



People, places, and questions: An investigation of the everyday life information-seeking behaviors of urban young adults

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Abstract

This article presents preliminary findings from a research grant on the everyday life information-seeking (ELIS) behaviors of urban young adults. Twenty-seven teens aged 14 through 17 participated in the study. Qualitative data were gathered using written activity logs and semi-structured group interviews. A typology of urban teens' preferred ELIS sources, media types, and query topics is presented. The typology shows friends and family as preferred ELIS sources, cell phones as the preferred method of mediated communication, and schoolwork, time-related queries, and social life as the most common and most significant areas of ELIS. The results indicate a heavy preference for people as information sources and that urban teens hold generally unfavorable views of libraries and librarians. The conclusion lists questions that information practitioners should consider when designing programs and services for urban teens and calls for researchers to consider this often-ignored segment of the population as potential study participants.

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An understanding of human information behavior is fundamental to the provision of high-quality library service. Once librarians and other designers of information services understand people's natural information-seeking behaviors and preferences, they might mold their

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services and resources to conform to these patterns, thereby better serving users' needs. Unfortunately, little user-centered research examining young adults' basic information-seeking behaviors and preferences exists (Shenton & Dixon, 2004). As a result, many information sources and services lack strong appeal for youth (Urban Libraries Council, 2001).

As limited as the research representing the young adult perspective is, there is even less research focusing specifically on urban young adults and their information use. The Urban Libraries Council's (2001) initiative has been the most significant user-centered examination of urban young adults' library use patterns. It concluded that urban youth view the public library as an "uncool" and uninviting place.

1. Problem statement

In this climate, it is time to investigate whether their view merely presents an image problem, or if there is a deeper problem of libraries' not meeting the full range of urban young adults' information needs, from school needs to health needs to social needs. In order to investigate these issues, the authors undertook a study of the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) of urban young adults.^{1,2} It asked urban teens to describe their everyday life information-seeking patterns, which may or may not include library use. Specifically, it addressed the following three research questions:

1. What types of information do urban young adults seek in their everyday lives?
2. What information media do urban youth favor?
3. What people sources do urban young adults favor when seeking everyday life information?

The study results have direct relevance to the practice of librarianship. Knowledge of the common reasons why young adults seek information and the types of information they seek in their everyday lives can impact collection development, reference services, programming, and budget allotment practices. For instance, if this study were to show that young adults commonly seek sex education information and are unsuccessful in finding the information they need, librarians would know to increase the provision of related resources and services. And armed with an understanding of young adults' source/channel preferences, librarians would be better able to match their collections to young adults' information-seeking practices.

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² This project, for which data collection has been completed and data analysis is currently underway, is a qualitative research study. As is common in qualitative research, multiple forms of data have been collected to serve as data triangulation and construct validation. For this preliminary report of the findings, only a portion of the collected data will be analyzed and discussed because of the large size of the overall body of data and since analysis of the remaining data is ongoing.

The researchers used a number of past examinations of youth information seeking as points of comparison for the findings, including [Latrobe and Havener \(1997\)](#), [Minudri \(1974\)](#), [Poston-Anderson and Edwards \(1993\)](#), [Shenton and Dixon \(2003\)](#), and [Walter \(1994\)](#). However, this study is unique in its focus on urban teens and in its use of a wide variety of data collection methods.

2. Literature review

Most research into human information seeking has focused on information seeking for work, research, or school purposes. However, much of the human effort expended when seeking information is for non-work-related, non-research-related, or non-school-related purposes. For example, the average person might turn on the radio in the morning to hear the weather forecast, peruse the newspaper headlines while eating breakfast, ask his or her spouse what time he or she expects to return home from work that evening, search the Internet during lunch for information relating to a personal health problem, and so on throughout the day. Information of this type, termed “everyday life information-seeking” (e.g., [Savolainen, 1995](#); [Spink & Cole, 2001a](#)), represents a relatively new research focus within the LIS research community.

[Savolainen \(1995\)](#), whose work has served as a framework for much of the existing ELIS research, suggested that ELIS habits and attitudes allow people to use their personal values and beliefs to make meaningful life choices. He introduced the concepts of “way of life” and “mastery of life” for understanding the role of information-seeking in individuals’ daily problem-solving activities. “Way of life” is defined as “the order of things” (p. 262), or the preferences given to life activities such as household tasks and hobbies. “Mastery of life,” which can be cognitive or affective, and optimistic or pessimistic, serves to keep things in order. That is, it is “a general preparedness to approach everyday problems in certain ways in accordance with one’s values” (p. 264).

[Savolainen \(1995\)](#) did not exclude work-related information seeking from the study of ELIS, pointing out that everyday life and work are sometimes inseparable. For the current study, some school-related information seeking must be considered since the study participants considered school to be so central to their social lives. Similarly, [Given’s \(2002\)](#) study of mature Canadian undergraduates’ ELIS showed their everyday and academic lives to be inextricably tied.

Other ELIS studies have included [Carey, McKechnie, and McKenzie’s \(2001\)](#) work, which stressed the importance of gaining participant trust in order to procure rich, authentic ELIS data. To maximize participant trust for the current study, the researchers chose to study young adults in settings that already formed a part of their daily lives.

Most ELIS studies have found human sources of information to dominate ELIS patterns. For example, [Julien and Michels \(2000\)](#) used qualitative methods to show that 57% of the time, their adult study participants turned first to human sources when seeking everyday life information. They turned first to print sources in 17% of their information-seeking cases, and first to digital sources in only 9% of the cases.

