemented to reduce negative effects of media is to provide reporting guidelines. With the discovery of evidence linking suicide in the media to increased suicidal behaviors, specific guidelines for the reporting and depiction of suicide have been created to encourage safer reporting of deaths by suicide. While several sets of guidelines have been developed by various organizations, they all advocate for the same modifications to be made. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's guidelines suggest that coverage of actual suicides be minimized by decreasing the frequency of reports as well as limiting details surrounding the method of suicide and location (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2016). Other suggestions provided by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention include not broadcasting memorials, limiting images of the deceased, not discussing contents of suicide notes, and avoiding explaining causes for suicide in a simplistic manner. Researchers and organizations also suggest that the media can be useful in diminishing these effects by including

numbers for hotlines, providing information about available treatment options, changing their language (e.g., “died by suicide” instead of “committed suicide”), and informing viewers of the warning signs for suicide (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2016; Goldney, 2001; Samaritans, 2017).

### **Summary**

As children reach adolescence, they begin to crave independence, a sense of identity, and increased time with their peer group. While the influence of parents decreases significantly during this time, upbringing and communication can have an effect on the behaviors that adolescents choose to engage in, such as media. Studies have shown that the messages parents communicate about media influence their children’s opinions as well, and can lead to better outcomes later on. Peers can also have an impact on media usage in both positive and negative ways. Adolescents learn what is acceptable and desirable through social learning in their peer groups, so when peers seem to enjoy violent television, this can encourage engagement with violent shows. Overall, media can affect adolescents tremendously, providing a space to explore identity, but also creating a space for magnification of common adolescent issues. Real life self-harm translates to digital self-harm, addiction to substances translates to addiction to technology, and bullying translates to cyberbullying in the world of technology. Typical harmful behaviors of adolescents can now be accessed in novel ways through technology. In contrast, social media allows for adolescents to be more engaged with their peers than was previously possible, and to communicate with others from around the world, helping adolescents to build their identity and relationships.

## **Current Study**

The current study used qualitative methods to learn about adolescents' perceptions of parent and peer influence on their media engagement. To my knowledge, there are no qualitative studies investigating this topic. The study focused on social media, news stories (through various sources), and television and will aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors do adolescents believe influence their media usage?
2. What are adolescents' emotional experiences of the media and what type of media triggers various emotional responses?
3. What are adolescents' perceptions of potentially harmful media practices (e.g., vaguebooking, digital self-harm, passive browsing associated with social comparison)?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were nine student volunteers (seven female and two male) from the eighth-grade class at an urban Massachusetts public school. The age of the participants ranged from 13 to 15 years old. Participants identified as Caucasian (11%), Latino/a (11%), and Black/African American (78%). Participation in this study was completely voluntary and no volunteers were excluded. Compensation was provided in the form of a five-dollar gift card to each participant upon completion of the individual interview.

### **Measure**

#### ***Clinical Interview***

The clinical interview was comprised of a semi structured set of questions (See Appendix A) constructed for this study to answer the specific research questions. The questions were formulated to explore media with which the participant engaged as well as their perceptions of

the media. The questions also examined the participants' perceptions of how their media choices were influenced by others and how media usage affected them in various ways. The interview times varied from 20 to 40 minutes each.

### ***Procedure***

A Massachusetts public school was contacted via email (see Appendix B) for approval to invite students for data collection for this study. Upon approval, a brief, 10-minute presentation (See Appendix C) was made to the entire eighth-grade class explaining the study and its purpose. I provided information about how the data would be collected and how it would be used afterwards. The students were sent home with a packet of information to give their parents, including a consent form with a box to approve or deny audio-recording (see Appendix D), an assent form (see Appendix E), and information on how to contact me regarding any questions or concerns. To encourage honesty from participants, parents were encouraged to respect their child's privacy and avoid questions that ask about the specifics of the interview or information collected. Interested students were asked to return the completed forms to their school guidance counselor within two weeks.

After two weeks, nine completed packets had been received. I was in contact with the school guidance counselor to set up days and times to begin the interviews with participants. The interviews were completed in a private office in the school over the course of two school days. Participants engaged in individual, semi structured interviews that ranged from 20–40 minutes. At the start of the interview, I asked for verbal assent from the participant and reviewed the planned procedures for use of audio-recordings. All interviews except one were audio-recorded, and all were transcribed afterward. I took handwritten notes during the interview of the one student whose legal guardian did not give consent for audio recording.

Immediately following the interview, participants were debriefed about the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions. I reminded the participants about how the results would be analyzed and used.

### *Analysis*

The results of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were transcribed on a computer document. I reviewed the transcriptions twice before beginning the analysis process in order to immerse myself in the data. I then pulled out salient quotes from the transcript. Next, one-word codes were developed to label those quotes and group common ideas together. Then, themes, or one-sentence summaries, were created to encompass the main ideas of the interviews. Following that step, clusters were created by grouping together similar themes. In some instances, participants had unique experiences that did not align with other participants. These unique experiences were encapsulated in their own themes in order to capture all perspectives of the participants and reduce bias. Once clusters were completed, the organized data were audited by someone who was unassociated with the study. The auditor and I came to a consensus regarding the organization of the data.

### **Results**

After completion of thematic analysis on the collected data, themes were organized into eight main clusters. These clusters include (a) introduction to media, (b) consumption of media, (c) influence, (d) privacy and safety, (e) uses of media, (f) potentially harmful media practices, (g) effects on relationships, and (h) impact on emotions. Each cluster is broken down into two to eight themes that illustrate the perspectives of the participants.

## **Introduction to Media**

This cluster includes themes that describe how and when participants were originally exposed to media.

*Technology was introduced between early childhood and adolescence, with social media accounts following after.*

Participants shared about their first electronic device. They indicated that their first device was received between the ages of 3 and 12. Participants noted that their first device was either a tablet, phone, iPod, or game console. One participant stated, “The first device, I used one of the phones where you have the time limit and you have to pay for the time...I was like probably 12. I used it to call my parents when I got home.” Participants reported that they opened their first social media account between the ages of 8 and 13, noting that their first accounts were either Snapchat, Instagram, Music.ly/TikTok, or Kik.

*Social media was more likely to be introduced by peers or influencers, while other media was more likely to be introduced by parents or advertisements.*

When discussing social media, participants reported learning about new social media from peers in school, influencers (social media users with a large number of followers), or advertisements on social media sites. When asked how they would anticipate learning about new media, one participant stated, “I only find out new media from my friends...people would probably be talking about it at school.” When asked the same question, another participant said they would learn about new media from “...my friends... well not even them...but also people on social media...hying it up.” Furthermore, participants stated that they typically learn about new television from advertisements or family members and occasionally peers. For example, one participant said, “I learn about new TV by advertisements. Like when they have trailers about

what’s coming soon. I see what looks interesting to me.” They also reported that they learn about news from their parents and social media or television alerts. One participant shared, “my mom would probably tell me the news, like when Kobe Bryant died...or by talking to my dad really loudly about it.”

