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Kim Smith
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, kcsmith1@ncat.edu

Tobin Walton
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, tnwalton@ncat.edu

Alvin Keyes
North Carolina A&T State Uniersity, keyesa@ncat.edu

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Kim Smith, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
Greensboro, N.C.
Kcsmith1@ncat.edu

Tobin Walton, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology and Social Work
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
Greensboro, N.C.
tnwalton@ncat.edu

Alvin Keyes, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
Greensboro, N.C.
keyesa@ncat.edu

Exploring Screen Time Habits and the Life Empowerment Divide at an HBCU

Abstract

College students at a historically black university used their social media accounts to recruit 1,232 of their peers to take an online survey that explored digital screen time and social media habits at this HBCU. The study revealed that 51% devoted daily screen time to academic empowerment, 31% devoted it to leisure, and 11% devoted it to life empowerment. Sixty-six percent said they spent too much screen time on leisure and not enough on life empowerment, i.e., using resources in the digital world to improve their lives. The paper explored the divide, its implications, and how to narrow it.

Keywords: millennials, empowerment, HBCU, screen time

Exploring Screen Time Habits and the Life Empowerment Divide at an HBCU:

Introduction

"Don't get caught up in the gossip on social media about Beyonce. Instead, learn how she and JZ made their billions."—author unknown

Resources abound on the Internet and social media to help students become empowered. YouTube, for example, has tutorials on how to: improve grades (How to build study habits, 2016); buy a house (Ramsey, 2016); or become financially literate (How to manage your money, 2019). An empowerment divide occurs when people who finally have access to the digital world do not use it to its greatest potential (Nielsen, 2006). Making the same point, Graves (2011) encouraged African Americans to spend less time seeking out entertainment during their screen time and more time seeking a way to learn life empowering skills.

Results from our survey, however, suggested that screen time to develop life empowerment skills lagged behind time devoted to academic empowerment and leisure. Such a gap has negative social, political, and economic consequences for students of color, many of whom come from impoverished areas and are the first in their families at this HBCU to attend and later graduate from college. Lacking these skills further complicates the lives of many students of color who are already facing a host of social, economic, and educational hurdles related to the digital divide and knowledge gap hypothesis (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996; Jeffres, Neuendorf & Atkin, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, and borrowing from Perkins & Zimmerman (1995), we defined life empowerment as the result of knowledge gained or a set of skills learned from the digital world via a digital screen that propels a person toward a goal of improving one's life and

perhaps the lives of others resulting in "improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and locus of control" (p. 2). A life empowerment activity would include students using a mobile phone, desktop, laptop, or tablet to search for job information, prepare for a job interview, or become health, financially, or media literate.

While we acknowledge that a college degree's academic pursuit is empowering, we decided to include two different variables, academic empowerment, and life empowerment, so as not to confuse the two. Our goal is to explore further and develop the concept of the life empowerment divide and learn the extent of its impact on students' daily screen time at this HBCU. There is good reason to explore the life empowerment divide among college students of color, whose access to everything digital is unquestioned.

More than 83 million millennials (those born roughly between 1980 and 2000) live in the United States (Nielsen Report, 2016). Fourteen percent of those millennials (11.5 million) are African Americans who, overall, are "driving social change and leading digital advancement" (para. 1). They have a smartphone penetration rate of 91%, second to Asian Americans, who have a 94% penetration rate. Ninety-one percent of African American millennials access the Internet through a mobile device, up from 86% in 2015. "Fifty-five percent spend at least one hour a day on social networking sites, which is 6% higher than all Millennials, while 29% say they spend at least three hours a day, 9% higher than all Millennials" (Nielsen 2016 Report, 2016, para. 7-8). African American millennials serve as a goldmine for online advertisers and marketers looking to sell products to a group that had $1.2 trillion in buying power in 2015. But with all of this access to digital technology, what do they do with this access?

A good place to find answers to the question and explore the life empowerment divide and screen time and social media habits of African American millennials is at a historically black public university in the South.

Background

What Is Empowerment?