More recently, [McKenzie \(2003\)](#) proposed a social-interaction-based ELIS model, suggesting that social relationships and social contexts can be more important in ELIS source selection and information-seeking patterns than cognitive factors. In a similar fashion, the current project is studying young adults' ELIS behaviors as they are framed within social contexts, working within the assumption that teens' social lives are central to their everyday life information-seeking choices.

[Spink and Cole \(2001b\)](#) stressed the need for "first, a deeper understanding of everyday life information-seeking (ELIS) from diverse cultural and social situation perspectives" (p. 304). There is an especially strong need for ELIS studies relating to young adults since so little work has been done in this area. More than 10 years ago, [Poston-Anderson and Edwards \(1993\)](#) studied the ELIS needs of 13- and 14-year-old girls in Australia. They found girls to need three major types of information: facts, interpretations, and understandings. Unfortunately, the study participants generally felt that school and public libraries could do little to help them solve their everyday problems, especially relationship-related questions. The researchers concluded that "The challenge for library media specialists is that these girls, and young people in general, do not perceive that the library media center has a major role to play in dealing with the information needs that relate to life concerns" (pp. 29–30).

[Shenton and Dixon \(2003\)](#) created a typology of children's and teens' informational needs categories. The typology included eleven major types of information that teens need: advice, personal information, affective support, empathetic understanding, support for skill development, school-related subject information, inter-driven information, consumer information, self-development information, reinterpretations and supplementations of information, and verificational information.

3. Methodology

Twenty-seven Philadelphia young adults aged 14 through 17 participated in the study on a volunteer basis and were paid modest compensation as encouragement to complete the study. Twenty-five were African-American; one was Asian-American; and one was Caucasian. They represented two different populations: members of the Free Library of Philadelphia's Teen Leadership Program and participants in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Philadelphia after school programs. Established relationships are important in gathering honest, useful data about information behavior ([Carey et al., 2001](#)). The teens involved with both of these organizations had positive relationships with the adults who run the programs, enabling researcher access and increasing the likelihood of gathering authentic data.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Philadelphia work to inspire and empower all young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens. Serving youth between the ages of 6 and 18, the Clubs offer Philadelphia youth opportunities in the arts, education and career development, health and life skills, character and leadership, and sports. Eleven Boys and Girls Clubs students completed the study.

The Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) serves an urban population of 1.5 million people with a Central Branch, 50 branches, and three regional sites, an annual budget of US\$37.2 million, and an annual circulation of 6.6 million materials. The users are slightly over 60% minority (primarily African-American, Asian, and Hispanic). FLP is an acknowledged leader and role model for other urban libraries in the United States and is known for developing innovative services to remain responsive to the needs of the citizens of Philadelphia. Sixteen young adult employees of FLP completed the study.

3.1. Data collection

Five data collection methods were employed: surveys, written activity logs, audio journals, photographic tours, and group interviews. The variant contexts that framed these multiple data collection methods resulted in a fuller picture of the participants' behaviors and life views. This article, however, focuses on the data gathered from the written activity logs and group interviews. The guide used in the interviews was based on an analysis of a subset of the written activity logs.³

3.2. Written activity logs

Participants were given an activity log in which they recorded questions that arose for them each day and indicated where they looked for information. The participants were instructed to complete at least one written activity log sheet each day for the period of 1 week.⁴ The number of questions logged per week ranged from a low of 7 (a mean of 1.0 per day) to a high of 103 (a mean of 14.7 per day), with the majority of the participants' entries falling into the 18–42 per week range (a mean ranging from 2.5 to 6 per day). Questions ranged from simple informational questions such as "What time is it?" to deeper philosophical questions such as, "Why does death come so suddenly?"

3.3. Group interviews

Group interviews are an underused tool in social science research (Frey & Fontana, 1991). They entail the simultaneous interviewing of multiple participants and can be highly structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the degree of control the interviewers wish to place on the direction of the interview discussions. The interviewers worked from a prepared interview guide to conduct semi-structured group interviews, asking probe questions when appropriate. The researchers conducted a total of four group interviews: two with the Boys and Girls Club participants and two with the Free Library of Philadelphia participants. The interview groups included seven, four, six, and ten members.

³ For a detailed description of each method of data collection used in the study, see the project Web site, <http://www.cis.drexel.edu/tmls/>.

⁴ Past research has proven a 1-week period to be optimal period for journal-based data collection (Zimmerman & Wider, 1977). Few research participants are willing to cooperate for longer periods; shorter periods generally yield too little data to form complete pictures of participants' behaviors.

An initial coding scheme was derived from analysis of the Boys and Girls Club participants’ written activity logs to serve as a basis for developing the interview guide. Bates (2004) has suggested that narrative and episodic interviews are particularly useful in studying ELIS behavior. In addition to evaluating this initial coding scheme, each participant was also asked to discuss in detail one specific ELIS incident that stood out in his/her mind as either unusually important or unusually interesting. The participants were also encouraged to discuss any other related topics that they deemed significant.

4. Data analysis

Data analysis took the form of “iterative pattern coding” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In iterative pattern coding, repeated readings of the transcribed data, while searching for recognizable data patterns and tying pieces of data to deeper theoretical considerations, results in the creation of a coding scheme for analysis. This process is similar to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the most common method for analyzing qualitative data.

The researchers used QSR NVivo 2 (QSR International, 2002) software to assist with data analysis. NVivo is a software program that facilitates data manipulation and assists in moving pieces of raw data into thematic groupings. The use of such a software program is particularly helpful when dealing with large data sets, as manual separation of the data and regrouping into themes can be cumbersome.⁵

Each of the two parts of an entry on a log sheet (“Question” and “Where I looked for the Answer”) served as a single data unit. For example, one participant entry read:

QUESTION	WHERE I LOOKED FOR THE ANSWER
What day will the SAT test be given	High School counselor

This single activity represents two units of data, “What day will the SAT test be given” and “High school counselor.” The combined logs from the 11 Boys and Girls Club participants totaled 980 units of raw data. Table 1 presents preliminary data analysis of the Boys and Girls Club participants’ written log data, which resulted in the initial coding scheme.

