Underwhelmed by It All

For the 12-to-24 set, boredom is a recreational hazard.

By Robin Abcarian and John Horn, Times Staff Writers
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With their vast arsenals of electronic gear, they are the most entertained generation ever. Yet the YouTubing, MySpacing, multi-tasking teens and young adults widely seen as Hollywood's most wanted audience are feeling — can it be? — a bit bored with it all.

A new Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll, the first in a series of annual entertainment surveys, finds that a large majority of the 12- to 24-year-olds surveyed are bored with their entertainment choices some or most of the time, and a substantial minority think that even in a kajillion-channel universe, they don't have nearly enough options. "I feel bored like all the time, 'cause there is like nothing to do," said Shannon Carlson, 13, of Warren, Ohio, a respondent who has an array of gadgets, equipment and entertainment options at her disposal but can't ward off ennui.

They do seem to be passionate about their electronic devices, though, especially their computers, which ranked even above cellphones when respondents were offered a "desert island" choice of one item. Still, the poll suggests that the revolution in entertainment, media and technology for which many in Hollywood are already developing strategies has not yet taken hold.

For example, respondents say that traditional sources such as television advertising and radio airplay still tend to drive their decisions about movies and music more than online networking sites. Those interested in keeping up with current events report a surprising interest in conventional news sources, especially local TV news. And although many see their computers as a perfectly good place to watch a TV show or a movie, there does not appear to be widespread desire to take in, say, "Spider-Man 3" on their video iPods.

But there's little comfort here for movie theater owners. The multiplex isn't very popular...
Despite the technological advances that are changing the way entertainment is consumed, there's more common here for movie theater owners. The multiplex isn't very popular either.

Even though 2006's box-office grosses are running 7% ahead of last year's, the poll found waning interest in seeing movies in theaters. Although the youngest teens say they're hitting the multiplex as often as ever, many young adults report that they're seeing fewer films in theaters. The main complaints are expensive tickets and concessions, but rude moviegoers and "bad movies" are factors too.

"It doesn't seem like there's anything good," says Emma Standing-Trueblood, a 16-year-old who is soon to start her junior year at Oak Park High School near Agoura Hills. "I'd say a good episode of 'The West Wing' is better than most of the stuff that gets out there."

A signature trait of those surveyed is a predilection for doing several things at the same time, with a majority of females in every age group and males from 15 to 17 and 21 to 24 saying they prefer to multi-task rather than to do one thing at a time.

Nathaniel Johnson, a 17-year-old senior at Claremont High School who took part in the survey, spoke for the 62% of boys in his age group who like to multi-task. He's a big fan of what the computer allows him to do: "You can open five or six programs simultaneously: watch a project, type a report, watch YouTube, check e-mail and watch a movie."

Unlike some of his peers, who report doing as many as four or five things simultaneously — such as homework, instant messaging, surfing the Net, talking on the phone and listening to music — Nathaniel discovered through trial and error that he could do only three things well at a time. "Generally," he said, "you feel overwhelmed at some point if you are trying to do too many things at once."

Like many others surveyed, Nathaniel rarely does his homework in a quiet environment. For him, homework and hard rock are inseparable. "Most people think it's horribly distracting," he said, "but I did get a 4.0 GPA." (A small number of the multi-taskers could do only three things well at a time. "Generally," he said, "you feel overwhelmed at some point if you are trying to do too many things at once."

Young people multi-task, they say, because they are too busy to do only one thing at a time, because they need something to do during commercials or, for most (including 64% of girls 12 to 14), it's boring to do just one thing at a time.

The poll, under the supervision of Los Angeles Times Poll Director Susan Pinkus, interviewed 839 teenagers (ages 12 to 17) and 811 young adults (18 to 24) from June 23 to July 3 using the Knowledge Networks' Web panel, which provides a representative sample of U.S. households. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for both age group samples.

Maybe it is part of the human condition that the young are bored, but some think that this generation — children of baby boomers, sometimes called millennials — has been spoiled by the sheer volume of entertainment and technology choices available.

"I think there is more media gratification that younger people feel entitled to," said Jordan Levin, who should know. Levin, a former chief executive of the WB network, was instrumental in developing the hit young adult shows "Felicity" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

Levin is now a partner in Generate, an entertainment company whose programs, thanks to an exclusive deal with MTV Networks, will be seen on television, cellphones and the Internet. Kids, Levin said, "have grown up in an environment where they expect to get what they want, where they want it, when they want it."

