



Feels Like Home: The Digital Information Practices of Teen Fans

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Abstract

It is a trope to say that teens are highly engaged online and are frequent and passionate members of fan communities, yet it is true. However, little is known about teens' information practices in this arena. This study examines the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) practices of teens in Nerdfighteria, a fan community, to answer the question: What kinds of everyday life information do teens seek in an online fan community? Using survey, interview, diary, and observational data, and concurrent, iterative data analysis incorporating grounded theory techniques, this study offers insight into the ELIS practices of teen fans. Teen Nerdfighters use their community to address a wide variety of information needs related to their development as adolescents. The primary information engagements were around social, cognitive, fan, and emotional needs, and they included seeking or giving emotional support; engaging in intellectual debates around current events, politics, science, and literature; sharing social events; and seeking and sharing fan-oriented information. The findings from this study illustrate the potential for information seeking in a fan community for purposes far beyond the fandom.

Introduction

Teens are often highly connected and frequently engaged in information behaviorⁱ but are an understudied population. Teens are also in the midst of a transformational developmental stage,ⁱⁱ and the impact of their informational needs is significant. Fandoms, while the focus of considerable research over the years,ⁱⁱⁱ are not often examined beyond the creation of fanworks such as fanfiction or the functioning of sites to maintain fanworks.

To address the intersection of these phenomena—information behavior, teens, and fan communities—this study examined the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) practices of teen Nerdfighters. Nerdfighters are fans of best-selling young adult author John Green and his brother, Hank Green, who share the very popular VlogBrothers YouTube channel and a growing media empire. Nerdfighteria, the community of Nerdfighters, sprawls across the internet to include official sites on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, and fan-made sites on a constantly shifting range of platforms from YouTube to Facebook to Discord and beyond. This study includes survey, interview, diary, and observational data from teen Nerdfighters, ages 13–17 from fall 2016 through summer 2017. The findings inform information behavior researchers, fandom researchers, and youth service librarians.

Research Question

This study asks: *What kinds of everyday life information do teens seek in an online fan community?*

Literature Review

This study draws upon and integrates several strands of research, most notably aspects of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) and practices, fandom research, and information behavior in fan communities. Wherever possible, research on teens is incorporated; however, very little research on the information behavior of teens in fan communities exists.

Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS)

ELIS begins with a basic understanding of information behavior. Information behavior can be faulted, if anything, for an overly broad definition. T. D. Wilson describes it as “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information.”^{iv} Information behavior research is heavily indebted to Wilson’s model of information behavior, which was groundbreaking in its recognition that information behavior is iterative and encompasses a range of behaviors beyond actively seeking to include actions like monitoring.^v From information behavior, we move to information seeking, which is understood to include a wide range of needs, contexts, assumptions, and understandings. Information seeking carries a cognitive and emotional load, as well as an emotional and affective impact.^{vi} While information seeking

initially appears almost self-explanatory, when examined more closely there are a wide range of issues and contexts underpinning even a cursory search.

Early research into information seeking frequently focused on work-oriented or artificial tasks, especially when the research concerned children or teens. However, the reality is that people need information continually that is not contained in work or school lives. This need is not always clear-cut or task-oriented. ELIS is a theory that seeks to understand and describe this process. Reijo Savolainen is the seminal researcher into ELIS practices. Savolainen describes a “way of life,” how a person functions under normal circumstances; “mastery of life,” the tasks we undertake to maintain that order; and the factors that impact the interplay providing a model for understanding daily life.^{vii}

From Seeking to Practice

While information seeking provided a better understanding of the daily information interactions of adults, it became apparent that “seeking” was too narrow an approach to fully understand daily information interactions. After all, most people are frequently engaged in information but less often directly “seeking” it. In recognition of this gap, Savolainen expanded his model to incorporate information seeking, use, and sharing in the context of daily life.^{viii} Savolainen uses the terms *seeking*, the ways a person identifies and accesses sources of information; *use*, the evaluation, filtering, and wielding of information; and *sharing*, the giving and receiving of information.^{ix} Context matters, however. Factors such as a person’s knowledge and understanding of the social rules and norms around information, the urgency of the information need, the time a person has available, the type of project requiring information, and the person’s values, goals, and interests all impact their information practice.^x

Pamela McKenzie examined information practices in greater detail in her study of mothers pregnant with twins and developed a two-dimensional model of information practice.^{xi} One dimension posits strategies for meeting an information need such as active seeking (actual searching), active scanning (reviewing the information environment for relevant information), non-directed monitoring (keeping an eye out), and by proxy (another person refers an information source). The other dimension refers to two modes of information seeking: connecting (identifying information sources) and interacting (contact with information sources).^{xii} This more complex model of information practices is useful for understanding how

people engage in a wide variety of behaviors. However, the model is limited in that it focused on live, direct interactions, and it predates the era of ubiquitous social media and internet access. In the case of this study, McKenzie's work also differs in that it focused on a specific issue (pregnancy) rather than a community.