A review of the literature on empowerment revealed a plethora of attempts to define a concept with various meanings depending on the discipline and context. From the individual's perspective, empowerment refers to "processes by which an individual acquires or strengthens the necessary resources that will enable personal decisions, critical thinking, mastery of essential activities and thereby achievement of goals" (Dolnicar & Fortunati, 2014, p. 165). As a personal goal, empowerment is a process of enhancing an individual's capacity to make choices and then transforming those choices into sought-after outcomes (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006). Gutierrez (1995) defined empowerment as "the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (p. 229). Rapport (1987) defined empowerment as a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them.

Empowerment can also be a group effort by like-minded individuals seeking change. Empowerment is "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Cornell Group, 1989, as quoted by Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 2). Community empowerment is used to describe how social media has been used by a group seeking political or social change (Dolnicar & Fortunati, 2014). Members of Black Lives Matter empowered

themselves by using social media to organize protests against George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin and against subsequent police shootings of unarmed black men and women. BLM began as the Twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter in 2013 (Rickford, 2015). In 2011, pro-democracy demonstrators in Egypt used social media to organize protests to fight an oppressive Egyptian government bent on crushing dissent during the so-called Arab Spring uprisings (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Efforts toward empowering social change through social media were doomed if demonstrators had not learned how to effectively use Twitter, Facebook, and other social media tools to get their messages out beyond the political power structure. They empowered themselves by learning to use social media.

All of these definitions have commonalities. In empowerment, the word "power" suggests that power relationships can change, expand, and be redistributed to those who have less power (Page & Czuba, 1999). These definitions also suggest that before empowerment takes place, knowledge is gained or a set of skills learned before one is emboldened to improve one's life and perhaps the lives of others, resulting in a redistribution of power (Page & Czuba, 1999), and "improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and locus of control" over one's life (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 2).

Origins of the Empowerment Divide

Rideout, Lauricella & Wartella (2011) concluded that the empowerment divide is rooted in habits developed by parents who allowed their children to have TVs in their child's bedrooms but did not monitor content or length of time the TV was on. Accustomed to hours of unsupervised screen-time access, students now have 24-hour access to social media and the Internet through their mobile phones. Their research and our study suggest that bad habits are hard to break and continue through high school and college.

Theoretically, the empowerment divide is related to the digital divide and the knowledge gap

hypothesis.

Digital Divide

The digital divide refers to "those Americans who use or have access to

telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not" (Kruger & Gilroy,

2006, p. 1). It was a concept made famous in a 1995 National Telecommunications and

Information Administration report during the Clinton administration entitled "Falling Through

the Net: A Survey of the Have Nots in Rural and Urban America." While never using the term

"digital divide," the report documented how access to the Internet had bypassed poor areas of the

country and recommended policies to make the Internet accessible to everyone regardless of

income, social status, or geographical location (Falling through the Net, 1995). While the digital

divide still exists in the United States, it has narrowed considerably since the 1990s. Growth in

broadband (high-speed Internet) service has risen from 2.8 million high-speed lines reported as

of December 1999 to 355 million connections as of December 31, 2015. Of the 355 million high-

speed connections reported by the FCC, 303 million serve residential users (Kruger & Gilroy,

2016).

Computers, smartphones, and broadband access in Appalachia lag behind the rest of the

country. Just over 8 out of 10 households in Appalachia have access to a computer device,

compared with 88.8% of the nation; 75% of Appalachia households have a broadband

subscription, compared to 80% of the country; 69% have access to a smartphone but only 51%

have a subscription to a cellular data plan (Computer and broadband access in Appalachia, n.d.).

The 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic exposed huge gaps in the digital divide linked to outdated digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Lee, 2020; Anderson & Kumar, 2020). When schools closed to control the spread of the virus, millions of K-12 and college students were forced online to take classes on an infrastructure that was unprepared for the burden it was forced to bear. Some students returned home to areas where one-third of the country had no broadband connection (Lee, 2020; Anderson & Kumar, 2020). Unable to take online classes because of unreliable WIFI connections or overdependence upon mobile phones to take tests and write papers, many of these students never returned to remote learning and failed courses. Many of these students were already strangled by poverty and other educational and economic problems before the pandemic placed them in other health, financial and education jeopardy (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis & Viruleg 2020). In this case, the pandemic shed light on a digital divide that threatened academic and life empowerment.