The initial coding scheme included three major categories: *places/sources of information*, *people consulted*, and *types of questions*.⁶ Under places/sources of information, television, school, telephone, Internet/Web, and newspapers appear as the most frequent sources for participant information gathering.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the benefits of qualitative data analysis software, see Agosto (2002).

⁶ Words in italics represent category code names.

Table 1
Initial Coding Scheme

1	Places/sources of information (304)
1.1	Television (62)
1.2	School (41)
1.3	Telephone (32)
1.4	Internet/Web (31)
1.5	Newspaper (25)
1.6	Other printed materials (19)
1.7	School material (17)
1.8	Magazine (13)
1.9	Boys and Girls Club (12)
1.10	Phonebook (10)
1.11	Computer (not Internet/Web) (10)
1.12	Books (10)
1.13	Library (9)
1.14	Product packaging (8)
1.15	Radio (5)
2	People consulted (179)
2.1	Friends (46)
2.2	Teacher/school employees (42)
2.3	Parents (37)
2.4	Siblings (21)
2.5	Cousin (8)
2.6	Boys and Girls Club employee (8)
2.7	Librarian (7)
2.8	Sports coach (5)
2.9	Telephone operator (3)
2.10	Store clerk (2)
3	Types of questions (497)
3.1	School homework questions (85)
3.2	Time of day/date of an event (80)
3.3	Meal selection (62)
3.4	Shopping/product information (53)
3.5	Current events/history (39)
3.6	Clothing selection (33)
3.7	Self-help information (29)
3.8	Television schedule (27)
3.9	Weather (27)
3.10	Traffic/transportation (22)
3.11	School activity (14)
3.12	Leisure activity (10)
3.13	Job information (8)
3.14	Information on specific people (8)

Libraries appears near the bottom of the list as the thirteenth most frequently used. Under people consulted, friends, teachers/school employees, parents, and siblings were by far the most frequently consulted. Librarian appeared as the seventh most frequent. The types of questions varied more widely, with school questions (homework related),

the time of day/date of an event, meal selection, and shopping/product information topping the list.

5. Results

In qualitative research, the number of occurrences of an incident is not as significant as the context surrounding it. The activity logs provided largely decontextualized data, as in “What to wear to funeral,” which fell under the main category (3) types of questions and the secondary category (3.6) clothing selection. Lacking contextual information, only the frequency of each subcategory could be determined from the logs; significance to the participants could not be assessed. A participant’s need to find an outfit appropriate for a funeral could have been an incident of major importance, or it could have passed through his/her mind relatively quickly and been resolved within a matter of seconds.

Consequently, the number of occurrences of each category, indicated in parentheses in [Table 1](#), was the only method for the initial organization of the category codes. This frequency hierarchy served as a partial basis for the group interview guide. Participant input in the group interviews led to reorganization of the codes in the frequency hierarchy into more meaningful arrangements by enabling the interviewers to probe the context and significance of the various category codes and giving the participants the chance to revise and reorganize them.

5.1. *The Boys and Girls Club interviews*

The Boys and Girls Club group interviews took place first, and the Free Library of Philadelphia interviews took place about 1 month later. As a basis for the Boys and Girls Club interviews, the project research assistants wrote two copies of the initial coding scheme ([Table 1](#)) on poster-sized sheets of paper, and one set was hung in each of the rooms where the two Boys and Girls Club group interviews took place at one of the Boys and Girls Club centers. Interview Group 1 consisted of six females and one male; Group 2 consisted of three males and one female. The students reported that they had limited access to computers at home and were infrequent public and school library users.

5.2. *Group interview 1*

When presented with the initial category codes, Group 1 spent about 15 minutes of the 40-minute interview discussing the coding scheme and rearranging the codes into more meaningful arrangements based on relative frequency of occurrence. The coding scheme as they rearranged and revised it appears in [Table 2](#) as Working Typology 1.

5.3. *People sources*

Group 1 participants identified humans as their preferred avenue for information seeking, so people sources is the first major category in Working Typology 1. The participants

Table 2
Working Typology 1

- 1 People sources
 - 1.1 Friends
 - 1.2 Sister/brother
 - 1.3 Mother/father/both
 - 1.4 Cousin
 - 1.5 Boys and Girls Club employee
 - 1.6 Librarian
 - 1.7 Sports coach
 - 1.8 Teacher/school employee
 - 1.9 Telephone operator
 - 1.10 Store clerk
 - 1.11 Grandparent
 - 1.12 University official
 - 2 Non-People Sources
 - 2.1 Telephone
 - 2.2 Television
 - 2.3 School
 - 2.4 Internet/Web
 - 2.5 Radio
 - 2.6 School library
 - 2.7 Newspaper
 - 2.8 Public library
 - 2.9 Other print materials
 - 2.10 School materials
 - 2.11 Magazines
 - 2.12 Phonebook
 - 2.13 Computer (not the Web)
 - 2.14 Books
 - 2.15 Product packaging
 - 3 Types of questions
 - 3.1 School (homework)
 - 3.2 Time of day/date/event
 - 3.3 Meal selection
 - 3.4 Shopping/product information
 - 3.5 Current events
 - 3.6 Clothing selection
 - 3.7 Weather
 - 3.8 Transportation/traffic
 - 3.9 Self-help information
 - 3.10 TV schedule
 - 3.11 School activity (not homework)
 - 3.12 Leisure activity
 - 3.13 Job information
 - 3.14 Specific people/sports teams
-

explained that faced with a need for everyday life information of almost any type, they would turn first to a friend because, as Nicole⁷ explained, “Your friend’s right there with you all the time.”⁸ Siblings (sister/brother) were the second most preferred sources. For example, Diana told the group that she turns to her sister to help her select outfits for school nearly every morning: “I just ask my sister, ‘Which one look[s] better?’” Parents (mother/father/both) were the third most frequently consulted people sources. The participants generally viewed their parents as authorities on a range of subjects: “I talk to my mom about everything” (Diana). Cousin and Boys and Girls Club Employee were next on the list.