ELIS researchers frequently attempt to classify people's information needs, practices, and strategies; however, they rarely engage with teens on their own ground.^{xiii}

ELIS with Teens

While some researchers are examining teen's information practices, this area is currently understudied in light of teens' complicated developmental stage and the rapid evolution of information and communications technology. Given that teens are in a critical developmental transition to adulthood^{xiv} and that their engagement with the internet and social media is exploding,^{xv} this is an area of study that warrants closer examination.

Kaveri Subrahmanyam and David Šmahel assert that teens are active co-creators of an constantly developing online life and that their engagement is closely tied to their developmental stage.^{xvi} Teens are therefore experiencing and enacting the classic developmental changes and challenges of independence, intimacy, identity, and sexuality both on- and offline.^{xvii} The relationship between developmental stage and information practice is an important one, but what specific information and which specific developmental tasks are most salient?

Denise Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell attempt to answer this question by examining the ELIS needs of urban teens to develop a model of teen ELIS needs.^{xviii} The researchers first examined a developmental framework developed by Robert Havighurst^{xix} and used by Subrahmanyam and Šmahel,^{xx} and they sorted information needs into developmental "selves" tied to accomplishing specific maturation tasks. Table 1, Maturation Tasks and Self-Definitions, describes the selves and definitions. The specific ELIS needs of urban teens were compared with a broader population of teens and found to be similar.^{xxi} However, while teens in this study did use the internet, the information needs were discussed and explored in person. This paper examines the ELIS needs that occur exclusively in an online fan community.

Table 1. Maturation Tasks and Self-Definitions	
<i>Self</i>	<i>Information Needs Topics</i>
Emotional	Family relationships, emotional health, religious practice
Reflective	Self-image, philosophical concerns, heritage/cultural identity, civic duty, college, career, self-actualization
Physical	Daily life routine, physical safety, goods and services, personal finances, health, job responsibilities
Creative	Creative performance, creative production
Cognitive	Academics, school culture, current events
Sexual	Sexual safety, sexual identity
Social	Friend/peer/romantic relationships, social activities, popular culture, fashion, social/legal norms

Source: Denise Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell, “Toward a Model of the Everyday Life Information Needs of Urban Teenagers, Part 2: Empirical Model,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 57, no. 11 (September 2006): 1418–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20452>.

Fandom Research

Research into fan culture has a long history; however, it has usually focused on areas outside of information behavior—the creation of fanfiction or other transformative works, for example. Fanfiction sites have their own culture, slang, norms, and values that extend beyond the creation of transformative works.^{xxii} Fanfiction communities can be tools for learning and exploration.^{xxiii} Some writers take on leadership roles, learn technical skills, and engage in mentoring.^{xxiv} Culture plays an important role in this learning and exploration; as Casey Fiesler et al. note, members of the Archive of Our Own (AO3) brought the collaborative culture of fandom with them when they established AO3.^{xxv} Nonetheless, many contributors hide their participation from those outside the community for fear of shaming.^{xxvi} Additionally, most research tends to focus on a single platform, such as AO3, even when the fandoms sprawl across many platforms.

Nerdfighter Scholarship

There is minimal research on Nerdfighteria despite its size and longevity. Researcher Nita Kligler-Vilenchik is an exception, having examined Nerdfighters from the perspective of civic participation. She has found that the nature of the community and its specific credos—such as

“decrease world suck”—function to encourage Nerdfighters to be active participants.^{xxvii} This involvement can often take the form of fund-raising, such as participating in the annual “Project for Awesome” event or using the Kiva platform.^{xxviii} While Kligler-Vilenchik did not focus on information behavior per se, she did observe that fan activism on the part of Nerdfighters was driven by both the low barrier to entry for this community and the powerful ethos of information sharing.^{xxix}