The Knowledge Gap Hypothesis

Tichenor, Donohue & Olien (1970) proposed in the knowledge gap that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds made wiser choices because they had access to faster and better information than people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Higher-income earners become information elites whose decisions overshadow and are often adopted over the voices of the lower socio-economic class because of better and faster access to information. Revaluating the hypothesis 25 years later, Viswanath & Finnegan (1996) concluded that social power and social action stem from the knowledge and the control of knowledge. Accordingly, inequalities in knowledge lead to power inequalities (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). The knowledge gap "has implications for policymaking in democracies" Jeffres, Neuendorf & Atkin, 2012 (p. 60), that struggle with ways to empower people left economically, socially, and educationally

powerless by the knowledge gap. Their research suggested that the wider the knowledge gap, the wider the empowerment divide.

Some studies suggest that if the digital divide closed so that all of society had equal access to new technology, life empowerment would take care of itself (Ye & Yang, 2020; Mehra, Merkle & Bishop, 2004). However, Smith (2011) concluded that equal access to new digital tools does not always translate into empowerment. His study revealed that Black and White college students who claimed to be experts at using computers to look up health information could not discern good online health information from bad. Online health illiteracy is another form of the digital empowerment divide.

An empowerment divide is also reflected in a study of Black, Latino, and White children's TV-watching habits. Black and Latino children spend 50 % more time watching television (six hours per day) than White children (three hours per day). Almost 90 % of Black and Latino children have a TV in their bedrooms compared to 64 % of White children. Minority youth spend 3 hours and 7 minutes per day watching TV, playing games, and listening to music on their mobiles - about 1.5 hours more each day than white kids (Bentley, 2011). The disparities point to an empowerment divide that could be narrowed if children of color were taught more productive ways to spend their screen time.

Problem Statement

A survey of students at an HBCU about their screen-time habits revealed that most of them spend time pursuing academic empowerment and leisure than life empowerment. The study examined the implications of the life empowerment divide and how to narrow the gap. Excluding some articles in the popular media on the empowerment divide and its impact on African Americans who use digital screens to access social media and the Internet (Graves, 2011;

Washington, 2011), we found no empirical research on the life empowerment divide culture among African American college students.

Informed by the digital divide (Kruger & Gilroy, 2006), and digital empowerment divide (Dolnicar & Fortunati, 2014; Nielson, 2006), and the knowledge gap (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien 1970; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996), we proposed the following hypothesis and research question.

H1: Student daily screen time leans more toward academic empowerment and leisure than life empowerment.

RQ1: How do daily screen time related to academics, leisure, and life empowerment compare among first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors?

Methodology

Using snowball sampling and a flyer announcing the survey, 72 students in two mass communication research courses, along with students in a psychology and sociology research course, were required to recruit five of their friends to take an online 20-item IRB-approved questionnaire which was placed on Qualtrics. Qualtrics allows people to take surveys using their mobile devices, which was how most of the students took the survey. On the flyer was a QR code with a link to the survey. The QR code made it easy for students with phones to take the survey. In addition to the flyer, students also recruited their peers by placing a link on their social media sites directed to current students. Nearly every student in the research classes had at least one social media account. Some had several, including Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and GroupMe. Social media played a critical role in spreading the link across campus. Additional student survey takers were recruited during one of the university's Undergraduate Research Symposia. Students from the research classes, armed with additional flyers to hand out, asked

their peers who came in to view the posters and listen to oral presentations to take the survey

using their mobile devices or laptops to increase the response rate. In addition to the volunteer

student recruiters, the initial results were a featured topic of discussion at the symposium. The

authors of this study held a panel discussion about the initial findings, which generated more

responses. By the end of the week, 1,232 students had taken the survey but not all of the students

answered all of the questions. After the survey was completed, some students conducted

interviews with some of the respondents to gain more insight into their peers' social media

habits.

<div align="center">**Results**</div>

Demographics:

Out of 996 respondents who answered the question, 14.76 % were freshmen, 24.20 %

sophomores, 32.83% juniors, and 26.31% senior. Females represented 68.91% of the responses

compared with 30.18% of males. The combined hours per day students spent in front of a screen

for academic, leisure, and life empowerment activities revealed that close to one out of three (

29.55%) spend 8 to 11 hours in front of a screen; 36.34% spend 4 to 7 hours; 17.21% spent 12 to

15 hours; 10.53% spent more than 15 hours, and 6.38% spent 0 to 3 hours per day.

