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Race, identity, and everyday life information-seeking: a study of African American teens in Chicago

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper reports a study investigating the everyday life and academic information-seeking behaviour of African American teens. While youth information behaviour research has examined technology, literacy, and everyday life needs, little attention has been paid to the role of racial identity and sociocultural context in shaping information practices.

Method. A sequential mixed-methods design was employed. Data collection included non-participant observations of 236 teens in public library YOUmedia spaces, surveys and focus groups with 35 African American teens, and interviews with 12 library staff members.

Analysis. Grounded theory, thematic coding, and comparative analysis with existing information behaviour models (everyday life information seeking, radical change, and small world theory) were applied to the qualitative and quantitative data.

Results. Findings show that African American teens rely heavily on personal and trusted networks, while also making complex use of digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Google. Their information needs paralleled those of peers, but racial identity and systemic inequities uniquely mediated trust, evaluation, and access. Teens also described barriers in cultural representation and reported collaborative, community-oriented practices.

Conclusions. The study demonstrates that racial identity is a critical factor in youth information behaviour. Implications include culturally responsive literacy initiatives and more inclusive youth library services.

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Introduction

Public libraries and information institutions play a vital role in supporting the intellectual and social development of young people. Over the past two decades, research on youth information behaviour has explored how teens locate, evaluate, and use information across academic and everyday contexts. Much of this work has examined information literacy, technology use, and digital engagement (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006; Franklin, 2013; Li, 2018; Williamson et al., 2012). However, despite attention to sociocultural factors such as identity, socioeconomic status, and peer networks, few studies have examined the influence of race and racial identity on how young people seek and interpret information.

This gap is particularly notable for African American youth. Although they share many information needs with their peers—academic success, career preparation, social connection, and entertainment—their experiences are shaped by systemic inequities, digital divides, and racialised social contexts. Historical and contemporary barriers, including economic inequality, educational segregation, and bias within institutions, contribute to disparities in access and trust of information sources (Benjamin, 2019; Carnoy & Garcia, 2017). For many African American teens, information seeking is not only intellectual but also a social and cultural process influenced by identity, belonging, and representation.

The limited research that addresses race in information behaviour often focuses on health or poverty rather than holistic perspectives of youth information practices (Hovick et al., 2011; Mai et al., 2016). Studies on teens frequently generalise findings across populations, assuming homogeneity in motivations and contexts. Yet, as Chatman's (1999) small world theory suggests, marginalised communities develop distinct information networks shaped by trust, privacy, and social boundaries. Likewise, Savolainen's (1995) everyday life information seeking model and Dresang's (1999) radical change theory emphasise the importance of context, access, and digital interactivity—elements central to understanding African American teens' experiences.

This study explores how African American teens in Chicago seek, evaluate, and share information in both everyday and academic contexts. Chicago provides a meaningful setting: nearly one-third of its residents identify as African American, yet persistent educational and digital inequities shape access to information resources (CMAP, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The city's network of YOUmedia learning labs—technology-rich, interest-driven library spaces for teens—offers an ideal environment to observe information behaviour in authentic community settings.

The conceptual foundation integrates three theoretical perspectives central to information behaviour research:

1. Savolainen's everyday life information seeking framework, which explains how people seek information to manage everyday needs and make sense of their social worlds.
2. Chatman's small world theory, which examines how marginalised groups form insular information networks that can lead to information poverty.
3. Dresang's radical change theory, which situates digital youth information behaviour within principles of interactivity, connectivity, and access.

Together, these frameworks illuminate the interplay between sociocultural context, digital engagement, and racial identity in the information practices of African American teens.

The purpose of this study is to examine how sociocultural and racial factors influence the everyday and academic information-seeking behaviours of African American teens, and how their

experiences may expand existing models. By identifying their key sources, motivations, and barriers, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of youth information practices—one that acknowledges the intersection of race, technology, and community.

Research questions

- What are the significant characteristics of the information-seeking behaviour of African American teens?
- What are their everyday and academic information-seeking behaviours?
- How does technology influence their information-seeking behaviour?
- What sociocultural factors influence their information-seeking behaviour?

By foregrounding racial identity as a key analytical lens, this study extends the conversation on youth information behaviour and offers practical implications for librarians, educators, and researchers seeking to develop culturally responsive library services.

