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



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## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Early adolescents as public relations publics

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

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

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

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

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

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