Information Behavior in Online Fan Communities

As noted earlier, there is relatively minimal research into information behavior in online fan communities. Two exceptions are Ludi Price and Lyn Robinson,^{xxx} and Maria-Jose Masanet and David Buckingham.^{xxxi} Price and Robinson’s Delphi study of information behavior by adult online fan communities found that information behavior generally was collaborative, informal, and generous, and that fan communities were fertile ground for information.^{xxxii} Masanet and Buckingham examined peer-to-peer sexual education through the lens of a fan forum for a popular show in the United Kingdom.^{xxxiii} These researchers found that the supportive and nonjudgmental nature of the fan community made it a space for teens to safely share information that they were otherwise reluctant to admit.^{xxxiv}

Prior research forms a basis for this study, in particular, the ELIS practices of urban teens,^{xxxv} however, there are numerous gaps. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on ELIS practices in an understudied population (teens) in an understudied setting (online fan communities).

Methods

This study uses primarily qualitative data collected from several sources between the fall of 2016 and the summer of 2017. Individuals could participate in two ways, through the survey and through interviews and a diary. There were 241 survey participants, who were recruited primarily with recruitment posts on social media and through snowball sampling. Fifteen teens participated in an extensive interview/diary/follow-up interview protocol. These participants were also recruited primarily using social media posts and snowball sampling. In addition to individual participants, I observed public social media platforms. It is important to note that no observations from public platforms will be quoted directly in order to protect the privacy of the

teen participants. Finally, where applicable, I examined documents related to the various online communities observed or mentioned by participants.

Survey

The survey remained open for the duration of data collection and included questions that mirrored the Nerdfighter Census and the Pew Internet and American Life studies, as well as questions developed from the research question. A total of 241 teens participated in the survey, which included a gateway question regarding age. Teen respondents averaged fifteen years old and were primarily female (70%), although a range of genders was represented (see fig. 1). Teens were offered a range of gender choices, allowed to select multiple gender choices, and were allowed to add their own descriptions. As a result, many teens chose something other than or in addition to binary male/female. Questions around race and ethnicity were likewise open-ended, though most respondents selected white (75%) (see fig. 2).