Literature review

Research on youth information behaviour has evolved significantly over the past two decades, moving from a focus on information retrieval and cognitive processes to more contextual and socially constructed understandings of how young people seek and use information. Theories such as Savolainen's everyday life information seeking, Dresang's radical change theory, and Chatman's small world theory provide valuable perspectives for interpreting the social, technological, and cultural influences that shape youth information practices. This section highlights key developments within these frameworks and establishes how the present study extends them through the lens of race and sociocultural identity.

Everyday life information seeking

Savolainen (1995) introduced the everyday life information seeking model to explain how individuals seek information to navigate daily life. Building on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, Savolainen argued that information behaviour is influenced by social and cultural structures that determine what people value, how they perceive their environment, and which resources they consider legitimate. Individuals 'internalise a socially and culturally determined system of thinking, perception, and evaluation' (Franklin, 2013, p. 28).

Within youth research, the everyday life information seeking framework has provided insight into how teens pursue information related to identity, friendship, school, and creative expression. Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2006) applied the model to urban teenagers and identified seven developmental selves—social, emotional, reflective, physical, creative, cognitive, and sexual—that shape the topics and sources youth pursue. Their work suggested that information seeking in adolescence is inseparable from identity construction and social belonging.

Later researchers tested everyday life information seeking across cultures and socioeconomic contexts. For example, Koo (2012) found that South Korean youth prioritised academic and peer relationship information, while Franklin (2013) added the 'playful self' to reflect leisure-based searching among affluent suburban teens. Markwei and Rasmussen (2015) studied homeless Ghanaian youth and discovered distinct needs centred on employment, shelter, and financial stability, showing that information behaviour reflects structural conditions as much as personal motivation.

Despite its flexibility, the everyday life information seeking model has rarely addressed racial identity as a determinant of information practices. Savolainen (2016) later recognised that factors such as class, education, and cultural norms can limit access to information and shape perceptions of trustworthy sources. Yet research directly connecting race, inequity, and information behaviour remains limited. This gap is particularly visible in studies of African American youth, whose experiences are shaped by historical marginalisation and evolving digital environments.

In this study, everyday life information seeking provides a foundation for examining how African American teens orient themselves toward everyday and academic information needs. The framework is expanded to include racialised experience as a structural dimension influencing access, trust, and motivation— factors not explicitly accounted for in traditional everyday life information seeking applications.

Radical change theory

Dresang's radical change theory (1999, 2005) emerged from youth literature research and later described youth information behaviour in digital environments. It posits that digital technologies have transformed how youth interact with information, emphasising three principles: interactivity, connectivity, and access.

According to Dresang (2005), interactivity reflects how young people engage dynamically with digital texts, multimedia, and social platforms, often employing non-linear reading and participatory information creation. Connectivity refers to the social nature of youth information practices, including collaboration and collective meaning-making. Access highlights the dismantling—or persistence—of barriers that determine who can find and use information effectively.

Subsequent research extended these principles. Koh (2015) applied radical change theory to online creative communities, observing that youth information behaviour includes personalising, remixing, negotiating value systems, and seeking identity-related information. These behaviours show that teens are not merely consumers but creators of new knowledge. Li (2018) similarly found that in library makerspaces, teens' information practices are socially oriented and driven by peer collaboration.

Despite its focus on equity and access, radical change theory has not fully accounted for how systemic racism and cultural representation shape youth experiences with information. Benjamin (2019) introduced the concept of engineered inequity to describe how algorithms and information systems perpetuate bias, reinforcing the structural barriers that youth of colour encounter. For African American teens, digital interactivity and connectivity exist within racially coded environments where representation and trust are contested.

This study extends radical change theory by situating African American teens' digital and social information practices within these racialised contexts. The findings explore how interactivity, connectivity, and access intersect with lived experiences of bias and exclusion, offering a culturally grounded interpretation of radical change in practice.

Small world theory

Chatman's small world theory (1991, 1996, 1999) offers a sociological framework for understanding information behaviour within marginalised or insular communities. A 'small world' refers to a bounded social environment in which members share norms, trust, and communication patterns. Within these worlds, individuals rely on familiar sources while viewing outsiders and formal

information systems with scepticism. Chatman (1996) argued that such dynamics can produce information poverty—a condition where communities have limited access to external or alternative resources despite their availability.

This perspective has proven valuable for analysing information practices among underrepresented populations. Markwei and Rasmussen (2015) linked small world theory to youth in Ghana who depended on peer networks for survival information. Buchanan and Tuckerman (2016) similarly found that disadvantaged youth in Scotland relied on interpersonal sources over institutional ones. These studies highlight that information behaviour is embedded in social relationships shaped by trust, authority, and power.