Throughout Hollywood, the race is on to develop entertainment that captures the attention of this distracted generation. The head of MTV Films just left to start a Viacom division that will make episodic shows for cellphones, iPods and computers. BitTorrent, once known as a top site for Internet pirates, has begun serving original — and lawfully shared — programming.

The studios also are looking to video games for artistic inspiration, which makes sense given the poll finding that 67% of boys ages 12 to 17 regularly play games on their computers. Among the game-inspired movies in the works: "Halo," "Hitman" and a sequel to "Resident Evil."

Some theater owners have taken notice of the huge teen demand for video games. National Amusements is renovating a theater to create a CyberZone video gaming site in Ypsilanti, Mich., which will offer nearly 80 PCs, PlayStations and Xboxes in an area adjacent to its movie screens.

Despite the technological advances that are changing the way entertainment is consumed, what they want, where they want it, when they want it.
delivered and consumed, good old-fashioned word of mouth — with a tech twist, thanks to text messaging — continues to be one of the most important factors influencing the choices that young people make.

As the Times/Bloomberg poll found, those recommendations (or pans) play a significant role in determining attendance. When asked how soon after seeing a movie they told their friends about it, 38% of teens and 40% of young adults said they told their friends the same day.

"Those text messages are a very powerful tool," said Jeff Blake, chairman of marketing and distribution for Sony Pictures Entertainment. "You certainly have the feeling that what they say in their text messages is just as important — if not more important — as the quote we put at the top of our ad. These kids listen to each other."

When it comes to the content of their entertainment, those surveyed tended to be quite tolerant of violence, gross-out humor and swearing in movies.

Yet a surprisingly high number of teenage boys (58%) and even more teenage girls (74%) said they were offended by material they felt disrespected women and girls. (How they reconcile that with their preference for the often-sexist aesthetic of rap music, the top music choice among respondents who specified a genre, is a topic for another poll.) Respondents who considered themselves religious were much more likely to be offended by gay and lesbian content. Young men 18 to 24 aren't offended by much; even material that disrespects women bothers only about 40% of this group.

Twelve-year-old Melina Erkan, a seventh-grader in Monroe, Conn., said she used to watch a lot of music videos on MTV and VH1 but has become increasingly turned off by the prevalent images of scantily dressed women. "Sometimes in the music videos these days, the women they have dancing in the background, they dress really cheap, and women don't really look like that and act like that," she said. "When I see that, I change the channel to something I like."

Hannah Montee, a 21-year-old college student in Liberal, Mo., said she had practically stopped watching TV because of all the vulgarity she saw. "I get tired of hearing all the cussing and the sexual innuendoes," she said.

Younger teens report that their parents keep a tight rein on their entertainment and technology habits. Nearly 3 out of 5 in this group say their parents restrict what they download, whether it's music, movies or other content. And although for many teenagers adult intrusion is unwelcome, parents can take some solace in the fact that about 15% of 12- to 17-year-olds answered "my parents" when asked how they found out about the music they'd most recently acquired.

Only 4% of the 12- to 17-year-olds reported that their parents didn't know much about their entertainment and communication choices. About a quarter of young teenage boys said they fought with their parents about video games or the music they listened to, whereas girls tended to fight with their parents about cellphone use.

(Girls play video games, but fewer than 1% of female poll respondents of all ages said they would choose a video game console if they could have only one item on a desert island from a list that also included a computer, a cellphone, a television, an iPod or an MP3 player.)

Renee Hampton, a 14-year-old ninth-grader in Chapmansboro, Tenn., battles with her parents over the time she spends online. Though most teens her age reported spending less than two hours a day on the computer, Renee said that this summer she was spending eight hours a day online. "My parents think I need to get outside more," she said. "I say that I get outside enough."

Renee loves Japanese cartoons and spends a lot of her online time creating animated music videos with anime characters, which she posts on the phenomenally popular site YouTube.com. Certain websites, she reported, are off-limits, but she wasn't sure why.

"Hey, Mom," she said. "Why are you against MySpace?"

"I have heard too many things about perverts on there and that it's not a good place for children," her mother replied.

"Mom," Renee said, "that's so stupid."