On this list of 12 people sources, librarian was number six and teacher/school employee was number eight, with the number seven place being held by sports coach. These relatively low rankings for librarian and teacher were based on a perceived lack of knowledge of important issues. Of the seven participants, only two (Sonya and Nicole) were comfortable talking to librarians:

Lavonnia: The librarian, they be ignorant.

Sonya: I love to go to the library. You talk to the librarian? I like her.

Lamont: They be ignorant.

Nicole: I talk to mine.

The others agreed with Lavonnia that librarians are “ignorant,” and generally unaware of their information needs and interests.

In the case of teachers, this perceived lack of knowledge was compounded by the participants’ lack of desire to cultivate relationships with their teachers:

Sonya: Teachers . . . they be ignorant, and we ain’t gonna’ go and ask them. They gotta be our last resort.

Sonya: Last resort.

Nicole: Last resort.

Diana: Last resort.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

Lamont: They know it in the school.

Yvette: I don’t ask my teacher nothing.

Sonya: I sure don’t.

Lamont: I don’t even like to see my teacher during school.

Yvette: I don’t get beyond my teachers like that.

Telephone operator, store clerk, grandparent, and university official completed the list of people sources.

5.4. *Non-people sources*

As for information sources other than people, the participants preferred the telephone above all other media, especially cellular phones, because they offered the most convenient method of finding answers to their questions. All of the participants owned cell phones, and

⁷ All participant names are pseudonyms.

⁸ Interview transcripts are verbatim, although some colloquial speech, such as “um” and “you know,” has been omitted for increased readability.

they carried them all day, every day, using them as their primary choice for mediated information seeking. For example, Sonya explained that one evening during the data-gathering period, she wanted to find out what time the Red Lobster restaurant stopped seating guests. She was in the car at the time, so she used her cell phone to call information (411) for the restaurant's telephone number. Then she called the restaurant with her question. She explained that using her cell phone "was convenient. I always use 411 now."

The second preferred non-people source was television. The participants explained that television was a ubiquitous part of their home lives and was generally turned on when they were home. In fact, the majority felt that they would be more comfortable using school libraries and public libraries if there were televisions playing in the background.

Next were school, Internet/Web, and radio. The group's general lack of comfort in the school library and public library resulted in the placement of these codes at numbers six and eight on the list, even though they felt that libraries were places where they were "supposed to" look for information. They used libraries less frequently than they assumed the interviewers wanted them to:

- Sonya: The library should be more [higher in the rankings].
- Lamont: No . . . you know you ain't go to the library.
- Sonya: I go to the school library all the time.
- Nicole: That's where you're supposed to go to get information.

Of the seven participants, only one (Sonya) expressed a generally positive image of libraries. The remaining six viewed libraries as dirty, unwelcoming, and unexciting.

Although Lamont and Yvette generally felt uncomfortable in libraries, they did view the school library as a refuge from the unpleasantness of school life. Lamont liked to go to his school library "when nobody's there, or when the teacher's getting on your nerves." Yvette had previously visited her school library as a method of "cutting class," and she lamented a recent rule requiring a note from the teacher because it ended her ability to escape to the library. However, neither Lamont nor Yvette frequented the public library because they felt it was crowded and dirty, and Diana agreed:

- Diana: I use [the] school [library], 'cause I don't like going there [the public library] with all them other kids.
- Lamont: The public library's getting dirty.
- INTERVIEWER: Say that again?
- Yvette: I go to five different schools [libraries].
- INTERVIEWER: So, do you prefer the school library or the public library or neither?
- Yvette: Just the school library, not the public library. There's too many people there.
- INTERVIEWER: At the public library?
- Lamont: It's too loud.
- Diana: Yeah. Too loud . . . too loud.
- INTERVIEWER: Too many people, too loud?
- Diana: Yeah, I wait a long time for the computer.
- Sonya: And you gotta sign up just to use the computer; it's like jail.
- INTERVIEWER: And you don't have to at school?
- Multiple voices: No.
- Sonya: Like at school, you might have to sign in, but it's a waiting list in the [public] library. You gotta wait at least 25 minutes, then you get 10 minutes on the computer. Who can wait all day when they give you almost no minutes at all?
- Yvette: Yeah.
- Lamont: Yeah, and you got pages to print.
- Sonya: Ten cents a page to print!

INTERVIEWER: Which one, at the school or the public library?

Lamont: The public library.

Yvette: School you just go in there and sign in for the library. You don't sign for the computer, you sign for the library, you know any computer that's free, and just stay online as long as you want.

Diana: And you tell the lady what you want to print out and she'll look at it and print it.

Newspaper was number seven, followed by other print materials (e.g., bus schedule, flyers), school materials, magazines, phonebook, computer (not the Web), books, and product packaging.