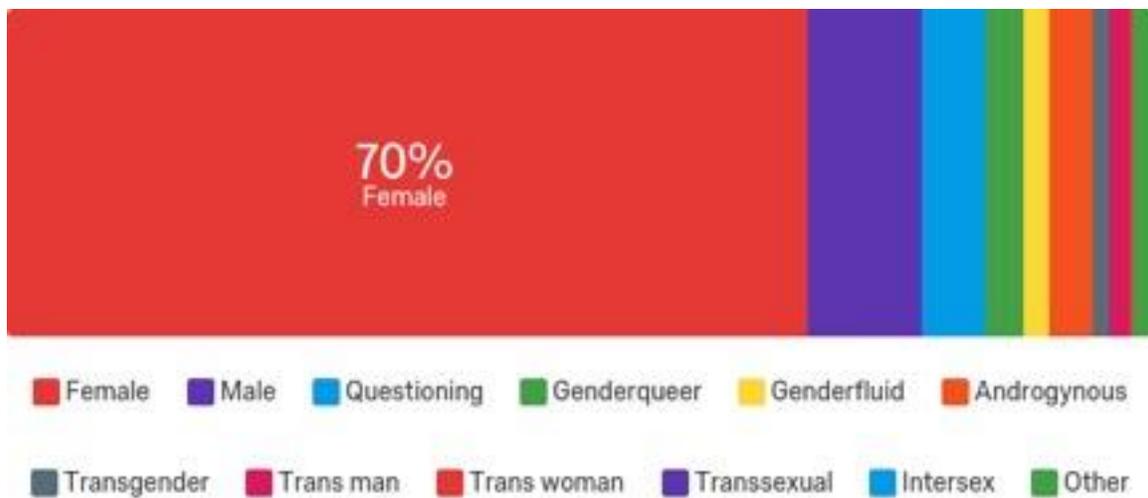


Figure 1. Representation of Gender Identity in Survey

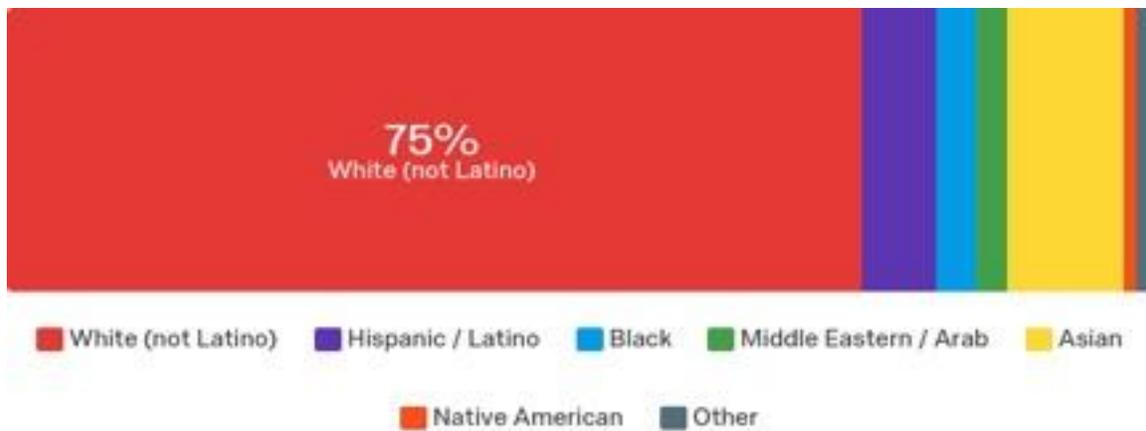


Figure 2. Representation of Race/Ethnicity in Survey

Interviews and Diary

Fifteen teens participated in an interview, followed by a monthlong prompted diary, and fourteen of fifteen completed a follow-up interview. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. The diary was online and prompted. Teens could log in at any time but received a reminder to participate three times a week. At the conclusion of the diary phase, teens were invited to participate in a follow-up interview, which fourteen of the fifteen did. This phase of the study rolled out in three cohorts. The average age of participants was 15.7 years.

Observations

A public Nerdfighter forum was observed from October 2016 to May 2017. This teen-oriented forum was a legacy bulletin board and part of a larger Nerdfighter forum.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing, iterative, and drew on grounded theory techniques.^{xxxvi} Coding took place during data collection and included several passes to uncover themes. Codes were both etic and emic, drawing both from the literature and from the data itself.^{xxxvii} Segments of the data was sent to a fellow researcher at another university to verify the code book and coding. All data was coded using Dedoose, a web-based mixed-methods research analysis platform.

This study was conducted in accordance with IRB protocols. All names are pseudonyms, and as noted above, I will not quote anything from an online post directly in order maintain privacy. All teens participating in the interview and diary portion received and completed parental consent

and teen assent forms, and each received a small gift card commensurate with their level of participation. As gender identity and pronoun choice was important to the participants, a singular “they” pronoun is used throughout this paper.

Findings

Teen Nerdfighters used their fan community for a wide range of information needs, far beyond the scope of the fan community. These information practices were informed by the developmental stage of adolescence and mirrored the findings of Agosto and Hughes-Hassell and Subrahmanyam and Šmahel that these tasks fall into specific domains, often termed “selves.”^{xxxviii} In addition to the selves from prior research, the teens in this study exhibited what I have termed a “fan self,” an additional component of their identity development that focused around their experience as a fan. Specific topics are discussed in the following subsections, organized by code prevalence. Table 2, Self Labels and Corresponding Code Application, represents the selves and the corresponding code applications, and includes all sources (survey, interview, diary, and observation).

Table 2. Self Labels and Corresponding Code Application	
<i>Label</i>	<i>Code Application</i>
Social	720
Cognitive	426
Emotional	252
Fan	226
Creative	133
Reflective	120
Physical	49
Sexual	34

Social

Social was the most commonly used code for the teens in this study. Intuitively, this makes sense, as this is a group of teens deeply engaged in social media across numerous platforms. This self is characterized by maturing peer-peer relationships and by learning to independently navigate a social experience.^{xxxix} The most prevalent subcode, by far, was an emic code for *hanging out*, which is a derivation of etic codes for relationships and social activities.^{xi}

Additional common subcodes were discussions of *overlapping fandoms* and the social aspects of the 2017 Nerdfighter *scavenger hunt*.

Hanging out was a particularly common code derived from the observations. Members of the forum would check in to see who was online and what they were doing. Sometimes discussions would focus on welcoming back a member who had been off the board for a while or on banter about the members' profile pictures. Members also observed traditional and nontraditional holidays from Christmas to Pi Day (March 14). Dreams were a surprisingly common topic of discussion.