### **Consumption of Media**

This cluster describes how much time participants spent exposed to media and their feelings about their own time spent using media. It also includes information about how participants compared their use to others in their lives.

#### ***Time spent on social media varied.***

Some participants reported that they spent more time on social media on the weekends than weekdays. For instance, one participant said:

On weekends, like if I hang out with friends, we’ll do TikTok together so it’ll be around a few hours. If I’m by myself, a lot of times I just watch tv, but it’s probably still around a few hours still.

Another participant reported spending more time during the weekends because during the school week they, “need to make sure I’m done with my homework before I go on [social media] because it takes up hours.” Other participants reported that they spent less time on weekends using media compared to school days as they spent more time with family.

#### ***Many participants felt that they used media too much, while others felt that they had a good balance.***

When asked about their feelings about their media consumption, most participants reported feeling that their use was “unhealthy” or “too much.” One participant stated, “I sometimes feel like [my use] is too much. I’m usually on my phone. Before I had it, I used to go

outside, now I don't anymore." A different participant said, "I think sometimes I use it too much...I'm always on it. If I get a notification and see it, I look at it right away." Another participant highlighted the importance of finding a balance by saying:

Um I feel like sometimes I can use it a little too much because I should like go like outside or hang out with my family. But sometimes I feel like I just need my alone time too. Just to hangout."

***Participants perceived that they used media less than their peers, but more than their parents.***

Participants were also asked to reflect upon the time their peers and parents spent on social media. All the participants reported that they believe their classmates used social media more than they did. Per one participant, "I know people who spend 6 hours per day on their phone. I think it's pretty dangerous because it's a waste of time." Regarding parent use, all but one participant indicated that they used media more than their parents did.

***Time spent on media could have a negative impact on sleep hygiene.***

Most of the participants indicated that the usage of media has affected their sleep as they have frequently stayed up late on social media. Some participants noted that it has been hard to stop engaging with media and that they have lost track of time while using media. One participant said:

I feel like TikTok and Instagram have affected my sleep very much. I didn't sleep until like 4 AM today. I almost slept in my math class. It takes up most of my time. I'm trying to cut down so I can sleep earlier but the content and people and videos can be so addicting.

Another participant reported feeling as if they "get kind of lost in it" at night time.

Along with feeling that media affects their sleep, participants also felt that media affects the sleep of their peers as well. They know this because “a lot of kids sleep during class because they are up late on social media and stuff.” Another participant noted, “so many kids come to school sleep deprived and they’ll complain that they didn’t get enough sleep because of TikTok or like because of this app.” Participants reported that similar to their own experience, they felt that their peers “lose track of time” or “get super into it.”

Two participants in the study reported that they did not feel social media had a positive or negative impact on their sleep hygiene, although both noted that it has negatively impacted them in the past. One of those participants stated:

Social media affected my sleep back when I had an iPad. I don’t know, I would just stay up to text my friends and to keep up with them. Now, I can’t do that anymore. I had to stop and focus on school.

The other reported having a similar experience, noting “I don’t think...it hasn’t affected my sleep anymore.”

### **Influence**

This cluster illustrates the participants’ perceptions regarding how others might or might not have influenced their media use. Participants discussed how parents, peers, family members, and personal choice have played a role in choosing the media with which they have engaged.

*Most adolescents reported parent influence with television and the news, while one participant felt their parents had influence on their social media use.*

When participants were asked about social media, only one participant reported that their parents’ use has influenced their own. They stated, “I think I use [the social media that I use] because like probably because I see my mom post a lot and I want to see what she is posting.”

Although participants did not feel that their parents influenced their social media use, they did feel that parents had an influence on other media they have used, such as the news and television. One participant reported, “my mom and dad watch [the news] too. We always talk about what happens on the news together and how we feel.” Another said, “[my parents] watch the same shows as me too. But uh sometimes I just watch stuff because they are.”

***Some social media was known to be used by older generations.***

Some participants indicated that they have avoided or have not been interested in certain social media because older generations were known to use it. For example, one participant said, “Um I feel like Facebook...I don’t want to say it’s for old people ‘cause like everybody uses it but it’s like I don’t know...I just don’t see myself on the app.” Other participants’ responses supported this statement as well, indicating that they were not interested in using Facebook because “only old people use Facebook now.”

***Other family members also played a role in choice of media.***

Along with peers and parents, some participants reported being influenced to use certain media by other family members including siblings, cousins, and aunts. Some indicated that they were influenced to use the media so that they could connect with family members. For example, one participant said, “my brother also uses [snapchat]. I use it to text back and forth with him.” Another participant indicated that it has helped them stay connected with family members who live in other states or countries.

***Feelings of belonging and ease of communication with peers were a major factor in social media use.***

Participants indicated that social media is used to communicate with their peers and that frequent communication has made them feel a sense of belonging. When asked why they

downloaded Snapchat, one participant said, “I couldn’t really text my friends before that like if I was bored or if I wanted to talk about homework. I got it because all my friends had it.” Another participant shared, “I started using [Snapchat] ‘cause everyone else had it and I wanted in on the action!”

***Adolescents likely would not use social media if their friends did not use it.***

Participants felt that engaging with media helped support peer connection, noting that they likely would not use social media if their peers did not have it. One participant said, “I don’t think I would use any social media...I only use it to talk to people so it’s not that important to me.” When asked what social media they would stop using if no one knew, another participant said, “I probably would stop using Instagram...I wasn’t planning on using that to begin with. Someone just put it on my phone, and I decided to use it.”

***Social media informed what was trendy and popular for adolescents.***

Some participants also felt that social media could be a good way to stay up to date. They expressed that social media has been important for them to be able to keep up with “trends” and “learn what is popular.” Per one participant, “there are a lot of trends to keep up with, like you learn what’s popular...clothing, the things we say, like ‘D.A. is deadass, no way, no effin’ way’, dances...”

***Peers played a role in what television shows were watched.***

Participants reported that they often took recommendations from their peers about television. For example, one participant stated, “Sometimes my friends recommend things to me and if I like it, I’ll stick to it.” Some peers specified that they have been influenced by peers because it gave them a sense of belonging. A participant said:

I have felt like [I need to watch shows that peers watch] before. Like some shows...my

classmates watch it's like Anime and I'm not a big Anime person so like I'll try to watch...or I watch a show called Good Girls with my friends and they always kept pushing me to watch it even though I was busy, so then I didn't really want to watch it anymore, but I eventually did.