H1: Student daily screen time leans more toward academic empowerment and leisure

than life empowerment.

The hypothesis was supported. Screen time hours per day favored academic

empowerment and leisure over life empowerment. Perhaps most alarming was that two out of

three students (66% of respondents) said they spent little of their screen time using it as a life

empowering tool.

Survey results showed that 51% of student screen time was devoted to academic empowerment, slightly more than 30% was devoted to leisure, and 11.80 % was devoted to life empowerment. The trendline showed that life empowerment lagged behind academics and leisure when it came to how students used their screen time. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 GOES HERE Figure 1.

N-933

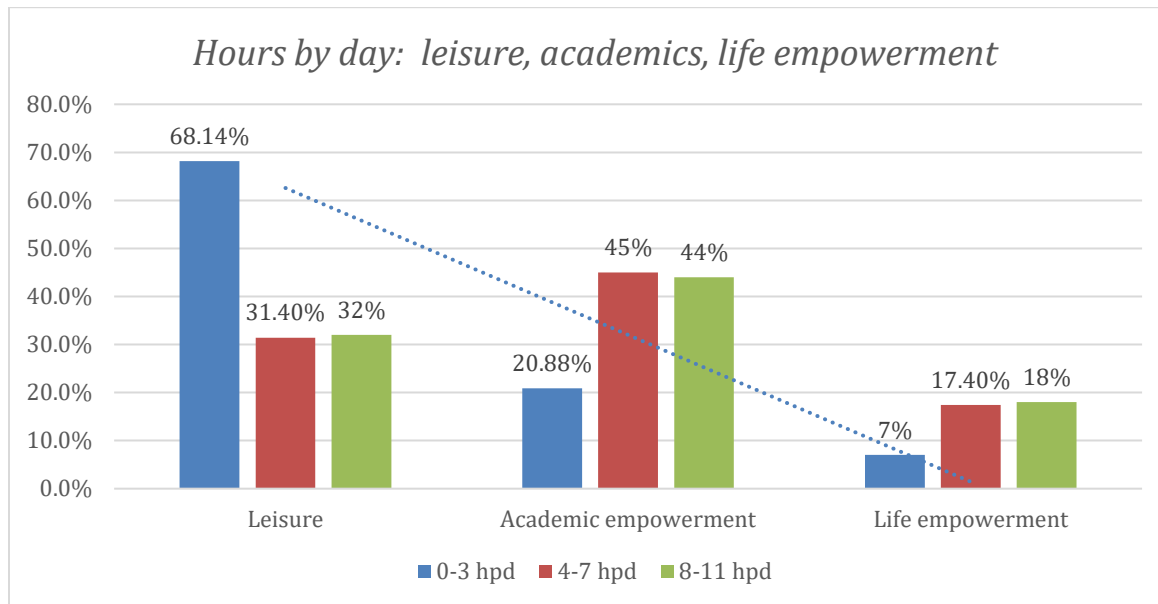Screentime for academic empowerment, leisure and life empowerment
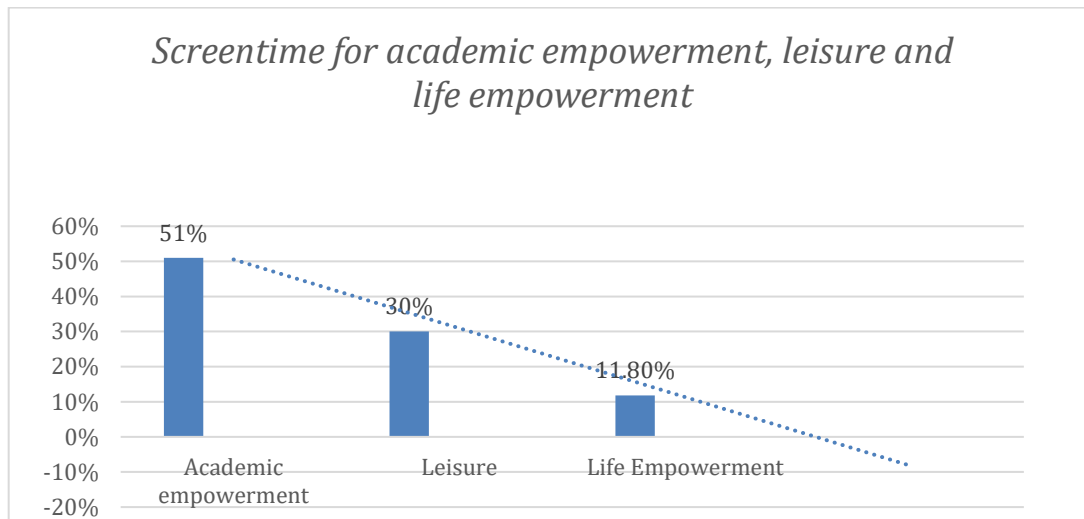
A deeper dive into screen time hours per day revealed again that academics and leisure outranked life empowerment. The trendline showed students had little interest in using screen time for life empowerment.