In African American communities, Chatman's insights align with findings that many individuals perceive mainstream institutions—including libraries—as lacking cultural relevance or responsiveness (Folk & Overbey, 2022). Experiences of racial bias or microaggressions further discourage engagement with formal sources, leading youth to depend on peers, family, and digital media that reflect their lived realities. As one participant in a related study stated, 'we look things up online or ask friends because the library does not have what we need or does not feel like it is for us' (Folk & Overbey, 2022, p. 381).

This study employs small world theory to examine how African American teens construct networks of trusted information exchange and how perceptions of institutional exclusion influence their behaviours. By integrating Chatman's framework with everyday life information seeking and radical change theory, this study addresses both the micro-level social interactions and macro-level structural forces that define African American teens' information worlds.

Summary

Together, everyday life information seeking, radical change, and small world theories provide a multidimensional foundation for analysing youth information behaviour. everyday life information seeking highlights orientation toward everyday needs; radical change underscores the impact of digital transformation and participatory culture; and small world theory exposes the social boundaries and trust dynamics that shape access. However, none of these frameworks independently capture the influence of race as both a contextual and structural factor.

This study advances information behaviour research by integrating these models to explore how racial identity mediates information-seeking among African American teens. It posits that understanding information behaviour through the lens of equity and representation is essential for designing inclusive library and educational practices that respond to the realities of diverse youth populations.

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to examine how sociocultural and racial factors influence the everyday and academic information-seeking behaviour of African American teens in Chicago. The design integrated qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to provide both depth of understanding and empirical breadth. Mixed methods approaches are widely recommended in information behaviour research because they enable exploration of complex social phenomena that cannot be captured through a single paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research setting

Data was collected within Chicago Public Library's YOUmedia learning labs, technology-rich spaces that promote creativity, digital literacy, and social connection among teens. YOUmedia was selected because it serves a high concentration of African American youth and combines informal learning with mentorship and access to digital tools (Homan, 2016). The library's emphasis on open, peer-driven engagement provided a natural environment to observe authentic information practices.

Chicago represents a meaningful sociocultural context. Approximately one-third of residents identify as African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), yet youth in predominantly Black neighbourhoods experience persistent inequities in education, technology access, and public resources (CMAP, 2022). Observing teen information behaviour in these environments enabled examination of how systemic inequities shape everyday information worlds.

Research design and participants

The study unfolded in two sequential phases: a qualitative phase focused on generating contextual data, followed by a quantitative phase to test and support findings.

Phase one: Qualitative exploration

Non-participant observations were conducted across five YOUmedia branches over six months. Observations captured naturally occurring interactions among teens, mentors, and library staff during programmes, independent computer use, and social activities. Field notes documented information needs, sources, and behaviours as they emerged.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 12 staff members (including librarians and part-time mentors) to explore perceptions of teen information needs and barriers to engagement. Focus groups and short surveys were administered to 35 teens aged 13–18. Discussions prompted participants to describe how they searched for school, career, and personal information, which sources they trusted, and how cultural identity shaped their experiences.

Phase two: Quantitative validation

A short survey collected data on technology use frequency and self-reported confidence in evaluating sources. Quantitative data provided descriptive statistics supporting thematic interpretation from the qualitative phase.

Across both phases, approximately 236 unique teen interactions were observed, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds within Chicago's African American community.

Data Source	Participants (n)	Age Range	Notes
Observations	236 teens	13–18	Across 5 YOUmedia branches
Focus Groups & Surveys	35 teens	16–18	Conducted at 3 sites
Staff Interviews	12	Adult mentors/librarians	Representing teen, tech, and program staff

Table 1. Overview of data sources and participant demographics.

Data collection procedures

All data collection followed Institutional Review Board approval. Parental consent and youth assent were obtained, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

Observation data were recorded in field journals after each session. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Surveys were distributed on paper to maintain accessibility for participants with limited device access.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of multiple data sources—observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Member checking occurred informally with librarians, who reviewed preliminary interpretations for accuracy.

Analytic approach

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out concurrently, followed by integration.