Overlapping fandoms is an emic code that fits with social self. Participants came to various Nerdfighter platforms to discuss their experience as a fan of *something else*. Harry Potter was the most frequent topic of overlapping fandom, but teens also discussed the musical *Hamilton*, specific bands, and books by authors other than John Green. *Harry Potter*, for example, was examined as canon text. Forum members were also creators of transformative works around Harry Potter. Harry Potter was also used as a metaphor for their lives and the world. For example, one interview participant, Claire, described a conversation about how the Patronus (a magical animal guardian evoked by a complex charm) might reflect the underlying character and mental health of the person. Alternatively, Emma saw a relationship between their fandom of Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens* and the underlying credo of Nerdfighteria: "I've seen someone talking about Neil Gaiman or *Good Omens* before in literature [Nerdfighter Discord subchannel]. In a sort of a roundabout way, *Good Omens*, it has a lot of things that Nerdfighteria really values. Like independent thought and sort of an easy respect for a lot of different things."

In the winter of 2017, John Green announced an online scavenger hunt,^{xii} which immediately created excitement among the teen participants in the study and those observed online. Thus, the third major area of social engagement was around the emic code *scavenger hunt*. Members of the forum had frequent discussions of the various clues related to the scavenger hunt, although ultimately moved the discussion to a separate board to keep the conversation on the teen board interesting for everyone. Several interview participants also participated in the scavenger hunt to varying degrees. The culmination of the scavenger hunt was the announcement of John Green's first new book since 2012.^{xiii} The scavenger hunt combined an intellectual challenge with a social practice. For example, Emma repeatedly referred to the people working on the scavenger

hunt as a community: “This community of intellectuals was brought together by something that was intellectually stimulating, the scavenger hunt.”

Music and *movies* rounded out the social engagement. These two codes are variants of the etic code for pop culture.^{xliii} A surprising number of Nerdfighters, both interview participants and forum members, are either directly involved in musical theater or fans of musical theater (often the musical *Hamilton*).

Cognitive

Unsurprisingly, as this is a community dedicated to celebrating being a nerd, teens were deeply engaged in cognitive practices. The most common cognitive subcodes were *intellectual*, *politics* and *current events*, *science*, *weather*, and *history*.

Finding a community that welcomed their *intellectual* passions was transformative for many participants. As Lia described it, “I want to be an engineer and everything. Finding a channel that is just about that, I was so excited. I’m like, ‘Yes!’” Isabelle was motivated to watch the entire Crash Course video series (a channel affiliated with the Green brothers) because they wanted to learn the background and history of programming, not just the programming languages taught in school. “Just getting what’s behind all of that is interesting to me.” The intellectual component of all the cognitive subcodes was a driving factor for engagement in the Nerdfighter community. *Politics* and *current events* were extremely common subcodes, especially in the forum. This is likely in part due to the timing of the data collection during the 2016 election cycle and its aftermath. Teens in the forum felt the outcome of the election keenly. As many of the members identified as LGBTQ, they were truly frightened by the election of the Trump/Pence ticket. Interview participants also talked about current events. For example, Mira referred to learning about Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act), in part by observing discussions on the VlogBrothers YouTube channel. Survey respondents also used Nerdfighteria to understand current events and politics, including changes in government policies. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said they used Nerdfighteria for information seeking specifically for information around current and world events.

Science, especially *weather* and weather phenomena, was a common topic of discussion in the forum. Members liked to share what was happening in their particular region and compare with

other forum members. It is likely that this practice served a dual purpose of linking together members from across the country in a common experience.

Participants were also deeply interested in *history*. Emma found and shared an archive that included the love letters between John and Abigail Adams. One teen member of the forum began every new page the forum rolled over to with a summary of a major historical event that happened in the year corresponding to the page number. For example, the page number 1776 likely included information about the American Revolution (note: I am not providing exact examples to protect the privacy of the participants).

Teen Nerdfighters deeply identified with the cognitive self. They relied on the community at large, as well as information from the Green brothers, to continue their intellectual engagement and frequently referred to the intellectual nature of the community as a primary factor fostering their engagement.

Emotional

The *emotional self* was the third most commonly present in the data. Common subcodes for this self included *emotional support*, *mental health*, and *religion*.

Twelve of the fifteen interview participants referenced the *emotional support* they got and gave through Nerdfighteria. This support was also common in the forum. Members turned to one another for support around adolescent rites of passage such as getting a driver's license.