See Figure 2.

Figure 2.

N-933

It was clear that almost seven out of 10 students spent 0-3 hours per day using screen time for leisure. Just over one out of three (31.4%) spent 4-7 hours per day pursuing leisure; 32% spent 8-11 hours per day pursuing leisure. Screen time focusing on social media entertainment seemed to be of particular concern among a majority of students. Two out of three respondents agreed with the statement, "Too much of my life is consumed by screen time related to leisure."

When it came to academic empowerment, 20.88% spent 0-3 hours per day using screen time for that purpose; 45% spent 4-7 hours, and 44% spent 8-11 hours per day pursuing academic empowerment. When it came to life empowerment, 7% spent 0-3 hours per day, 17.4% spent 4-7 hours, and 18% spent 8-11 hours per day.

Here is a final piece of evidence supporting the hypothesis. Out of 929 students who answered this question, 43% said that life empowerment made up a small portion of the daily

screen time, compared to 14% who said it was a large part of their daily screen time. Four

percent said all of their screen time was devoted to life empowerment. Life empowerment is not

a priority when it comes to screen time.

   RQ1: How did daily screen time related to academic empowerment, leisure, and life

empowerment compare among first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors?

       We decided to look at first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors' screen time

associated with academic empowerment, leisure, and life empowerment. The researchers

selected the 4-7 hours per day category to examine the relationship between classification and

leisure, academic empowerment, and life empowerment. This 4 to7- hour category had the

largest number of respondents (416) among all classifications. See Figures 3.

Figure 3
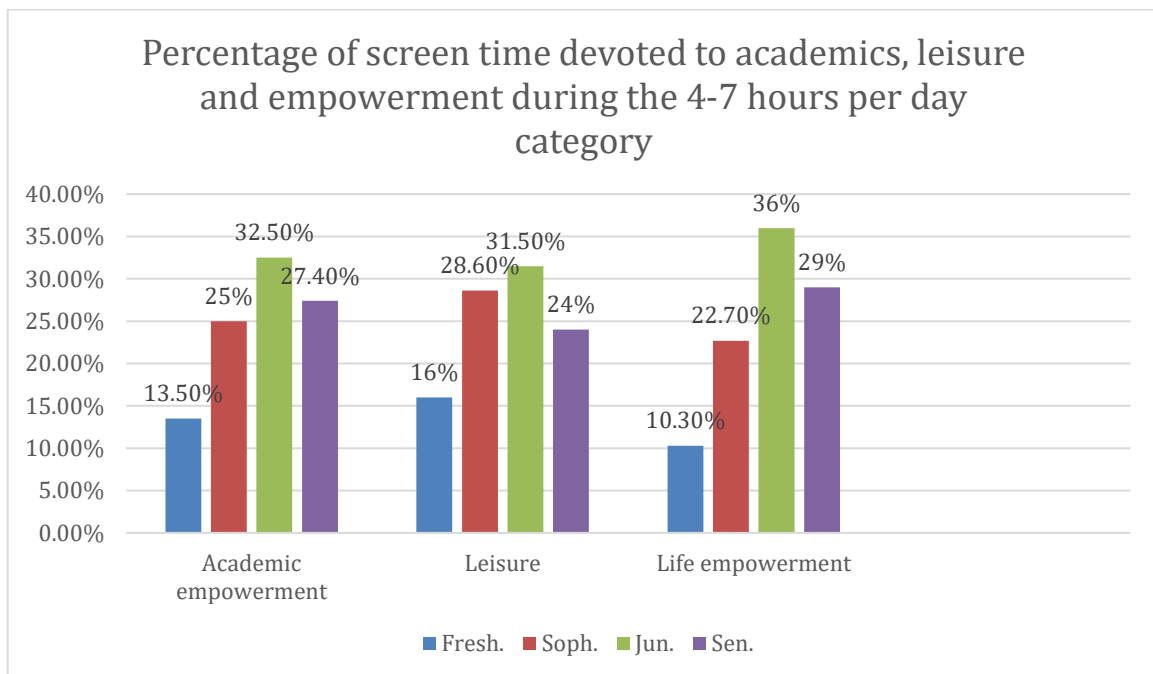
N=416.