***Although others influenced adolescents, personal interest was still important when selecting which media was used.***

While participants acknowledged that they are often influenced by others in their lives, they also highlighted the importance of having a choice when making decisions regarding media. When one participant was asked about how their usage has been influenced by others, they replied, "I don't really watch anything similar to friends. I never really cared what they watch or felt I had to watch what they do. I don't even really ask them what they watch." When a different participant was asked why they felt that they were not influenced by others, they stated:

I'm not that kind of person. I have a different mindset. I'm different because they care too much about what others think. I'm not really like that. If you think a certain way about me, I don't know what to tell you. I'm not going to change so you can be happy.

Another said, "I don't feel like I just use social media based on what my friends or family choose. I like using them for myself."

Some participants noted that their own personal interests were a big influence on the media with which they engaged. For instance, one participant said, "People watch Riverdale, but I wasn't interested so I don't watch that. My friends sometimes want me to watch things, but I don't watch them if I'm not interested." Another participant shared that "I don't use [other social media friends use] because I think it's a waste of time."

## **Privacy and Safety**

*Some parents chose to supervise use of media, while other parents chose not to.*

While some participants reported that their media use was not monitored by their parents, others reported that their parents supervised the amount of time spent on media or which accounts they were allowed to have. Others noted that their parents have frequently checked their phones. Per one participant: “Sometimes, like maybe like 4 times a week my parents will ask to look at my phone. They are always asking what I’m doing on my phone. I think they worry that I’m getting into trouble or bothering people.” Another participant reported:

My mom doesn’t want me on it constantly. She monitors my stuff to make sure it’s good and that I’m not being negative, I’m being positive and I’m being myself and not changing anything. She wants to make sure I stay myself on the apps.

Some participants stated that their parents required them to have privacy settings on their accounts for safety reasons. With other types of media, participants indicated that their parents limited them from watching inappropriate content including content with bad language, sexual content, scary aspects, or shows depicting suicide or homicide.

*Adolescents wanted to keep social media private from their parents.*

Some participants explicitly reported that their parents have had an impact on what media they stayed away from, particularly regarding social media. For example, one participant shared:

Once I went on [Facebook]. I saw my friend suggestions. I saw my mom and dad and I got scared so...no more of that! Everyone is on it. It’s scaring me. I don’t want them to catch me on there.

Another said, “My mom is on Instagram. I was scrolling through her pictures and accidentally

liked it...now she follows me back. She knew I had it but didn't know what my '@' was, so now I'm actually mad at myself."

***Adolescents took safety precautions in response to media.***

During interviews, many participants mentioned safety issues related to using media. Some participants acknowledged that they have been cautious about their safety following news reports of shootings, sexual assaults, and kidnappings. One participant reported, "When people are getting shot...like in parks...I get scared. I stopped going to [name of park] because people got shot. I told my mom I was scared and we don't go there anymore." Participants indicated that they have had discussions with their parents about how to keep safe in light of crime reports on the news. Additionally, participants shared that they have tried to take safety precautions, such as keeping their phone's location setting off and not tagging their locations in photos in order to prevent strangers from tracking them. One participant said:

People these days can...go to your location and they can like harm you...or if you're really popular you have to be like super like cautious of everybody around you and you have to like make sure that nobody seems suspicious because they could always hurt you.

**Uses of Media**

This cluster describes various ways in which media can be used, as indicated by participants.

***Media was used for entertainment purposes.***

The majority of participants indicated that they have used media as a form of entertainment, including viewing and making videos, looking at memes and posting photos, either by themselves or with friends and family. A few participants also noted that they have used media to keep up with their celebrity idols. One participant said, "I just am interested in

drama and famous people news...it's really funny. If it's people I know, I feel bad for them though being in that situation though." Participants felt that watching television and movies was a good form of entertainment as well. Many noted having a wide range of interests regarding genres of television and movies.

***Media could be used for learning.***

Media was also reported to be used for learning purposes. One participant felt that "the point of social media is like learning new things from people around the world, like whether it's like a language like ASL or like Spanish or like maybe to learn new [do-it-yourself] things or new like baking techniques." Another participant stated, "I don't really watch T.V. but I watch YouTube. Just games. Like people playing their games. I just like to experience the stuff and see other people do it to learn from them."

Some participants specified that media has been a good way to stay informed. For some, the news has been a good platform to stay connected to the world around them and learn new ways to keep themselves safe. For instance, one participant said, "But it depends what's on the news. If it's about someone who got killed because of social media, I'll be more cautious." Per another participant, "With the news, I get interested in what's going on in other countries. It depends what's on...I like learning about other cultures and stuff." Others indicated that social media platforms also helped them to stay informed about the world. One participant reported, that despite some of the "inappropriate" content on social media, "I feel like social media does have good stuff to like what's happening in other countries and stuff." When asked what media they would choose to continue using if there was no one influencing their choice, one participant said, "I would use Instagram because like it has so much stuff about what's going on. It's more of a variety like celebrities, new songs, the world. I like seeing what's going on around me."

***Social media helps adolescents stay connected and make new connections.***

Social media can be an easy platform for keeping in contact with others, new and old. As one participant stated, “the good thing [about social media] is that you can see how good other people are doing even if you lose contact.” Another participant shared that social media has helped them gain new connections by saying, “I’ll sometimes talk to people there, people I don’t really know. You can make new friends.” Some participants felt that the point of having social media was to “...help people get together and share experiences,” to “...share what’s happening in the past, present, and future,” “...to interact with people you may not have met before,” and to “...talk to people from far distances.” Participants also noted that social media, “...can sometimes be used to spread awareness. It can have a big impact on people.”

***While adolescents reported watching the news, many felt that their peers did not do the same.***

Participants typically reported that they did not think that their peers watched or read the news. One participant’s perspective was that “I think my classmates are 100% oblivious to everything in this world. They just care about themselves.” Another participant stated, “...classmates just hear about the news from their parents.” One participant indicated that adolescents used social media pages, such as the “shade room” to get celebrity news, but otherwise, “they think the other stuff is boring.”

***Parent uses of social media varied.***

In general, participants did not seem to know a lot about their parents’ use of media. One participant shared, “my dad uses Facebook, but I don’t really know what he does on there or how much he uses it.” Most noted that their parents did have social media accounts, but the use of those accounts seemed to vary. For instance, one participant noted, “my mom uses Instagram, but she doesn’t post,” while another noted, “my mom uses Instagram to post about family, or if

she hangs out with friends, like going out to eat.” Furthermore, when asked about their parents, one participant said, “at home, no one really uses their phones.” In contrast, a different participant stated:

My parents they like sometimes they tell me to get off my phone and they go on their phones so it’s like weird. They spend a lot of time on social media just scrolling through on Facebook to see what’s going on and stuff.