Responses were typically to share their experience and offer reassurance. When someone stepped away from the forum and returned, they were uniformly welcomed back with eagerness and support.

Tyler, an interview participant, was generally an observer in Nerdfighteria. Nonetheless, they chose to engage when they could give support to another person. "I guess because I found the safety and security that I really want to find . . . I try to be as nice to other people as I can, because they all deserve the love and support."

Mental health was a concern for some of the forum members. In particular, one forum participant stepped in and out as their anxiety dictated. An interview participant noted that they became overwhelmed by too much social interaction and would sometimes choose to step away from technology to recharge. Others came to their Nerdfighter community to share their mental health struggles.

Religion, while present, was not a common subcode. Interview participants had different perceptions of religion within Nerdfighteria. Gabriella thought the community was welcoming and engaged in discourse rather than arguing. Chris, a practicing Mormon, had a more conflicted view of religion in Nerdfighteria, feeling that they were often responsible for explaining their faith to a larger audience that had a skeptical view of religion overall and Mormonism in particular. However, Chris noted that they were more comfortable discussing their religion within Nerdfighteria than other areas of the internet, noting that the community made an effort to be civil and have an honest conversation.

Emotional self was a primary factor for engagement. Interview participants frequently referenced getting and giving support as a motivating factor for participating in Nerdfighteria. Forum members exhibited kind and thoughtful behavior and sought opportunities to support one another. While interview participants acknowledge that negativity or “trolling” could happen in Nerdfighteria, it was generally not tolerated in the places they frequented.

Fan

Nerdfighteria was an aspect of the teen participants’ lives that in their minds became a part of their identity, the *fan self*. Each self refers to “a subset of an adolescent’s growing understanding of himself or herself and of the world in which he or she lives.”^{xliv} The importance of Nerdfighteria to the study participants and its place as a “world in which they live” warrants a separate category as a self and suggests that other teens likely have a self drawn from their engagement in fan communities. Though as with all people, the proportional mix of selves likely varies from person to person.

All subcodes are emic, drawn from the data, and reflective of the teen participants’ experiences. The largest subcode was *Nerdfighteria*, which was used when teens described their experience or sought to learn more about the community overall. *Object of fandom* and *service to fandom* were the two other codes.

Participants and forum members were self-reflective about what it meant to be a part of this community. Mira frequently commented in other online settings (specifically ESPN), but described Nerdfighteria as part of who they *were*. Ash said that Nerdfighteria was built around inclusivity, which was an important component in their participation. Emma was proud to be a part of a community that was experiencing “a renaissance.” Teens in the forum dreamed about

Nerdfighteria. Sometimes this subcode took the form of discussing fan-related merchandise. Riley was proud to share that they possessed several signed posters. Anything that involving direct interaction with the Green brothers was very significant to the participants.

Object of fandom referred to whenever the teens would discuss a VlogBrothers video, a John Green book, and so on. However, considering that the community is literally made up of fans, *object of fandom* was a relatively rare code. It primarily occurred around discussion of John Green's new book, *Turtles All the Way Down*, which was announced at the conclusion of the scavenger hunt. The last subcode for fan self is *service to fandom*. Many participants engaged in activities to help and support the fandom. For example, members of the forum collaborated with others on a fanzine, which had several issues and contained stories about members' experiences in the community or discovery of the community, fiction and poetry, and fan art. The fanzine was an unusual and rare example in this study of Nerdfighter fanworks. Unlike many fandoms, Nerdfighteria produces relatively little fan-related transformative works.

Creative

Agosto and Hughes-Hassell describe the *creative self* as including both the creation and consumption of creative work.^{xlv} The data in my study led me to take a narrower stance. *Creative self* was coded to focus on content creation due to the increasingly blurred line between content and creation, and Agosto and Hughes-Hassell's inclusion of popular culture in social self.

Creative self was a less common code. A lone survey respondent mentioned searching Nerdfighter communities for Nerdfighter-related art. Creative self encompassed two subcodes, both emic, *hobbies* and *side projects*.

Many participants were involved in theater. Others had YouTube channels to share their creative content, including a planned video prequel to Harry Potter. Some, such as Gemma, used the Nerdfighter community to share their writing: "If I need feedback on something, there are people who will take time out of their schedule to go read and try and figure out more about something. You can always have people that will give their time up to help." Rebecca participated in Nerdfighter Facebook groups around cooking and visual arts. Rebecca liked being able to provide help, citing an example in their crafting group where she advised a fellow Nerdfighter on how to mix paints.