5.5. Types of questions

The participants used both importance and frequency of questions to rank types of questions. School (homework) questions occurred less frequently than time-related questions, but the participants ranked school-related questions first because finding answers to these questions was more significant to their daily survival. Nonetheless, they expressed little interest in their schoolwork: "I don't be askin' no questions. You do your work, read what they gave you" (Sonya).

The participants used frequency to place time of day/date/event second on the list. As Lamont explained, the desire to know the time of day arises repeatedly during the school day as he sits in class waiting for the time to pass and the class to end: "When you think about it, you're like this in class [looks at wristwatch]: 'What time is it?' All day long practically." Meal selection, shopping/product information, current events, clothing selection, weather, transportation/traffic, self-help information, TV schedule, school activity, leisure activity, job information, and information about specific people/sports teams completed the list of types of ELIS questions.

5.6. Group interview 2

Group 2 was a much smaller group (four participants), and as is sometimes the case in group interviews, all four were relatively unwilling to speak, despite interviewer probing. Their reticence resulted in little discussion of the initial coding scheme. The students did, however, add grandparents to the people consulted category and museum and aquarium to the places/sources of information category. They also provided concrete examples of the types of questions they might ask their parents, siblings, teachers, or even librarians, such as where to find information on famous ideas or people like the Black Panthers, or how to find the bus schedule on the computer.

5.7. The Free Library of Philadelphia interviews

Interviews 3 and 4 were conducted at the Free Library of Philadelphia. Each of the Free Library participants was employed at one of the library branches as a teen leadership assistant (TLA), assisting school children with homework and taking part in program preparation. The majority had home access to computers. They used public and school libraries infrequently for their own purposes, despite being employed at the

public library. Interview 3 included one male and five females; interview 4 included four males and six females.

5.8. Group interview 3

The group spent about half an hour discussing the category codes and devoted most of the remaining half hour to relating and discussing specific information-seeking incidents. Their revision of Group 1’s working typology appears in [Table 3](#) as Working Typology 2.

The group members agreed unanimously that whenever possible, they preferred seeking information from people, especially friends and family. As Nakia said, “I’d probably put friends first, then I’d put my mom.” Group 3 also often needed to consult school employees (teachers, class sponsors, guidance counselors, etc.) when seeking school- or career-related information, although they tried to keep those interactions to a minimum since they were generally uncomfortable with these relationships.

As Free Library employees, the participants explained that they often turned to their supervising librarians at work and co-workers when seeking information to assist them

Table 3
Working Typology 2

1 People
1.1 Friends
1.2 Family
1.3 School employees
1.4 Supervising librarians at work
1.5 Co-workers
1.6 Passers-by
2 Places/Sources
2.1 People
2.2 Telephone
2.3 Radio
2.4 School
2.5 Letters (notes, text messaging)
2.6 Stores
2.7 Computers (Internet, email)
2.8 Newspaper
2.9 Books/libraries/catalogs
3 Types of questions
3.1 Gossip
3.2 Music/fashion
3.3 Homework
3.4 Current events
3.5 Time
3.6 Weather
3.7 Transportation
3.8 Job information

with their jobs. On their own, however, they rarely consulted public or school librarians because of negative past experiences. Tamika was frustrated that the librarians at the public library were not familiar with the types of books she wanted to read: “The librarians [at the public library], every time I ask them for a book, they never heard of it.” Katie had had similarly negative experiences with one of the librarians under whom she worked at the Free Library:

One lady, she seems to direct me towards religion all the time. I don’t know why. What’s she trying to say about me? I need to know Jesus or something? So I stopped asking her after a while ‘cause she was always giving me the same kind of thing.

Katie had had better luck asking other librarians at her branch for book recommendations, so she indicated that she might seek their reading suggestions in the future. The participants tended to tie libraries to the concept of “books,” even though they worked in the public library and must surely have been aware of the array of other available services and resources.

Group 3 also listed passers-by as useful sources of ELIS information, such as public transportation queries. However, they stressed that they preferred to engage in information seeking with people they knew on a personal basis because they trusted them more.

As for places/sources, the group members again stressed their preference for people sources. Second only to face-to-face interactions, they preferred telephone use because it most closely approximated face-to-face interaction. Since the members of this group also carried cell phones throughout most of the day, much of their ELIS efforts involved cell phone use, which they touted for ease and speed of use.

Next the group relied on the radio as an important information medium. For example, Nakia described searching for transportation information to travel with her cousin to a shopping mall to hear a music star perform, a performance about which her cousin had first learned by listening to the radio.

Since they were in school for many hours each week, much of the group’s ELIS activity took place in school, including exchanging letters (passing notes, text messaging). Natasha explained that at her school, students engaged in the writing and exchange of paper letters (notes). Nakia preferred text messaging via her cell phone while in class. Both girls agreed that exchanging letters of either format was limited to school hours when it was impossible to talk to their friends (verbally) via telephones. Outside of school, verbal telephone discussions were vastly preferred as a more intimate form of communication.

Group 3 participants also sought information at retail stores, particularly information about product availability. Surprisingly, they expressed limited interest in communicating via computers (Internet, e-mail). Their lack of interest stemmed from a number of reasons. Charles felt that telephones were “more convenient” and afforded increased personal contact. He explained that “if you talkin’ with somebody on the phone, you [can] hear them laugh or something. You can’t hear them laugh over a computer.” He also worried about communicating with strangers over the Internet, as did Katie. Together they briefly related a story they had heard about a girl who had been raped by a man she had met online. Katie also liked being able to hear friends’ voices over the

telephone. Nakia felt that telephone use was easier and quicker than e-mail. Tamika and Mamika dismissed the Internet as “boring” now that it was no longer new and exciting. Natasha and some of the others did agree, however, that e-mail can be more economical than making long distance telephone calls.