Qualitative analysis

Thematic analysis followed grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014). Coding proceeded through open, axial, and selective stages. Initial coding identified recurring patterns such as ‘trusted sources’, ‘identity expression’, and ‘institutional avoidance’. Axial coding refined these into broader conceptual categories aligned with theoretical frameworks— everyday life information seeking orientation, radical change interactivity, and small world trust networks. Selective coding generated core themes linking racial identity to information practices. ATLAS.ti software supported data organisation.

Qualitative analysis

Survey data were entered into Qualtrics for descriptive statistics. Frequencies were calculated for variables including device use, preferred sources, and topic interest. Quantitative trends validated qualitative themes—for example, frequent YouTube use corresponded with observed reliance on visual and peer-recommended information.

Integration

Findings were integrated through data weaving (Fetters et al., 2013), in which qualitative insights explained mechanisms underlying quantitative patterns. The resulting synthesis produced a holistic view of African American teens’ information behaviour, accounting for both structural and individual influences.

Researcher positionality

The researcher identifies as an African American information professional with extensive experience in youth services. Reflective journaling was maintained to acknowledge potential biases and positional advantages. This insider–outsider dynamic facilitated trust with participants while requiring constant attention to analytical distance.

Validity and reliability strategies

Several strategies enhanced credibility and dependability:

1. Triangulation: Multiple data sources (teens, staff, observations) and methods (qualitative and quantitative) supported cross-verification.
2. Audit trail: Documentation of coding decisions and analytic memos ensured transparency.
3. Peer debriefing: Findings were reviewed with two colleagues experienced in youth information behaviour.

4. Thick description: Detailed contextual accounts of YOUmedia spaces enable transferability to similar settings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical sensitivity was essential given participants' age and racial identity. Teens were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Sessions occurred during regular library hours to ensure safety and voluntary participation. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the researcher.

As one participant shared, *'I feel comfortable here. Like, I can actually talk and be myself without feeling judged or watched'*. (Teen G, age 15). This underscores the importance of environments where youth feel respected, autonomous, and culturally affirmed.

3.8 Limitations

The focus on a single metropolitan area limits generalisability. Self-selection bias may have favoured teens already engaged with library programmes. Nonetheless, the triangulated design and diverse sample strengthen confidence in the findings' credibility.

This mixed-methods approach provides a nuanced understanding of African American teens' information-seeking behaviour, revealing how sociocultural identity, digital engagement, and institutional trust intersect. Its methodological rigour and theoretical integration position the study to contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussions of equity and representation in information behaviour research.

Findings

The findings are organised around the study's research questions and highlight how African American teens navigate everyday and academic information needs through trusted networks, digital platforms, and culturally grounded practices.

Characteristics of African American teens' information-seeking behaviour (RQ1)

Addressing the first research question, this section identifies the core characteristics of African American teens' information-seeking behaviour, particularly the central role of trust, relational credibility, and informal knowledge exchange.

Across observations, interviews, and focus groups, African American teens consistently expressed a preference for personal and trusted networks over formal or institutional sources. Family members, peers, mentors, and online creators were primary information sources on topics ranging from schoolwork and jobs to social identity and mental health. One participant summarised, *'If I need something, I'll ask my friends first or look it up on TikTok. They explain it better than teachers'* (Teen H, age 16).

Trust strongly shaped how teens evaluated information sources. As Teen C (age 16) explained, *'If I don't think a source is credible, I'll ask an adult or somebody who's heard of the situation—someone I trust. They can be more reliable than what I find online'*. Rather than relying solely on institutional authority, teens prioritised credibility grounded in familiarity and lived experience.

These patterns align with Chatman's concept of small worlds, where trust develops within familiar environments and guides information exchange. Teens viewed interpersonal networks as more relatable and less judgmental than institutional figures. Librarians similarly observed that teens often approached mentors or peers before using reference services. Staff C, a teen librarian,

reflected, ‘They’ll talk to a mentor or another teen long before they come to the desk. It is about comfort and not wanting to look dumb’.

Digital platforms amplified these informal networks. YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram were the most frequently used platforms for learning and exploration. Survey data showed that over 80% of respondents used YouTube weekly, while fewer than 30% accessed library databases. Teens valued the visual, peer-created, and on-demand nature of these resources.

Beyond convenience, trust also had a cultural dimension. Teens relied on peers who shared similar experiences of navigating race and identity, perceiving their insights as more authentic. As Teen I (age 17) stated, ‘People like me understand what I’m trying to find out—teachers do not always get that’. Similarly, Teen D (age 17) noted, ‘If I had to do a project on segregation, I would want somebody real—like someone who actually been through it’.