Reflective

The *reflective self* encompasses a developing *identity, future goals, values, civic duty*, and a *cultural identity*.^{xlvi} The subcodes for *reflective self* only differed slightly between Nerdfighteria and the ELIS needs of urban teens. Similar codes were *college* and *future goals* and what I termed *identity*, but what Agosto and Hughes-Hassell call *self-actualization*. Nerdfighters engaged in quite a bit of discussion around *charity* (e.g., Project for Awesome and other charitable endeavors). Theoretically, charity could be considered to be a part of *civic duty*, however the high prevalence of *charity* and the prominence of charitable endeavors in the community argued for an independent code.

The culture of Nerdfighteria emphasizes charity. Indeed, their maxim is to “decrease world suck.” Consequently, teens were very involved in charity work. Once again, timing was likely a component of the weight of this code. Project for Awesome is a very large annual fund-raiser and occurred during the data collection phase of the study. Additionally, data collection occurred during the escalating Syrian international refugee crisis. This crisis prompted reflection on the part of Nerdfighters, and one interview participant asked that their gift card be donated to a local agency that supported resettled refugees.

As teens are in a transitional stage, the discussion of college and future goals was common in the forum. Members discussed which colleges they were considering, what they wanted in a school, the common application, and admissions interviews. No one referenced a career before of higher education. College posts received advice and information, including insider information from people who happened to live near one of the colleges under discussion. Future goals beyond college were discussed less frequently.

Identity was less frequently discussed. When it came up in the forum, the discussion focused on the importance of a Nerdfighter identity to the members. Questions of identity were less prevalent in the interview and diaries, though they did come up. For example, Chris talked about how being a Nerdfighter helped during a difficult period of middle school.

Identity, in a gender or sexual sense, was a complex topic among teen Nerdfighters. Sexuality is included in the discussion of sexual self. Gender identity did come up. For example, Sam and a friend from a Nerdfighter group developed a flyer on gender identity and an infographic on pronoun usage (with regard to identity, not grammar). Sam took this project to their

Nerdfighteria group because the community has a lot of exposure to identity issues and a “drive to make a difference.”

Physical

The *physical self* includes *health, well-being, safety*, and daily tasks that are a part of living. However, physical *safety* was not a concern for the participants or the members of the forum. *Health* was the most common subcode. Rebecca, an interview and diary participant, had experienced a traumatic brain injury. They participated in a Nerdfighter chronic illness subgroup to discuss their progress, ask for advice, and provide advice in turn. Discussion of health in the forum revolved around more common adolescent experiences such as having wisdom teeth removed or braces put on, for example, or reflecting on the illness of a family member. *Appearance* as a subcode only occurred once, and by an interview participant. In this instance, Tyler (who went by two names, one traditionally female and one traditionally male) used their Nerdfighter community for advice on cutting their hair, then sent before-and-after photos. When asked why they turned to Nerdfighteria for this advice they responded:

I like to believe that a lot of people in the community are really honest and stuff. Their opinion, though I don't know these people in real life, is just as important as people I do know in real life. Not in a weird way, but I feel it gave me the confidence I needed. I trust the group a lot. . . . I guess because I found the safety and security that I really want to find. By joining the group from day one, I haven't felt excluded from it. I've felt welcomed and accepted regardless of anything. I think the sense of security is what's been nice, and safety.

Sexual

Sexual self refers to the growing understanding of a person as a sexual being, sexual identity, and sexual safety from violence.^{xlvii} Though not mentioned in the original discussion of sexual self, gender identity is part of this self. In the decade since Agosto and Hughes-Hassell proposed their framework, there has been a seismic shift in the discussion around gender. Sexual and gender identity falls in both the reflective self, in which I discussed identity, and the sexual self, discussed here.

Sexual and gender identities were commonly discussed by interview participants in different Nerdfighter platforms. They used these platforms to come out, to advocate, and to support. One

interview participant, Ash, was an active participant in a Nerdfighter Discord LGBTQ subchannel discussion. Tyler, as discussed earlier, found a Nerdfighter friend to collaborate on educational materials about nonbinary genders and the importance of pronoun choice.