First-year students devoted 13.5% of their 4-7 hours per day in screen time to academics. Screen time for leisure was 16%. Screen time for life empowerment was 10.3%. Sophomores spent 25% of their time in academics, 28.6% of their time in leisure, and 22.7% of their time in life empowerment. Juniors spent 32.5% of their time in academics, 31.5% of their time in leisure, and 36% of their time in life empowerment. Seniors spent 27.4% of their time in academics, 24% of their time in leisure, and 29% of their time in life empowerment. But this came as a surprise. By the junior year, life empowerment pursuits led by 36%, ahead of academic pursuits at 32.5%, and 31.5% for academic pursuits. By the senior year, life empowerment continued to lead at 29%, followed by academics (27.4%), and leisure pursuits at 24%.

In addition to the hypothesis and research question, the data also revealed students' favorite social media platforms/apps for academics, leisure, and life empowerment. For academic empowerment, Google was the favorite for 95.82 % of 718 respondents, followed by Blackboard with 79.53% out of 557 responses, and GroupMe with 79.19% out of 529 responses. For leisure, 83.10% chose Snapchat out of 748 responses, Netflix got 80.59% of the vote out of 657 respondents, and YouTube received 80.6% out of 768 responses. For life empowerment, YouTube was the favorite among 78.82% out of 406 respondents, LinkedIn was favored by 68.25% out of 369 responses, GroupMe was favored by 62.28% out of 342 responses.

Discussion

These findings pointed to a student digital culture that encouraged a life empowerment divide at this HBCU. The data showed that life empowerment lagged behind academic empowerment and leisure in hours students spent per day in front of a screen. Rideout, Lauricella & Wartella (2011) blamed the empowerment divide on parents who allowed their children unlimited access to the TVs in their bedrooms during their childhood. TV watching was

unsupervised, including content and the length of time TVs were on. Accustomed to hours of unsupervised TV screen time per day, students now have 24-hour access to social media and the Internet through their mobile phones. Habits developed in childhood tend to continue through K-12 and college, and perhaps later. Perhaps those habits manifest themselves in this study of students' daily screen use at this HBCU. In addition to the life empowerment divide, the study revealed some unexpected findings regarding grade classifications and screen time. From first-year students to sophomores, life empowerment lagged behind academic empowerment and leisure. But by the junior and senior year, interest in life empowerment became more important than academic empowerment or leisure. It could be that it was not until students got to their junior year that they realized they needed to get serious about using their screen time for life empowerment. The focus became: What can I find on the Internet about how to write a resume? How do I write a personal statement for graduate school or medical school? What can I find on the Internet about how best to balance work and schoolwork?

Examining screen time and grade classifications also revealed the nuanced interplay between academic empowerment and leisure. The study suggested that students sought a balance between academic empowerment and leisure. And the data showed that leisure and academic time were shared nearly equally. Leisure does play a role in reducing stress created by academics. It was also clear from other data that there was too much of an emphasis on leisure among some students.

Interviews with Student Recruiters

Students who conducted the survey interviewed some of the students they had recruited. Their interviews suggested that many of their peers were shocked, and in some cases, embarrassed when they began counting the number of hours spent in front of screens. Some of

the recruiters said screen time might be longer because some students might not have been as forthcoming as they should about the amount of time they spent. Although we didn't ask about how many hours per day their daily screen time included hours in front of a TV screen, the student researchers suggested that students may not have included those hours. Botterill, Bredin & Dun (2015) would describe these respondents as "transmedia users." These are social media-obsessed students who use social media and traditional media such as TV at the same time but are only tracked by most media market research firms for social media use. Transmedia users "orchestrate multiple media activities and cultural forms on a number of devices at different moments of the day, sometimes simultaneously, to address a range of interests and routines" (p. 5). Their study of Canadian college students revealed that they use media for entertainment and socializing, much like students on this HBCU campus.