The participants also turned to newspapers and books/libraries/catalogs when looking for information, mostly for schoolwork questions. Again they equated libraries with books, lumping them into a combined category with product catalogs.

As for types of questions, Group 3 explained that their greatest interest was in gossip, or, as one participant explained, “mainly who did what in school.” Charles explained that most of his daily communication involved “just talking” to friends on the telephone as a method of maintaining his peer relationships.

Music/fashion was the next topic of interest, followed by homework, current events, time, and weather. Tia, for example, used her cell phone to call the weather line each day so that she would know how to dress. Katie, on the other hand, watched the television news each morning for weather information. Transportation and job information completed Group 3’s list of ELIS topics.

5.9. Group interview 4

Interview 4 lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes. This was the largest of the four interview groups, with 10 participants, which perhaps explains why this interview lasted longer than the others. The group devoted the first hour to discussing the category codes. The group members decided to rearrange them according to daily life significance rather than frequency of query occurrence or a combination of significance and frequency. The resulting scheme appears in [Table 4](#) as Working Typology 3.

In accordance with the previous groups, Group 4 agreed that people are the most important sources of everyday life information, both in importance and frequency of consultation. Group 4 decided to put the combined code friends/family first, stressing that the choice of turning first to friends or family is dependent upon relationships and topics. For the participants who had close relationships with family members, family served as the primary ELIS source, regardless of the topic in question. As Suzanne explained, “I’d ask my mom before my friends.” They agreed that “In my opinion, friends can’t be more important than your family.” Others disagreed, as in Kareem’s explaining that, “friends can be above family.” Jane and Eric attempted to explain the rift in opinions by suggesting that the topic dictates whether friends or family will serve as preferred ELIS sources. As Jane explained, “If you’re talking [about] something like sex, you automatically go to your friends. If you’re talking about something family-wise, you go to your family.” Tyshia further explained that

It depends on your relationship. Like my mom, I can tell her everything. But if you know that you and your mom don’t get along that well, she’s gonna be like, “Oh, I don’t want you to do that.” Then maybe I’m gonna consult my friends first. Then, afterwards, I’ll talk to my Mom about it.

The group concluded that both topic and relationship determine whether family or friends are the first choices at any particular time.

Table 4
Working Typology 3

1	People
1.1	Friends/family
1.2	School employees
1.3	Mentors
1.4	Customer service
1.5	People passing by
2	Places/sources
2.1	People
2.2	Telephone
2.3	Computers/television
2.4	Radio/newspaper
2.5	School
2.6	Books/library/catalogs
2.7	Letters (notes; text messaging)
2.8	Stores
3	Types of questions
3.1	Time
3.2	Weather
3.3	Homework
3.4	Transportation
3.5	Financial
3.6	Gossip
3.7	Personal life
3.8	Job information
3.9	Music
3.10	Current events
3.11	Fashion
3.12	Shopping

Group 4 participants placed school employees second on the list of people sources. They considered asking teachers, counselors, and others for basic school-related information as an undesirable, yet unavoidable, necessity. The general attitude toward teachers and other school employees was negative, mainly due to the belief that most school employees lack genuine concern for their students. As Jermaine explained, there are generally a handful of “cool” teachers in each school, teachers who are able to relate to teens on their own level, but these kindred spirits are rare. Eric agreed, saying that “They don’t ask me nothing; I don’t ask them nothing. They got this space between us, and they stay away from us.” As Jermaine said:

Teachers, you’re gonna ask them the basic stuff that’s required in school. Besides that, you’re not gonna talk to them about your personal life or anything like that, because most times, teachers and students don’t have that kind of relationship due to adult attitudes and student attitudes. They look at us like as children: we should be seen not heard.... They don’t need to say anything to me; I don’t say anything to them.

Group 4 next introduced a new concept, the concept of mentors as information source. They explained that they actively seek adult mentors who can guide them in their lives, especially in the areas of employment, career, and health information. Kareem even had a

formal mentor, a local lawyer who would take him on trips to visit area colleges and offer career guidance. Other subcategories of mentor included clergy, physicians, human services workers, employment supervisors, and co-workers. Customer service employees and people passing by completed the list of people sources.

Group 4 opted to remove librarians from the list of people sources. Even though all of the members of Group 4 were employed at the Free Library, they were infrequent library users themselves. They felt that the public library served children and adults but that there were few services for teens:

Tyshia: My personal opinion of the library. I do real well in school, but I never really had to go to the library. They should make it so it should welcome not only children but also teens. Because the children's section doesn't have much for us. Make it so it's not only for children. I never went to the library until I started working here. I couldn't remember that last time I went to the library for my own personal use.

Kevin: Right.

Tyshia: I can't remember ever going.

The second major category was places/sources. Again people was first, followed by telephone. This group combined computers/television, explaining that most of them had both a computer and a TV in their homes, making them easily available ELIS tools. They were especially enthusiastic about the Internet, praising it for the speed of information delivery: "When I wanna know how the weather is like, I really don't have to wait until 10 o'clock. I just go on the Internet to weather.com."

Next came radio/newspaper, school, and books/library/catalogs. Group 4 did exchange letters (passing notes; text messaging), but again only to relieve their boredom in classes: "I gotta be real bored to be text messaging" (Jermaine). Group 4 also sought everyday life information from stores while they were shopping.

Group 4 stressed that availability largely dictated their media choices. For example, Tyshia explained that she read newspapers because the school provided them: "I read the print [version]. I get the newspaper through school when they give them out. But if I had to pay for it, no." Similarly, television and computers ranked high because nearly all of the group members had access to them at home.