***Different generations tended to interact with media in different ways.***

Participants indicated that media is used in different ways across various generations. For instance, some participants felt that messaging over social media has replaced traditional texting. One stated:

[my parents] mostly use text because when they were younger, they only thing to communicate was sending texts or calling each other. So old people got used to that. That’s all they had back then so that’s what older people use now.

Another participant shared, “[my mom] thinks I’m always on Snap or Instagram or something just taking pictures of myself. I don’t take pictures of myself though? She doesn’t understand.”

Additionally, participants indicated that previously popular social media sites now disinterest younger generations. For instance, when asked about Twitter, one participant replied, “I don’t use Twitter. I just don’t use it...seems less useful.” Another participant stated, “I don’t use Facebook because it’s boring to me and I don’t really like Twitter.” A different participant reported a disinterest in television, reporting, “I just don’t watch a lot of T.V....I am usually doing something else.”

## **Potentially Harmful Media Practices**

This cluster covers participants' perspectives regarding named media practices, such as vaguebooking, use of fake accounts, and passive browsing.

### ***Vaguebooking could be used to get attention or support from others.***

Participants reported being familiar with vaguebooking, noting that it is a common practice on Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. Participants felt that vaguebooking was likely an attempt to get attention from others. Some participants reported that this could be negative as it could have the opposite effect that the poster is intended. For example, one participant noted, "I don't think it works though. I think they get less attention because people stop talking to them." Other participants reported that when people do this, "I'm like, who cares. I mean, I care but it's annoying. I don't get why people do it. I just skip by it. It annoys me." When one participant was asked about vaguebooking, they responded, "I think people...they need to relieve what's on their chest, even if they don't talk specifically about like what it is."

### ***Some adolescents reported negative impacts associated with passive browsing, while others did not.***

When asked about engaging in passive browsing, one participant reported that they have engaged in this behavior and felt that it did not impact them. They stated:

Yeah, sometimes I just scroll. I don't feel anything about it really. I just like looking at different things people post and I uh don't really have things to say all the time. I don't think it's bad or good. Just something people do.

Other participants noted that passive browsing could have negative impacts. One participant said, "I'm always scrolling. It's so addictive...I can't stop!" Another participant reported, "I think it can be addicting. When I'm scrolling, I get everything out of my mind and just focus on

that...my mom will tell me to do something and I'll ignore it. It's just really disrespectful.”

Additionally, a participant stated, “sometimes [passive browsing] isn't good for you because when you need to like study for a test and you're on it all the time...it's a distraction.”

Others indicated that passive browsing was just a way to keep up with what was happening in others' lives without actually having to engage with them or let the person know that they are interested in their life. For instance, one participant stated, “It's like, I don't want to say stalking, but like. If they have an ex, they scroll through and see how that person is doing...and see if they have a new partner”

***Fake accounts might allow people to hide their true selves and could be used in harmful ways.***

Although participants did not indicate that they have engaged in digital self-harm or knew about the practice, the questions tended to spark conversations regarding the use of fake accounts. Participants reported that fake accounts could be used to “spread negativity” through negative comments on others' posts.

Participants also spoke about the dangers of “catfish,” or people that use a fictional online persona, as related to fake accounts. Participants noted that they have seen catfish accounts online. One person stated, “I've seen people make fake accounts for catfishing or fan accounts. People just want others to think they're someone else sometimes...maybe to get your money or to trick people.” Another participant said that people catfish because, “they want to make a connection with somebody, but they aren't going in the right direction. Instead they're like using someone else's face as a mask. Maybe they are worried to share who they really are.”

Participants shared that they have talked to their parents or watched videos in order to learn about ways that they can keep themselves safe from catfish.

## **Effects on Relationships**

This cluster includes themes that illustrate how adolescents perceived the effect of media on their relationships with others.

### ***Social media could have both a negative and positive impact on relationships.***

All of the participants named media as the main way that they have stayed connected with their peer group and noted that they will continue to use it to support these connections. One participant said, “well it could strengthen [relationships] because if you’re apart you can talk to each other more.” A different participant reported:

Sometimes my parents think I use social media too much because like they always want to spend time with me so like my parents will think it’s like a little too much how I use it but for me like it feels right because I want to spend time with my friends too, even if we aren’t together, together.

Participants not only reported using social media to maintain their friendships while apart, but also said that they frequently used social media platforms to communicate about homework assignments and class projects.

Participants reported that media has impacted their relationships with others in negative ways as well. For example, participants shared that if you don’t follow a friend back or add them on social media, friends may get upset with you. Participants also reported that media has been a forum for peers to talk negatively about each other when they get mad as it is easy to hide behind a screen. One example of this is that a participant shared, “On Instagram, someone thought that I wasn’t following them, but I was, but they started talking bad about me.” Another participant reported, “some people think it’s good to say [mean comments] there because they think there’s no emotion to it. it’s easier to say things on social media because you don’t have to see what

people say or feel about it.” Participants also noted that social media has been used as a platform for sharing “drama” and “spread[ing] hate and negativity. One participant felt that “without social media, there wouldn’t be as much drama as there is.” Some participants even indicated that if they were to stop using social media, it would be due to the amount of drama that spreads on those platforms.

Some participants felt that media could affect their relationship quality due to miscommunication or user error. One participant noted that, “sometimes people will like take a text the wrong way because they can’t like see or feel their actual emotions and then they like start to get into a fight.” Another example provided was about a participant who was looking at a crush’s account: “If I’m scrolling through like the old [posts], that scares me. I’ve [accidentally liked an old post] so many times. It’s embarrassing.”

***Bullying could occur more frequently online than in person and could be difficult to escape.***

All participants reported seeing cyberbullying occur through media. Participants reported that cyberbullying often occurred through comments on social media, whether from the actual person or a fake account. One participant reported feeling worried on social media because, “on [my social media], you can just see my posts and leave a comment so you never know what people will say. They can be mean.” Participants noted that cyberbullying usually included topics such as racism, body shaming, name-calling, and discrimination.

Participants reported that bullying happened more frequently online than it did in person because it might be easier to feel more confident behind a device and it might be harder to get caught. For instance, one participant noted seeing the difference between online interactions versus face-to-face interactions:

I feel like it’s like because they’re not face to face so they feel more confident behind the

phone and then I've seen them act normal around them...like 'cause they'll make the fake account and then they'll text that person mean stuff. Then, when they're in person they act completely different.