In terms of favorite social media platforms/apps, student recruiters said Google was the respondents' favorite online academic empowerment tool because it is the first place they go for information and research. Blackboard was listed because it housed most of their online assignments. GroupMe was another academic empowerment tool because that was where students could share information about assignments. For students who did some degree of life empowerment, YouTube was selected because of its many self-help, instructional, and tutorial videos.

Lessons from this Study

Earlier research suggested that if the digital divide and the knowledge gap were eliminated and everyone had equal access to digital technology and knowledge, the life empowerment divide would also go away. Other research suggests that eliminating the digital divide and knowledge gap would not entirely close the life empowerment divide. Students make

individual choices about the content they seek on the Internet and social media or are driven by

habits formed in childhood that encourage a life empowerment divide. Nevertheless, the life

empowerment divide should be of concern because that could threaten these students'

educational and economic growth in a 21st -century digital society (Viswanath & Finnegan,

1996; Jeffres, Neuendorf & Atkin, 2012). Not having financial and health literacy skills in

today's society limits their political and socio-economic power. Lacking these skills further

complicates the lives of many students of color who are already facing a host of social,

economic, and educational hurdles. Many of them are first-generation college students. A digital

empowerment culture has to be cultivated to narrow the life empowerment divide culture among

such students. One way to create the culture is to link digital empowerment with a reimagining

of media literacy education.

Linking Digital Empowerment with Media Literacy

Media literacy provides students tools to think critically about the media and a

"framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms while building

"an understanding of the role of media in society, as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-

expression necessary for citizens of a democracy" (Media literacy: A definition, n.d. para. 1). A

group of technology experts, scholars and health specialists called for the redesign of media

literacy programs to "formally educate people of all ages about the impacts of digital life on the

well-being and the way tech systems function, as well as encourage appropriate, healthy uses"

(The future of well-being in a tech-saturated world, 2018, para. 17). Media literacy education for

youth has been debated nationally and globally, and the consensus is that media literacy must be

taken seriously and taught from K-12 to the college level, and perhaps beyond, the researchers

concluded. While there has been a growing effort to provide media literacy education in K-12,

efforts lag at the college level (Schmidt, 2012). Perhaps it is time to take media literacy education seriously for K-12 and college students. With part of its focus being on digital empowerment, a media literacy curriculum should also be required for K-12. Those courses should continue through college and beyond. It would teach college students to be more discerning about media use and the benefits of spending more screen time empowering themselves with the vast amount of knowledge that can be found on the Internet and social media.

Recommendations

So how do you create a media literacy culture and narrow the digital empowerment divide? Bentley (2011) concluded that developing media-literate children starts in the home, with parents who monitor media content and how long per day children can spend in front of a screen. Media-literate children grow up to be digitally empowered. In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics, as quoted by Reading Rockets (2016), has compiled a list of other things parents can do to raise media-literate children. (1.) No child under 2 should have a television in their bedroom and no screen time. (2.) Be a good role model for how to use media. "Teach and model kindness and good manners online. And, because children are great mimics, limit your media use. You'll be more available for and connected with your children if you're interacting, hugging and playing with them rather than simply staring at a screen" (Academy of Pediatrics, as quoted by Reading Rockets, 2016, para. 6). 3. Don't use technology as an emotional pacifier. "Media can be very effective in keeping kids calm and quiet, but it should not be the only way they learn to calm down" (Academy of Pediatrics as quoted by Reading Rockets, 2016, para. 9). The same can be said about parents who buy their children mobile phones so that parents can get a moment of peace.

Limitations/Future Research

The survey was based on self-reported screen time hours per day. We had no way to document official students' screen time. Our sample represented a fraction of the student population at this HBCU. In terms of future research, the data for this survey were collected before the pandemic. It would be interesting to redo the study to see if social media and Internet habits have changed post-pandemic. Does life empowerment take a more critical role in their lives after the pandemic?

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