As for types of questions, Group 4 felt that questions pertaining to the time and the weather were both the most frequent and the most important. As Tyshia explained, "Time and weather; I need to know the time and the weather every day. Every day. You can't leave the house without knowing what time it is or what the weather is."

Homework questions were the next most important, but again homework was an unpleasant necessity. Transportation and financial questions were next. Gossip was number six, lower than in the prior groups' arrangements. Personal life, job information, and music were next.

Overall, Group 4 was much less interested in current events and world news than in topics of more direct personal relevance. Many in the group even chose to avoid hearing news of the recently declared war in Iraq:

Laquinta: Whenever the war came on TV, I changed the channel.

Kevin: Yeah, I did.

Jermaine: Some people felt that; some people feel that way.

Kevin: I did the same thing. I don't wanna see it.

Jermaine: Why do you feel that way?

Kevin: Why do I feel that? I don't know . . . I just don't like to hear about it all the time.

Jermaine: You don't like the war; you're not concerned with it? Even though it's a major current event, you're not concerned with anything about the war?

Kevin: I gotta do it all the time in class.

Fashion and shopping completed the list of significant ELIS topics.

5.10. Combined typology

The three working typologies have been collapsed into a combined typology (see [Table 5](#)). This typology will serve as a partial basis for the creation of a theoretical model of urban teen ELIS once all of the project data have been analyzed. Thus, the combined typology must be seen as a preliminary step in understanding and describing urban teen ELIS behaviors. The three major category codes in the combined typology are people, media, and topics. The order of the codes within each of the three major divisions was derived by averaging the number of order of appearance in each working typology, weighted according to the number of appearances across the three working typologies. The resulting orders must be viewed as approximate since, as seen in the variance among the interview groups' rankings, the frequency and importance of the codes are likely to vary somewhat among teens and in different contexts.

A few of the codes from the working typologies were dropped due to their duplicity with other codes. These codes referred to specific locations and included "school," "school library," "public library," "stores," and "Boys and Girls Club." These codes overlapped either with people whom the participants consulted (for example, "store clerks") or with the media they used at these locations (for example, "printed school materials").

The combined typology reflects an important theme that ran throughout the interviews: context. The participants decided which people to consult and which media to use based on established human relationships, question topics, and the location of the information seeking. As Group 4 concluded, their choices are guided by the "it depends" principle, supporting [McKenzie's \(2003\)](#) emphasis on social context in ELIS behavior.

Looking at the combined typology, people remains the first major category, since all of the interview groups agreed that they preferred human sources above all other possible ELIS sources. Listed in order of frequency of consultation, the codes are friends/family, school employees, mentors, customer service staff, librarians, and passers-by.

Once the duplicative location codes were removed, the remaining codes from the working typology categories "non-people sources" and "places/sources" all referred to types of information media.⁹ Listed in order of frequency of use, the codes are telephones, television, computers, radio, newspapers, product packaging, personal communication systems (including instant messaging, email, and written notes), printed school materials, product catalogs, printed ephemera, books, magazines, and phonebooks.

The third major category code is topics, which replaced the working category code name "types of questions." Since the interview groups had organized the category codes in the working typologies according to both importance and frequency, the combined typology

⁹ "Media" is defined here as: "material in *any* format that carries and communicates information content" ([Reitz, 2002](#), n.p.).

Table 5
Combined Typology

1 People
1.1 Friends/family
1.2 School employees
1.3 Mentors
1.4 Customer service staff
1.5 Librarians
1.6 Passers-by
2 Media
2.1 Telephones
2.2 Television
2.3 Computers
2.4 Radio
2.5 Newspapers
2.6 Product packaging
2.7 Personal communication systems
2.8 Printed school materials
2.9 Product catalogs
2.10 Printed ephemera
2.11 Books
2.12 Magazines
2.13 Phonebooks
3 Topics
3.1 Schoolwork
3.2 Time/date
3.3 Social life/leisure activities
3.4 Weather
3.5 Daily life routine
3.6 Popular culture
3.7 Current events
3.8 Transportation
3.9 Personal finances
3.10 Consumer information
3.11 Personal improvement
3.12 Job information

reflects a combination of these two principles. The topic codes include schoolwork, time/date, social life/leisure activities, weather, daily life routine (e.g., meal and clothing selection), popular culture, current events, transportation, personal finances, consumer information, personal improvement (including self-help, college, and scholarship information), and job information.

6. Discussion

As Table 6 shows, the information needs identified by the participants appear as categories or subcategories in the typologies developed by previous researchers. Schoolwork, social life/leisure activities, popular culture, current information, personal improvement, and job

Table 6
Comparable categories in other YA information needs typologies

Project typology topics	Comparable categories in other typologies
School work	School related; subject information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) School and curriculum needs (Minudri, 1974) Education and work (Poston-Anderson & Edwards, 1993) Course-related information needs (Latrobe & Havener, 1997) Self-actualization (Walter, 1994)
Time	Personal information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Social life/leisure activities	Advice (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) Relationships (Poston-Anderson & Edwards, 1993) Current lifestyle issues; relationships (Latrobe & Havener, 1997) Self-actualization; love and belonging (Walter, 1994)
Weather	Personal information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Daily life routine	Personal information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Popular culture	Interest-driven information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) Current lifestyles (Latrobe & Havener, 1997) Self-actualization (Walter, 1994)
Current events	Interest-driven information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) General information (Latrobe & Havener, 1997)
Transportation	Personal information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Personal finances	Advice (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Consumer information	Consumer information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003)
Personal improvement	Self-development information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) Love and belonging; physiological (Walter, 1994)
Job information	Self-development information (Shenton & Dixon, 2003) Education and work (Poston-Anderson & Edwards, 1993) Future plans; current lifestyle issues (Latrobe & Havener, 1997)

information have been identified by more than one researcher studying the information needs of youth. Time, weather, daily routine, transportation, consumer information, and personal finances emerged in the work of Shenton and Dixon (2003). The findings are significant not only because they confirm what other researchers have found, but because they expand these findings to include the information needs of urban youth. Previous research dealt largely with middle-class suburban and rural populations. The participants lived in urban communities, were predominantly from the lower socioeconomic stratum, and were predominantly African-American. The fact that the categories are similar to those of previous researchers suggests that perhaps teenagers have similar information needs across socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, additional research is of course necessary to confirm this possibility.