A different participant noted that if social media did not exist "kids wouldn't get bullied from 1000 miles apart."

When asked about how people could escape cyberbullying, some participants noted that it could be hard to escape. For example, one said, "If you're being bullied, they can just make a new account if you block them and they can keep bullying you." Another participant stated, "I don't get it. It's just mean. I don't really think there's a way to get away from it. everyone has an opinion and they judge you. You should just not take it to heart." On the contrary, others encouraged blocking those accounts, creating a new account yourself, or just ignoring it. One participant said, "I think if you fight back, they come back harder and keep bringing it up."

***Engagement from others on social media felt rewarding.***

The adolescent participants noted that it has been rewarding to get "likes," comments, and followers on social media as those interactions represent popularity and likability. Some participants indicated that a high follower count was one of the most important aspects of having a social media account. As said by one participant, "People just use it to gain followers sometimes and that's all that matters." Aligning with that, another participant reported:

I think sometimes people my age just want something to post on. I think they get happy when they see that have a lot of likes of comments. I think it shows them that people find them funny or whatever. People like their videos so they get happy.

Participants felt that social media could be a good way to exchange positive feedback and relate to their peers. One participant reported feeling "a boost in energy" when receiving positive

feedback, through “likes,” comments, and followers online. Another reported that social media could be a way for people to “say what’s on their mind to help other people or to relieve their own stress.”

### **Impact on Emotions**

This final cluster includes themes that describe how media and emotion could be intertwined.

#### ***Adolescents reported enjoying news and television shows that made them feel positive emotions.***

Participants reported enjoying news stories that involved weather updates or good news, such as criminals being caught or missing persons being found. Although participants had a wide range of interests regarding television shows, they reported that they tended to watch shows that made them feel good. Participants noted feeling “happy” when they viewed this type of content.

#### ***Most adolescents reported experiencing a wide range of negative emotions while viewing media, while others reported neutral emotions.***

Participants reported that they felt distressing emotions when they engaged with television, news, and social media. Some participants indicated that they avoided watching television shows that made them feel upset or scared. Regarding the news, participants reported experiencing a wide range of negative emotions while viewing the news due to racism, terrorism, and crime reports. As for social media, participants noted that others’ posts could sometimes make them feel sad or worried. For example, one participant reported, “sometimes it worries me like when I see things like people who want to die and stuff like that. It worries me even though I don’t know them. It still worries me.” When participants were asked about how use of media has impacted their emotions, one participant reported feeling “neutral” when engaging with various

types of media. Others indicated there might be “inappropriate” or “upsetting” content online, but noted that they were able to “just forget about it” so that it did not impact them.

***Social media could make it easy to make comparisons with other peoples' lives.***

Participants felt that social media could be bad as you might often see people portrayed positively and it could be easy to compare yourself with others, which could impact your self-esteem. One person reported, “I think other social media can just make people feel bad because they’re like always looking at other people and the fun things they’re doing, so they may compare.” Another stated, “You see them living their best life. Sometimes it’s real but not always. Sometimes I wish I had what others have.” Others noted that social media has made them feel bad about the way they look. For instance, one participant gave an example:

Say someone posts a picture of themselves and someone will be like, “you should change this” or “you should change that.” They’ll feel like they have to look better. Sometimes if the person knows that they are beautiful, they may not care. But if people already have low self-esteem this may hit them hard and they may try to change themselves.

Another participant said, “if they see a supermodel and scroll through...like why are you following them...It can make you feel bad seeing those things, so I don’t know why people do that.”

Some participants indicated that social comparison happened frequently when they were engaged in passive browsing. For instance, one participant stated, “I mostly just scroll because I’m bored. I try to only do it a short amount of time and then I’ll stop because it doesn’t really help and can make me feel worse...like seeing other people having fun.” Another said, “I feel like social media can make your self-esteem lower...like there are Instagram models and it

makes you feel like you have to look a certain way...certain body type or race or hair type.” In alignment, another participant said:

They make you feel like you have to have this body type or your hair has to be this shade of red and brown put together... I think it makes people feel like they have to change themselves to fit in, but they really don't.

*Getting positive feedback from others and watching positive videos could lead to happy feelings.*

In general, participants reported feeling happy on social media when they watched positive videos, such as videos that made them laugh, music videos, or inspirational videos. For example, one participant said:

TikTok is the one that mostly makes me feel happy. They post funny videos and sometimes inspirational videos. Like uh, “if someone says you aren't brave, don't listen to them. You are brave.” It can make me feel happier and like better about myself.

Another participant reported feeling as if social media was a “safe space” for them as they could connect with friends and other support systems. As previously mentioned, positive feedback from others could help produce positive emotions as well. For instance, one participant said, “the good things that come out [of social media] is that there is always a group of positive people, positive feedback, positive posts, positive accounts...that just keep things positive.”

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent perspectives regarding media use. Specifically, the aim was to explore the factors that influenced use, the emotional experiences around use, and adolescent perspectives on potentially harmful media practices noted in past research, such as vaguebooking, digital self-harm, and passive browsing.

### **Factors Believed to Influence Use**

One major finding of this study was that participants felt that media helped them to connect with their peer group. This connection seemed to be important even before reaching adolescence as many participants indicated joining social media in late childhood, and noted that they were typically introduced to social media through their peers. Participants shared that being on social media led them to feel a sense of belonging with their peer group and supported communication when they were unable to connect with peers in person. Many acknowledged joining social media because of their peers and noted that they would continue to use the social media that they use in order to support these peer relationships. The participants' reports seemed to align well with the study by Valkenburg et al. (2017), that reported that when contact increased with peers, stronger relationships developed. Connecting via social media seemed to allow participants more opportunity to have shared experiences with their friends and peers, further strengthening those relationships. Participants also reported that they would likely not use social media if their friends did not use it. This seems to support the need-to-belong theory in that adolescents might use social media to feel accepted by peers and to avoid being rejected or left out (King et al., 2017). By not participating in social media, adolescents might lose a chance to stay up to date with their peers.

Additionally, peers seemed to have more influence with social media compared to other forms of media. This might be because social media supports communication between people in a way that television or the news does not. For instance, with social media, people are able to experience a two-way exchange in the moment through messaging, sharing memes or photos, or other means. Sharing a connection about what is viewed on the television or the news might be more delayed as adolescents are likely watching separately from peers and discussing the content

later. This might also explain why the concept of personal choice was common in discussions about television or the news, but less common when participants talked about what social media they chose to use. Watching the same shows as peers seemed to have less of an impact on connection than participating in the same social media as peers.