Sexual self was not an especially common code. I suspect that this is most likely due to the public nature of the forum observed, and the understandable reticence of interview participants. As sex and sexuality were not specific topics of questions in the interview, diary, or survey, participants would have to have a reason to raise it.

Teens came to their Nerdfighter community with a wide variety of information needs and topics. These ELIS practices fit well into a developmental framework, which suggests that teen Nerdfighters engaged in information topics related to their stage as adolescents and informed by the specific characteristics of their community, and that fan communities overall are rich sources for teen ELIS practices.

Discussion

This study affirms the findings of prior researchers on the information behavior in fan communities that the communities are generally supportive and welcoming spaces for information seeking, but this study extends these findings to teens. The teens in this study came to Nerdfighteria for a wide variety of information needs, but the emotional and supportive nature of the community kept them coming back. As Grace said, “It’s a really nice place to be. Even though it’s not a physical place, when you’re with everyone or talking to people, it just feels like home. No one’s there to judge you. Everyone’s there for the same kind of reason, just be.”

Additionally, this study finds that teens in online fan communities use their community for an astonishingly wide variety of information topics, and that these topics and practices fit well with our understanding of the ELIS practices of teens. The ELIS needs of Nerdfighters were well matched to our understanding of the developmental stage of adolescence and the attendant information behaviors.^{xlviii} In the case of Nerdfighteria, teens were most frequently to engaged in social, cognitive, emotional, or fan-oriented topics. Social practices were oriented toward hanging out, welcoming friends, and sharing overlapping fandoms. Cognitive topics were very common in Nerdfighteria, as it is a community dedicated in part to being a nerd and included discussions of current events, science, literature, as well as a general celebration of being a nerd. As Riley put it, “I guess it’s a place where anyone can go and learn and at the same time interact

with people. . . . It is a place also where anyone can be themselves and being a nerd isn't a bad thing." Teens in Nerdfighteria were quick to ask for or offer emotional support and to share their personal challenges. Fan-oriented topics were important to teen Nerdfighters to the extent that they viewed their participation in Nerdfighteria as an extension of their identity and felt a responsibility to support the community at large in a variety of ways.

Congruent with prior research, it is likely that the mix and prevalence of topics would vary according to the specific platform studied (e.g., social practices were prevalent in observations of the forum while cognitive practices were prevalent in interview data) and the specific community (Nerdfighteria focused heavily on cognitive topics). Other communities would probably see a different mix of selves. This research adds a developmental informational "self," that of the fan.

Implications for Practice

Fandoms are far more than places for sharing fanworks, such as fanfiction. Indeed, fandoms are extensive, sprawling communities, which often function as a social hub outside of the object of fandom. Fan spaces—whether online communities, as studied here, or in real life—are rich venues for information far beyond the topic of the fandom. Librarians serving teens would be wise to recognize the power of a fan community for information sharing. Additionally, as fandoms cover an almost limitless range of topics, and as the online communities are rapidly, incessantly evolving, keeping aware of changes and trends in fandoms is an ongoing task. Librarians working with teens should maintain their already strong connections with the teens they serve and take the time to examine with an open mind the fan spaces that are relevant to their populations.

Limitations

The teens in this study were undoubtedly impacted by the period in which this study was conducted. As noted earlier, the social upheaval following the 2016 election and the Syrian refugee crisis likely played a role in the prevalence of certain topics. Likewise, this study occurred during a renaissance in Nerdfighteria. As the study was under way, John Green announced a scavenger hunt, a new book, and a book tour. All of these events created additional excitement in a community that had been relatively stable. Additionally, the teens' perception was that Nerdfighteria was a unique place; indeed, that was a motivating factor to participate.

Not everywhere on the internet felt like home in 2016 and 2017. The nature of the community drove teens to share their information needs in Nerdfighteria.

As with most qualitative studies, this one had a relatively small sample size, a specific age of participants, and focused on a specific area of online communities—fandoms—all of which limit the degree to which this study can be generalized. Future studies should examine information behavior in other fandoms and with teens to determine how the ELIS practices of teens change based on the community in which they engage.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) practices of teens in an online fan community to determine the kinds of information teens sought. Because little is known about the intersection of teens, information behavior, and fan communities, and because fandoms and online communities are undergoing constant transformation, this study contributes to our understanding of an evolving phenomena. Teens are going to fan communities and seeking or offering information on a wide variety of topics far removed from the fandom itself. Gaining a better understanding of these processes and needs will help researchers understand and librarians serve this critical population.

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Notes

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