Together, these characteristics indicate that for African American teens, information seeking is inseparable from community and identity. Reliance on trusted networks reflects adaptive strategies for relevance, safety, and agency rather than disengagement.

Information Source	% of Teens Reporting Frequent Use	Primary Context of Use
Parents / Family Members	88%	Academic help, personal advice, career guidance
Friends / Peers	74%	School assignments, social and emotional support
YouTube	70%	Learning new skills, entertainment, tutorials
TikTok	65%	Quick information, trends, news, peer learning
Google / Web Search	60%	General inquiries, school projects
Mentors / Librarians	42%	Creative projects, technology help
Teachers	38%	Academic support (varied trust)
Library Websites / Databases	26%	School-related research, limited awareness

Table 1. Frequency and contexts of information sources among African American teens (n = 35).

4.2 Every day and academic information-seeking practices (RQ2)

Addressing the second research question, this section examines how African American teens seek information across every day and academic contexts and how these domains are deeply interconnected.

Teens rarely separated school-related needs from personal, social, or future-oriented concerns. Instead, they navigated information holistically, drawing on the same trusted networks for homework, career exploration, identity-related questions, and social support. Parents, siblings, peers, and mentors were frequently consulted for academic help, while peers and online creators were often relied upon for everyday life information.

However, teens' every day and academic information-seeking practices were shaped by broader institutional and sociocultural barriers. Despite enthusiasm for learning, many participants reported feeling disconnected from or misrepresented by traditional information institutions. Three interrelated dimensions emerged: access inequities, representation gaps, and perceived bias.

Access inequities

Although YOUmedia offered robust technological access, many participants reported unreliable home internet and shared devices. Teens from lower-income neighbourhoods often depended on the library for Wi-Fi, printing, and homework. One teen noted, *'If the library closed early, I couldn't finish my project because my internet at home barely works'* (Teen I, age 16). Staff confirmed that digital divides persist even in urban areas.

Research gaps

Participants expressed frustration with the limited availability of culturally relevant materials. They struggled to find media reflecting diverse Black youth experiences. One teen remarked, *'I get tired of only seeing slavery or civil rights—there's more to us than that'* (Teen A, age 16). Another teen expressed *'On TikTok, it be a lot of Black people giving out information about what's going on. It feels more real because it's people actually experiencing it'* (Teen E, age 16). This mirrors Folk and Overbey's (2022) findings that limited cultural representation undermines trust in libraries. Teens often turned to Black online creators and community platforms to fill these gaps.

Perceived bias and microaggressions

Several teens recalled feeling surveilled or doubted when using technology. As one participant said, *'Sometimes they think we're playing games or doing something bad, even when we're working'* (Teen B, age 17). These experiences discouraged help-seeking from adults and reinforced reliance on peers and mentors. Staff also reflected on this dynamic stating that *'There is some anxiety and hesitation with authority figures...they're unsure about approaching adults, even when they need help'* (Staff A, teen librarian).

Collectively, these factors shaped how teens navigated every day and academic information needs, often privileging community-based sources over formal institutional ones. This dynamic reflects what Chatman (1996) termed information poverty, where structural and cultural boundaries restrict engagement with formal sources. Yet participants also demonstrated resilience by turning to networks that validated their experiences and identities.

Technology and digital platforms in information-seeking (RQ3)

Responding to the third research question, this section focuses on how technology influences African American teens' information-seeking behaviour.

Digital platforms were central to teens' information practices. YouTube, TikTok, Google, and Instagram were frequently used to learn new skills, complete assignments, explore social issues, and seek guidance. Teens valued these platforms for their visual formats, immediacy, and peer-generated content, which contrasted with the perceived rigidity of traditional academic sources. As one staff member noted, *'They use YouTube a lot to teach themselves things. If they want to learn music or graphic design, they'll watch videos and then come in and try it themselves'* (Staff D, branch librarian).

Technology also supported participatory and creative information practices. Teens described using music production tools, video platforms, and social media to create and share information

with peers. Librarians noted that teens often completed studio certifications, recorded original tracks, and used library technology to produce content. These practices reflect radical change theory's emphasis on interactivity and connectivity, highlighting youth as active creators rather than passive consumers of information.

At the same time, technology use was shaped by structural constraints. Algorithmic bias, representation gaps, and unequal access influenced which sources teens trusted and how they evaluated information. As a result, digital platforms functioned as both sites of empowerment and adaptation within racially coded information environments.