Although participants felt that their peers did not have as much of an influence on television and the news in comparison to their influence on social media, participants did still report some level of influence. For example, some participants stated that they have watched television shows that they would not typically be interested in so that they could relate more to their friends and not feel left out of discussions that occur in school. This is consistent with the findings of Nathanson (2001), which stated that peers have an influence on television because adolescents feel that they need to be able to discuss shows with their peers. On the contrary, peers did not seem to have much of an influence on what the participants viewed on the news. This might have been due to perceived lack of interest in the news among their peers, leading participants to feel less external pressure to watch it. Adolescents might perceive that watching the news is not common for people in their age group and therefore, chose not to discuss it with peers due to fear of judgment or rejection. This again aligns with the need-to-belong theory in that adolescents might avoid feeling rejected by peers by not showing interest in something that might be perceived as an atypical interest for their age group (King et al., 2017).

Participants often reported that they felt that they, and their peers, used social media too frequently. Thinking about the Sullivan-Piaget thesis, time spent on social media by participants and their peers likely go hand-in-hand. For instance, the thesis emphasizes the importance of mutuality and reciprocation in peer relationships as well as the co-construction of group norms (as cited by Nathanson, 2001). If adolescents perceive their peers to use social media more often

than they use it themselves, they might feel pressure to spend more time on social media to fit in with perceived norms and engage in reciprocity. This desire to have a mutual experience might make it difficult for adolescents to decrease time spent on social media even if they feel they are using it too much.

When looking at parent influence, parents seemed to have less of an influence on social media use, but more of an influence on other media, compared to peers. This finding seemed to be in contradiction with Nathanson's (2001) finding that peers have more influence on television than parents. Many participants stated that they engaged in coviewing of television and the news with their parents. This seemed to be one way that adolescents spent time with their parents that did not involve peers. One speculation for this might be that television and the news allow adolescents to connect with their parents using media without giving up privacy, as they would if they connected over social media. Social media use requires more disclosure and participation than television or the news, leading people to share more about themselves online. By connecting with parents through other forms of media instead, adolescents might be able to maintain wanted privacy on social media. Furthermore, some participants expressed adoption of similar viewpoints to their parents (i.e., politics) as a result of coviewing the news together and discussing the content. Participants also acknowledged that their parents sometimes mediated by placing restrictions on television, such as shows that portrayed violence or suicide. Participants seemed to have little interest in viewing these types of shows as a result, evidenced by reports of wanting to only watch shows that make them feel positive emotions.

When considering social media, most participants felt that their parents had no influence on their use. Some participants even reported that they actively avoided specific social media used by their parents or older generations in order to maintain privacy. This finding might

support the idea that adolescents need time for identity exploration independent of their parents. This could be accomplished by avoiding social media sites that are popular for older generations or by creating usernames that might be unknown to their parents. Also, adolescents reported using social media in ways that were unfamiliar to other generations, such as using Snap Chat in place of traditional texting apps to communicate. These new ways of using technology, that might be unknown or less widely used by parents, could further assist adolescents with gaining independence and privacy.

Another finding was that parents seemed to influence what media were used through supervision. All participants reported that their parents engaged in some form of supervision of their media use. This tended to be through either restrictive mediation (i.e., limiting screen time, not allowing use of particular apps) or coviewing mediation (i.e., “friending” or “following” their adolescents on social media). Participants seemed to feel that their parents were supervising in order to keep them safe rather than to intrude on their privacy. The participants also seemed to take in their parents’ concerns regarding safety while using media and apply them even when their parents were not supervising, supporting the idea that parents continue to have an influence on their adolescent children as suggested by Nathanson (2001).

### **Emotional Experiences and Responses**

Results found that participants experienced a variety of emotional responses to the news. Some participants reported happiness around reports that portrayed good news, such as criminals being caught. Some also felt that being able to learn about events going on across the world brought them happiness and was interesting to them. On the contrary, participants also reported feeling distress, worry, or fear when viewing the news related to discrimination and violence. Some participants reported that the news helped them learn ways that they could keep

themselves safe and encouraged them to be more cautious in the world. These findings align with Kleemans et al. (2017) who reported that the news could help viewers establish opinions about the world and make decisions regarding their own behaviors based upon what they are viewing.

When asked about emotional responses to television, most participants reported watching television shows that led them to experience positive emotions, such as happiness, and noted that television has been a source of entertainment for them. Some participants openly reported that they avoided watching television shows that made them feel upset or scared. Participants seemed to be able to control their daily emotional experiences by choosing media that would make them feel a certain way. The way that adolescents select media that can influence their emotions has not been discussed in previous literature.

Furthermore, participants had a variety of emotional responses to social media. Much like with television, participants noted using social media as a form of entertainment for watching videos that they find online or that others send to them. Participants reported watching videos that made them feel happy or inspired, such as comedy or videos with positive messages. Social media also increased positive emotions through positive feedback from others, in the forms of “likes,” comments, and followers. Consistent with Valkenburg et al. (2017), participants noted that positive feedback from peers increased their self-esteem and feelings of connection with their peers. “Likes,” comments, and followers seemed to be an easy way for adolescents to gauge how well they are fitting in with their peer group and to what extent others approved of and accepted them. Participants also reported engaging in these behaviors to communicate approval and acceptance to their peers in return. This again supports the Sullivan-Piaget Thesis regarding reciprocity in peer relationships as well as co-construction of group norms (as cited by Nathanson, 2001).

On the contrary, other findings suggested that social media could lead to negative emotions as well. One of the main areas of distress seemed to be social comparison, as mentioned by Weinstein (2007), that occurs when using social media. In some cases, participants reported engaging in upwards comparison with others. This led them to feel worse about themselves as they viewed others having seemingly more fun, engagement, or beauty. Participants also reported engaging in downward comparison when they saw others reporting about the bad things in their lives. This also seemed to make participants feel negative emotions as they were able to empathize with the person posting instead of using it as a chance to feel better about themselves. This result indicated that both upwards and downwards social comparison could impact the viewers' emotional experience in a negative way. As Weinstein suggested, adolescents might be able to decrease the negative effects of social comparison by learning ways to be critical of the portrayal of others on social media platforms.

Furthermore, results showed encountering cyberbullying, "trolling," or "negative energy" via social media also contributed to the presence of negative emotions, such as distress. This distress seemed to be present even if the negativity was towards another person. One new finding from this study was that participants reported being able to "forget about" upsetting content viewed online. While adolescents might be able to ignore content that they deemed distressing by just scrolling by it, this might also speak to possible desensitization in response to content that is common, readily available, and is encountered frequently while online.

### **Perception of Potentially Harmful Media Practices**

#### ***Vaguebooking***

The findings of this current study showed that vaguebooking continues to be a common practice for adolescents over social media. In agreement with the findings of Berryman et al.