6.1. Information sources consulted

As Table 6 shows, the students turned to a plethora of resources to meet their information needs including people, telephones, televisions, and computers. The most frequently consulted people included friends, family, and school employees, which is consistent with the findings of Latrobe and Havener (1997). Librarians appeared low on the final typology,

after mentors and customer service personnel, such as store clerks. The relatively low ranking of librarians is consistent with Latrobe and Havener's findings, as well as those of the [Urban Libraries Council \(2001\)](#). Like the teenagers interviewed by the Urban Libraries Council, the participants conveyed negative attitudes toward libraries and librarians and reported frustration with many of the same aspects of library service such as strict rules, unpleasant staff, lack of culturally relevant materials, dreary physical spaces, and limited access to technology.

The participants also relied heavily upon a variety of media sources. As [Table 6](#) shows, when these teenagers have information needs, they turn to telephones, televisions, computers, and radios before turning to print resources such as newspapers, books, and magazines. In fact, books and magazines, still staples of many public and school libraries, were listed at the bottom of their list of resources. This finding differs greatly from that of [Latrobe and Havener \(1997\)](#) who found that honors students said they turn first to books and magazines to meet their information needs.

6.2. Perceptions of libraries and librarians

The limited use of libraries and librarians as information sources stemmed from widespread negative perceptions of libraries and librarians. This finding is particularly disturbing considering the fact that 16 of the 27 participants worked for the Free Library of Philadelphia after school and during weekend hours. Despite the fact that they spent 10–20 hours per week working at the public library, when they needed information, they turned to other sources. Group 4 even opted to remove librarians from the list of people sources.

Participants in all four group interviews complained that both public and school library staff generally treat teenagers rudely and explained that they would be more inclined to use library services if the staff treated them with respect. For example, Nicole spoke with anger about a school library usage rule she saw as an impediment to use:

For example, like today. I went to print this paper at the computer. I needed a special login. It used to be in that school you gotta get a special login, and that takes time. So I was askin' this lady ... since I was already late for school, I was askin' her like, "Can I please come in here, please, please, and just type my name and print this paper, less than five seconds, then I be out of here?" [She yelled at me:] "No! You need a note." I just looked at her like ... "Ooh!" Like I should snatch her hair, like she was makin' me so mad. And I needed that paper real bad.

Many of the participants also agreed that library book collections held little attraction for them due to a lack of culturally relevant materials. Statements such as: "They need more books with teenagers like us," "They need multicultural books. Books about our culture ... Black books," and "Every time I ask them [librarians at the public library] for a book I want, they never heard of it" were met with hearty agreement. This finding is particularly troubling since the librarian in charge of collection development for young adults at the Free Library of Philadelphia is a recognized authority on literature that features urban teenagers. For example, when a question about literature for minority teenagers is posted to YALSA-Bk, she is one of the first to respond with current titles.

All these complaints add up to the sad conclusion that little has changed in the more than 10 years since [Posten-Anderson and Edwards \(1993\)](#) conducted their study. Young adults still rarely think of libraries as places where their everyday life information needs can be met.

7. Conclusion

While the findings are preliminary, they suggest five questions information practitioners should consider as they design programs and services for urban teenagers.

1. While the teenagers in this study identified school work as their primary everyday life information need, they reported that they do not use libraries or books. What kinds of assignments are they being given in school, and how can libraries support the students in their academic pursuits?
2. Since the Free Library of Philadelphia does purchase books that feature urban teenagers, what does the library need to do to make these books “visible” to the teens? For example, what kind of professional development do branch librarians need? Should the books be shelved in special sections or placed in special displays that are highly visible when teenagers enter the library?
3. The participants identified electronic media such as telephones, television, computers, and radios as their preferred media. How can libraries use these media to deliver services to urban teenagers? Is it time to revisit the idea of telephone reference? Is there a way to use text-messaging to reach teenagers?
4. The teenagers in this study identified people as their preferred information source. What can librarians do to counteract the negative attitude urban teenagers have toward librarians? How can librarians integrate themselves into the interpersonal networks of urban teenagers?
5. Since it seems that urban teenagers are hesitant to visit libraries, how can libraries take their services to them? Should libraries work with community groups such as the Boys and Girls Club to address the everyday life information needs of urban teenagers?

Lastly, experienced librarians understand the importance of involving their patrons in the development and evaluation of the programs and services they offer. The findings of this study illuminate the ability of urban teenagers to provide rich data. Not only did the participants exhibit enthusiasm for the project, they were also able to describe and analyze their own behavior. They developed trust with the researchers even though their cultural backgrounds differed. The authors encourage other researchers interested in the information behaviors of youth to consider this often-ignored segment of the population as future study participants. As the [Urban Library Council \(2001\)](#) noted, urban youth are the best sources of information about their needs and must serve as the “cornerstone” of all library initiatives designed to serve them. The impact of such research efforts on urban library practices could lead to a badly needed image boost for urban libraries and help to

make everyday life information-seeking easier, more pleasant, and more meaningful for urban teens.

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