4.4 Community-oriented and identity-affirming information practices (RQ4)

Addressing the fourth research question, this section highlights how sociocultural and racial factors influence African American teens' information behaviour through community-oriented and identity-affirming practices.

Peer learning emerged as the most common form of information exchange. Teens frequently helped one another troubleshoot digital tools, locate tutorials, and share resources. Teen F, age 16, explained, *'If somebody don't know how to do something, we just help each other. Like if one person figure it out first, then everybody else gonna know'*. These exchanges often occurred organically and were reinforced by shared experiences and mutual trust. This collaborative ethos reflects radical change theory's interactivity and connectivity principles, where youth create meaning through shared participation.

Teens also relied on 'veteran' peers to mediate institutional engagement. Staff C described this dynamic, noting, *'There's always one veteran teen in the group who says, oh, well you can do this here or you can do that'*. Such practices demonstrate how expertise circulates horizontally within youth communities.

Mentorship further bridged peer and institutional worlds. Teen librarians acted as culturally responsive intermediaries, providing guidance while respecting teens' autonomy. Their role extended beyond information provision to trust-building, modeling how institutional resources could be engaged without compromising identity or safety. Teens also articulated how racial identity shaped comfort within information exchanges. One participant shared, *'I feel more comfortable asking people who look like me or know where I'm coming from, because I don't have to explain myself first'* (Teen H, age 17).

Creativity served as a key vehicle for identity-affirming information practices. Teens used music, media, and digital storytelling to express themselves and share knowledge. Many participants linked information seeking to collective uplift—helping peers, supporting family members, or improving their communities—highlighting a communal epistemology rooted in shared experience and mutual empowerment. Staff noted that teens often completed studio certification and recorded original tracks using library resources. As one librarian explained, *'They come in with ideas, use the equipment, and really take ownership of what they create'* (Staff C, teen librarian). Others described starting YouTube channels or sharing tutorials and scholarship tips online. These practices exemplify radical change's emphasis on participatory knowledge creation and the transformative role of digital tools.

Collectively, these practices demonstrate that African American teens' information behaviour is shaped by a communal epistemology grounded in racial identity, mutual support, and shared experience.

Synthesis of findings

- African American teens' information behaviour is situated at the intersection of trust, representation, and resilience.
- Trust networks form the foundation of their information world, guided by interpersonal credibility and cultural authenticity.
- Racialised barriers shape perceptions of institutions, leading to reliance on community based and digital alternatives.
- Community-oriented practices demonstrate how youth reclaim agency through collaborative, creative, and identity-affirming exchange.

These findings extend theoretical models in several ways. They expand Savolainen's everyday life information seeking by foregrounding race as a structural determinant of everyday information orientation, enrich radical change theory by illustrating how interactivity and connectivity are mediated by inequity and cultural affirmation, and reinterpret Chatman's small worlds not as bounded deficits but as adaptive ecosystems that preserve culture and enable empowerment within marginalised contexts.

Theoretical Framework	Core Concept	Extension from Findings
Savolainen's everyday life information seeking	Everyday life information orientation	Incorporates racial identity and structural inequities as shaping factors
Dresang's radical change	Interactivity, connectivity, access	Demonstrates how digital engagement intersects with cultural representation and bias
Chatman's small worlds	Trust and information boundaries	Reveals adaptive, community-based strategies that resist information poverty

Table 2. Conceptual relationship between theoretical frameworks and emergent themes.

These findings reveal that African American teens' information behaviour is neither deficient nor disengaged but deeply contextual, relational, and culturally situated. Their strategies challenge deficit narratives and call for an expanded understanding of youth information behaviour that integrates equity, representation, and agency as central constructs.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide new insight into the everyday and academic information-seeking behaviour of African American teens, revealing how racial identity and sociocultural context shape the ways they seek, evaluate, and share information. Building on prior research in youth information behaviour, this section positions the findings in relation to Savolainen's everyday life Information seeking (ELIS), Dresang's radical change theory, and Chatman's small world theory, while also drawing on broader scholarship on youth, equity, and information resilience. Collectively, the discussion demonstrates how the study both confirms existing research and extends it by centering race, representation, and community as structural influences on information practices.

Expanding everyday life information seeking

Savolainen's (1995) everyday life information seeking model posits that individuals' information behaviour is shaped by their way of life and mastery of life within particular sociocultural contexts. The present study affirms this premise while extending everyday life information seeking by demonstrating that racial identity operates as a structural determinant within those contexts.