(2017), participants felt that those who engaged in this practice were doing so for attention or because they were searching for social support. Some participants noted that they think that engaging in this practice has the opposite effect that the person posting was intending, as people might be put off or annoyed by the posts. If adolescents engaged in vaguebooking were doing so due to mental health issues, such as loneliness or depression, as suggested by Berryman et al., these findings could suggest that this practice could further isolate them from their peer group. Those engaging in vaguebooking would likely benefit from reaching out for support in more direct ways. Engagement in vaguebooking might be something that parents and others should monitor in order to combat the potentially negative impacts.

### ***Digital Self-Harm***

While participants did not report engaging in or seeing others engage in digital self-harm, this led to a discussion about the use of fake profiles for other purposes, such as cyberbullying or catfishing. Many felt that by creating a fake profile, perpetrators were able to hide their true selves, increasing their brazenness to bully or catfish. This perception is supported by Young et al. (2017) who noted that the internet could make it easy for perpetrators to cyberbully others, hide behind their screen, and be desensitized to victims' reactions. Also, the current study's participants suggested that it might not be easy for victims to escape cyberbullying or catfishing as blocking one account would not prevent new accounts from being created by the perpetrator. These findings suggest that more might need to be done to promote safety online for users whether through increased supervision from parents or improved resources for help on social media sites.

### *Passive Browsing*

Results of this study indicated that passive browsing was a very common social media practice. While some felt that it did not have an impact on them, many reported that passive browsing had affected them in negative ways, as supported by Patchin and Hinduja (2017). For one, participants noted staying up late to scroll on social media sites and reported that their peers engaged in this behavior as well. Aside from impacting sleep hygiene, participants also noted that this impacted academic engagement for themselves and their peers. For some, this meant procrastinating on homework or not studying enough for a test. For others, this meant falling asleep during the school day due to lack of sleep. This finding regarding the impact of passive browsing on sleep and academics is supported by research (Savci & Aysan, 2017).

Participants also labeled passive browsing as “addictive” and “distracting,” which is supported by research by Savci & Aysan (2017). Participants noted that sometimes it was difficult to stop browsing even if they were aware of the negative impact on their grades or there were negative repercussions from their parents. Thus, time spent on passive browsing could be difficult to control use even when there are clear, negative consequences (Turel & Osatuvi, 2017). Additionally, participants noted that they had engaged in social comparison while passive browsing, which, as previously mentioned, impacted their self-esteem. Another finding was that passive browsing could be used to “stalk” or keep up with other peoples’ lives without the other person knowing. The purpose of this seemed to be to keep connections going even after relationships had ended and ease the adolescent’s curiosity about how the other person was spending their time or with whom that person was associating. Overall, passive browsing seemed to have more negative impacts than positive ones for the participants of this study, suggesting that limiting this media practice might be beneficial for adolescents.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study had several limitations that could be improved or expanded upon in future research. For one, the data represented opinions from a small sample of adolescents who attended the same public high school and were in the same grade. It is possible that older adolescents may not hold the same views regarding parental monitoring as the participants in my sample. Additionally, the majority of the participants were female. These factors limited the ability to generalize to adolescents as a whole. Future research in this area should aim to gather a more heterogeneous sample for better representation and generalization. Comparing the experiences of different genders, ages, and races might help us understand more about how different groups view and experience media as well as how media use may evolve over time.

Furthermore, although interviews allowed for the gathering of rich information, an anonymous study might have had different findings as participants might have been more comfortable about sharing their experiences if data was not collected face-to-face. Results may also have been impacted because of an adult conducting the interview

A final noted limitation is that I did not collect information regarding mental health or self-esteem. To better understand the implications of this study, it might be interesting to collect this type of information from participants to see if perceptions about media are associated with different levels of self-esteem, anxiety, depression symptoms, or other phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

Findings of this study suggest that media is important for maintaining and building upon peer relationships. Although adolescents can still communicate in person,<sup>1</sup> connecting through

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<sup>1</sup> Data for this research study were collected at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, prior to stay-at-home orders that prevented in-person contact. Future studies looking at the impact of the pandemic on media would be interesting.

media creates additional opportunities for peer connection and belonging. Media also seemed to support identity exploration. Despite being influenced by those around them, adolescents noted being able to make their own decisions about what social media accounts they chose to have and who had access to viewing those accounts. Adolescents also acknowledged the importance of personal interest in viewing other forms of media, such as television and the news. Additionally, adolescents were aware of the potential negative impacts of media, and used this knowledge to make thoughtful decisions regarding their media use.

This might suggest that efforts to mitigate the negative effects of media use need to go beyond prevention efforts that only discuss the negative consequences of media. Adolescents may instead benefit more from skill-based education to support time management and helping them to balance their life online and offline. Furthermore, although parents seemed to have less of an impact on social media compared to peers, they continued to impact media use for adolescents. Parents seemed to play an active role in supervising media, particularly through covieing and restrictive mediation methods. Findings suggested that supervision from parents might be important in limiting the negative effects of potentially harmful media practices, such as vaguebooking and passive browsing. While adults might sometimes find it difficult to support or fully understand adolescent immersion in media, overly restrictive family policies might not be ideal. Rather a more balanced approach that includes a moderate level of monitoring and restrictions, along with ongoing discussions and open communication, might minimize the negative and maximize the positive impacts of social media. It seems clear, based on the results of this study, that media holds high importance to this age group. Media not only keeps

adolescents entertained and up to date with the latest trends, it also supports peer connection, communication, and identity exploration, all of which are important for social development and individual growth.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

*Introduction:* As you know, this study is about your use of media. For the purpose of this interview we will assume that “Media” includes social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, and television shows, including the news.

Let’s start with a media timeline. Starting as far back as you can remember, tell me about how media was involved in your life.

*Follow up questions:*

What was your first electronic?

What was your first social media account?

Was your media use supervised?

What social media sites do you use now? How do you use them/What is their purpose in your life?

*Follow up:* What social media do you use to connect with peers?

Is there social media that you use that you would prefer not to use? Why?

What social media sites make you feel happy? Anxious/worried? Depressed?

*Follow up:* What is it on the site that makes you feel that way?

How many hours per day do you use social media? Is this too much, too little, or, just right? How does this compare to your peers? Parents?

What do your parents think about your social media use? (what is used, how frequently, pros/cons)

Do you ever make vague posts on social media? (will provide example) Do your peers ever do this? Why do people make those posts, in your opinion?

Have you ever created a fake profile in order to comment on your own page and make it appear as though you are being bullied? Peers?

*Follow up:* What was the goal of this?

Do you ever just scroll through social media, not posting or liking anything? How does this make you feel? What is the benefit of doing this?

What television shows do you watch?

How do you choose what shows you watch?

*Follow up:* What do you think influences you to watch it?

Are there shows you feel like you need to watch in order to fit in with your friends?

What shows make you happy? Anxious/worried? Depressed? Scared?

What do your friends watch that you don’t? Why?

Are there shows your parents don’t approve of you watching?

If no one else in the world knew what media you used, what would you still choose to use?

What do you think influences your choices in media?

What do you think influences the type of media your peers use?

How do you learn about new social media? New television?

Has use of media ever affected your sleep? Relationships?

## Appendix B

### School Contact Letter

Dear [ Principal or Superintendent],

My name is April Fiacco and I am a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology attending Antioch University New England. As part of the requirements for my degree, I am completing a dissertation entitled, *Adolescent Perspectives on Media Use*. The study was approved by the Antioch University Institutional Review Board and addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What factors do adolescents believe influence their media usage?
- (2) What are adolescents' emotional experiences of the media and what type of media triggers various emotional responses?
- (3) What are adolescents' perceptions of potentially harmful media practices (e.g., vaguebooking, digital self-harm, passive browsing associated with social comparison)?

I believe that this study will provide information that would be helpful for parents, teachers, and students to further understand adolescent media use. I am contacting you to ask if you would be open to me interviewing some of your middle school students in the late Fall about their media use (approximately eight students). I would first seek parent consent and student assent. I would like to recruit participants by giving a 10-minute presentation in 2 or 3 middle school classrooms about the purpose of my study and what I hope to learn. They will be provided with packets including this information as well as consent and assent forms to be signed by themselves and parents, if they choose to participate. I will clearly communicate that this study will not affect their grades or anything related to school. Students who choose to participate would return the packets to school within one week, where I would pick them up. From there, I would set up individual interviews with those students during the school day or during another convenient time. For this, I would request an available space, within the school.

I am happy to follow up by contacting you over the phone to answer any questions you may have and to learn if you are willing to let me work with your students. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

April Fiacco, MS

Doctoral Candidate, Clinical Psychology

Antioch University New England

## Appendix C

### Presentation Script

Hi everyone! I wanted to come in and introduce myself to you all because I am looking for kids to be in my research study. I am currently in graduate school to become a child psychologist and have to do a final research project, or dissertation, in order to finish my degree.

My study involves interviewing a handful of students about their use of different types of media such as social media and television, including the news. I want to learn more about what media you use, how your friends or families may help influence what media you use, and in general your thoughts and feelings about it. The interviews will be recorded, but following the interview, I will type up the conversation. A number will take the place of your name so that your identity is hidden and the recording will be deleted as soon as I type it up. The information learned in the interviews will be combined together in my final paper, and again, no one will know the names or any other information about you aside from what you say in the interview.

You do not have to participate in the study, but if you want to, it would be helpful for me. Whether you participate or not, this will not affect anything related to school, such as your grades. It is entirely up to you. Each person who participates will receive a \$5 gift card to Dunkin' Donuts. One other important thing for you to know is that, although what you say will be kept private, I am required to contact your parent/guardian if anything comes up in the interview about hurting yourself or other people. My questions will not ask you about this, but if you happen to bring it up, I have to say something to an adult.

If you choose to participate, I have provided you all with packets that include an assent form, which is a form that you will read and sign to give permission to have you in my study. It also includes a consent form, which your parent or guardian will read and sign to give permission for you to be in my study. The forms cover the information I have provided to you and more. I will need both forms signed in order for you to participate. Once signed, you can return them to your teacher sealed in the envelope provided. I will be back to collect the packets in one week. Are there any questions I can answer?

## **Appendix D**

### **Parent/Guardian Informed Consent**

My name is April Fiacco and I am a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology attending Antioch University New England. As part of my school requirements, I am conducting a study will explore adolescents' perspectives on media use.

I am writing to ask for your permission for your child to participate in this research study. This will involve my talking with your middle school student for about 30 minutes. I will interview your child at the school during or after the school day. Interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed, which will each be labeled with a participant number instead of your child's name. Your child will be asked to answer questions related to their personal media use, who influences that use, and the effects of media use on him or her.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child's involvement in this study. That is, there no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life.

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to you or your child by participating in this study. The information provided by this study will contribute to knowledge that may help teachers, parents, and therapists understand media use in adolescents.

#### **Payment for participation**

In exchange for participation in my study, each child who chooses to participate be compensated with a \$5 gift card to Dunkin' Donuts.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information your child provides will be kept private. While parents/guardians have a right to access the information their child provides, it is recommended that your child is given privacy to assure honesty during the interview. It is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, I am not seeking this type of information in our study.

The results of this research will be presented for the researcher's doctoral dissertation orals. Your child will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your child's identity. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information (including audio recordings) that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

#### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. He/she is free to choose not to participate. Should you and your child choose to participate, he/she can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

#### **Questions about the Study**

This study was approved by the IRB. If you have questions or concerns about your child's participation in this study, or you would like to receive a summary of the results, please contact me or my faculty advisor:

**Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of my child as a participant in this study. I consent for my child to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form.

I give consent for my child to be audio recorded during their interview. (parent's initial)

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Name of Child (Printed)

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Name of Parent/Guardian (Printed)

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Date

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Name of Parent/Guardian (Signed)

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Date

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Name of Researcher (Signed)

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Date

## Appendix E

### Assent Form

My name is April. I work with parents and children but I am also a student. Right now, I am trying to learn more about how kids are affected by media (such as the news, Facebook, television, etc.)

If you agree, you will then sit in a 30-minute interview with me where I will ask you questions to help me with my research. We can do the interview during school, with your teacher's permission, or after school, if you prefer. The interview may be audio recorded to help me remember everything that was said. As soon as we are done, I will listen to the recording and write it all down on a piece of paper that will not have your name on it. Then, I will erase the recording. No one else except me and the teacher at my school will see what you said. Through your help, I am hoping to understand more about the media that kids use as well as how their classmates and parents influence what media they use.

If you agree to help me with this project, your teacher and classmates won't know what you have said. Also, if you decide to participate or if you decide to say "no," your choice will not affect your grades or anything related to school.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide if you want to be in my study or not. I will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to be in this study, but even if your parents say "yes," you can still say "no" and decide not to be in the study.

If you don't want to be in my study, you don't have to be in it. Remember, being in the study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to be in the study. If you decide to stop after we begin, that's okay, too.

Please ask me any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can email me or ask your parent or guardian to email me.

I agree to be in the study about kids and media use.

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Name (printed)

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Name (signed)

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Date