Consistent with prior everyday life information seeking research on youth, African American teens in this study sought information related to academic success, identity formation, and social belonging (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006; Franklin, 2013). Like the suburban and urban youth studied by Franklin (2013) and Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2006), participants relied on interpersonal networks and informal sources to meet everyday needs. However, this study extends those findings by showing that trust and relevance are not only developmentally driven but also racially mediated.

For African American teens, reliance on trusted networks—family, peers, and mentors—functioned as a protective strategy in response to experiences of bias, misrepresentation, and institutional mistrust. This aligns with Savolainen's later acknowledgement that structural factors shape access and perceptions of legitimacy (Savolainen, 2016), while offering empirical evidence that race and representation are central to information orientation. An equity-informed adaptation of everyday life information seeking must therefore account for how historical and contemporary inequities shape not only access but also trust, motivation, and evaluation.

Radical change theory and digital participation

Dresang's (1999, 2005) radical change theory provides a useful framework for understanding how youth engage with digital information through interactivity, connectivity, and access. Consistent with this theory, teens in the present study actively created, shared, and evaluated information using digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

These findings corroborate prior research demonstrating that teens are not passive consumers of information but active participants and creators (Koh, 2015; Li, 2018). Similar to Li's (2018) study of library makerspaces, African American teens used digital tools for collaborative learning and creative expression. However, this study extends radical change theory by foregrounding how digital participation is shaped by racialised information environments.

As Benjamin (2019) argues, digital systems are not neutral but reflect embedded biases that affect visibility, credibility, and representation. Teens' reliance on Black creators and peer-generated content illustrates both empowerment and adaptation—empowerment through agency and cultural affirmation, and adaptation to the absence of representative voices in mainstream information systems. This suggests that radical change's principle of access must be reconsidered beyond technological availability to include cultural accessibility, reinforcing calls by Folk and Overbey (2022) to address race more explicitly within LIS theory and practice.

Small world theory and rethinking information poverty

Chatman's small world theory (1991, 1996, 1999) offers a sociological lens for understanding trust-based information networks within marginalised communities. Traditionally, small worlds have been framed as sites of information poverty, characterised by limited engagement with external sources. The present findings challenge this deficit framing.

Consistent with studies of marginalised youth in other contexts (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015), African American teens' peer networks and mentorship relationships functioned as adaptive and resilient information systems. Rather than restricting access, these networks enabled culturally attuned knowledge exchange and emotional safety. This aligns with Jaeger et al.'s (2015, 2020) work on information resilience, which emphasises communities' capacity to adapt information practices in response to structural exclusion

By reframing small worlds as sites of social capital and collective agency, this study extends Chatman's framework to account for how trust-based networks can support empowerment rather than isolation, aligning with contemporary LIS discussions of information resilience. Among African American teens, bounded information worlds were not barriers to participation but mechanisms for navigating inequitable institutional landscapes

Intersections across frameworks

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how everyday life information seeking, radical change, and small world theory intersect to explain African American teens' information behaviour across individual, collective, and structural levels. The study confirms existing research on youth information practices while extending these frameworks by centering race, representation, and community as mediating forces.

This study proposes an integrated model (see Figure 3) in which trust, representation, and community operate as interconnected mediating system rather than a linear process, with access and participation dependent on cultural validation and relational trust as much as technological availability. The middle row—Trust and Representation—captures foundational conditions shaping whether information environments are perceived as safe, relevant, and credible. Trust underpins interpersonal networks; representation informs engagement with digital and institutional sources. Community occupies the bottom central position because it mediates how trust and representation are enacted in practice. Community acts as the connective mechanism through which information flows. Digital and Peer Flows—represents observable behaviours, including platform use, content creation, and collaborative learning. These practices reflect radical change principles of interactivity and connectivity but are shaped by the relational and cultural conditions above. Together, these forces form an equity-oriented information ecology system where access and participation depend on cultural validation as much as on resources or skills.

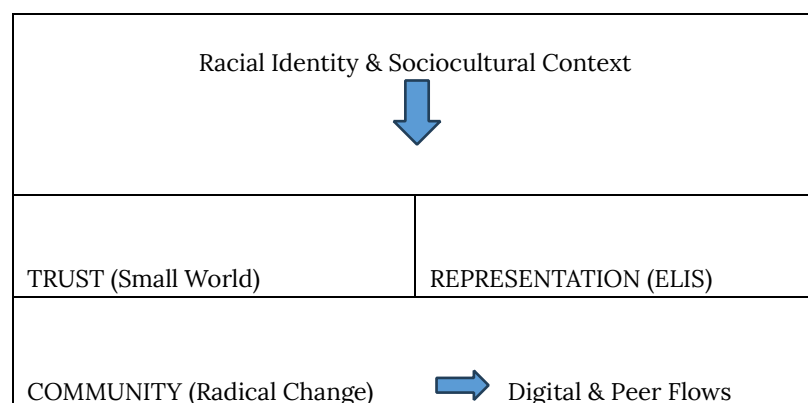


Figure 1. Conceptual model integrating everyday life information seeking (ELIS), radical change, and small world theories within an equity-oriented information ecology of African American teens.

Implications for practice

The findings offer several implications for public libraries, educators, and youth-serving organisations seeking to design inclusive information environments.

1. **Culturally responsive information literacy.**
Libraries and schools should embed cultural relevance within information literacy instruction. Teens' skepticism toward institutional sources often stems from experiences of bias or exclusion. Librarians and educators can integrate culturally relevant creators, examples, and scenarios into instruction (e.g., analyzing TikTok or YouTube content alongside databases). This validates teens' existing practices while building evaluative skills. Using culturally familiar examples, creators, and topics can increase engagement and trust.
2. **Mentorship and representation.**
Representation among staff is critical. Teens responded positively to mentors who shared their cultural background or lived experiences. Libraries should formalise mentorship roles for youth services staff, particularly those with shared cultural backgrounds. Recruitment and professional development should prioritise diverse staffing and culturally grounded mentorship models. Training should emphasise relational trust-building rather than compliance-driven engagement.
3. **Expanding the definition of access.**
Equitable access must move beyond devices and internet connectivity to include cultural access. Collections, programmes, and digital platforms should reflect diverse voices and perspectives so that all youth see their realities represented. Additionally, librarians and educators should conduct regular equity audits of collections, databases, and recommended resources to ensure diverse Black youth experiences are represented beyond historical or deficit narratives.
4. **Recognising community-based expertise.**
Librarians and educators can support peer-led learning by positioning teens as co-creators of knowledge. Educators and librarians should acknowledge peer knowledge-sharing as a valid form of information practice rather than informal or secondary behaviour. Programmes that enable youth to teach, create, and share information strengthen engagement and affirm the legitimacy of their practices.

5.6 Contributions to information behaviour research

This study contributes to the field in three key ways:

1. It empirically demonstrates that racial identity is an essential variable in understanding youth information behaviour.
2. It extends foundational theories— everyday life information seeking, radical change, and small worlds—by integrating cultural and structural dimensions of equity.
3. It highlights information resilience and community-based trust as central constructs for studying marginalised youth populations.

By framing African American teens' information behaviour not as a deficiency but as a culturally embedded strategy, this study challenges deficit narratives and affirms the role of public libraries as potential spaces of liberation, creativity, and belonging.

Conclusion

This study examined the everyday and academic information-seeking behaviour of African American teens in Chicago, revealing how racial identity, representation, and trust intersect to shape youth information practices. Grounded in Savolainen's everyday life information seeking, Dresang's radical change theory, and Chatman's small world theory, the research found that African American teens navigate information worlds marked by both resilience and constraint.

Across observations, interviews, and focus groups, participants emphasised trusted networks—family, peers, and mentors—as their most reliable sources of information. These networks offered credibility, cultural understanding, and emotional safety, often compensating for barriers within formal institutions. As one teen shared, 'If I was to go to the library, I would ask a question to the Black librarian instead of the White librarian because I do not want to deal with White guilt' (Teen H, age 17). Such insights underscore the influence of representation and racial dynamics on information engagement.

The findings highlight that while racialised barriers limit access and participation, teens respond through community-oriented and identity-affirming information practices. These behaviours extend existing frameworks by positioning race and culture as structural determinants of information orientation and trust.

Theoretically, this study proposes an equity-oriented information ecology linking trust, representation, and community as mediating forces in youth information behaviour. Practically, it calls for culturally responsive library and educational services, diverse staffing, and peer-led learning models that enhance institutional trust and engagement.

Ultimately, African American teens' information behaviour exemplifies adaptive, community-based resilience, reframing their practices as sophisticated, culturally grounded strategies rather than deficits.

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