Renee may be frustrated, but her peers reported similar parental involvement. About a third of boys and girls ages 12 to 14 said their parents didn't let them go on social networking sites such as MySpace. About 15% of the kids 15 to 17 said their parents restricted access, but by age 18, parental control had melted away.

Another concern for adults is multi-tasking. For the most part, experts have not looked closely at how teens’ and young adults’ thinking skills, especially when it comes to homework, may be affected by what one software executive has dubbed "constant
"It's like being in a candy store," said Gloria Mark, a UC Irvine professor who studies interactions between people and computers. "You aren't going to ignore the candy; you are going to try it all."

Mark, who has studied multi-tasking by 25- to 35-year-old high-tech workers, believes that the group is not much different from 12- to 24-year-olds, since the two groups grew up with similar technology. She frets that "a pattern of constant interruption" is creating a generation that will not know how to lose itself in thought.

"You know the concept of "flow"?" asked Mark, referring to an idea popularized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi about the benefits of complete absorption and focus. "You have to focus and concentrate, and this state of flow only comes when you do that... Maybe it's an old-fogy notion, but it's an eternal one: Anyone with great ideas is going to have to spend some time deep in thought."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Voting power

For young consumers old enough to vote, government matters more than 'American Idol.'

Q: Have you ever voted for an 'American Idol' contestant?

Ages 18-20
Yes, voted for contestant 16%
No, not voted for contestant 84%

Ages 21-24
Yes, voted for contestant 24%
No, not voted for contestant 76%

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Q: Have you ever voted for a political candidate for a government office?

Ages 18-20
Yes, voted for candidate 37%
No, not voted for candidate 63%

Ages 21-24
Yes, voted for candidate 63%
No, not voted for candidate 37%

Source: Times/Bloomberg poll

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Attention deficit

Despite an increasing number of choices, young consumers of entertainment still tend to be bored.

Q: How often are you bored with the entertainment choices available to you?

Ages 12-17
Male
Often/sometimes: 69%
Rarely/never: 31%

Female
Often/sometimes: 75%
Rarely/never: 25%
Ages 18-20
Male
Often/sometimes: 73%
Rarely/never: 27%
Female
Often/sometimes: 73%
Rarely/never: 27%
Ages 21-24
Male
Often/sometimes: 65%
Rarely/never: 35%
Female
Often/sometimes: 76%
Rarely/never: 24%

Q. In general, do you like to focus on one thing at a time, or would you rather multi-task, that is do more than one thing at a time?

Males
Ages 12-14
Focus on one thing at a time: 50%
Multi-task: 50%

Females
Ages 12-14
Focus on one thing at a time: 37%
Multi-task: 63%

Males
Ages 15-17
Focus on one thing at a time: 38%
Multi-task: 62%

Females
Ages 15-17
Focus on one thing at a time: 29%
Multi-task: 71%

Males
Ages 18-20
Focus on one thing at a time: 52%
Multi-task: 48%
Females
Ages 18-20
Focus on one thing at a time: 28%
Multi-task: 72%
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Males
Ages 21-24
Focus on one thing at a time: 46%
Multi-task: 54%
Females
Ages 21-24
Focus on one thing at a time: 37%
Multi-task: 63%
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Asked of those who multi-task
Q. What is the reason for that? (Multiple selections allowed, top four responses shown.)

Ages 12-14
It's something to do during commercials
Male: 39%
Female: 46%
My schedule keeps me too busy to do only one thing at a time
Male: 14%
Female: 26%
It's boring to just do one thing at a time
Male: 51%
Female: 64%
I like to stay in touch with my friends at all times
Male: 16%
Female: 33%
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Ages 15-17
It's something to do during commercials
Male: 37%
Female: 48%
My schedule keeps me too busy to do only one thing at a time
Male: 14%
Female: 28%
It's boring to just do one thing at a time
Male: 58%
Female: 47%

I like to stay in touch with my friends at all times
Male: 31%
Female: 32%

Ages 18-20
It's something to do during commercials
Male: 42%
Female: 54%

My schedule keeps me too busy to do only one thing at a time
Male: 30%
Female: 40%

It's boring to just do one thing at a time
Male: 40%
Female: 47%

I like to stay in touch with my friends at all times
Male: 27%
Female: 17%

Ages 21-24
It's something to do during commercials
Male: 35%
Female: 40%

My schedule keeps me too busy to do only one thing at a time
Male: 25%
Female: 53%

It's boring to just do one thing at a time
Male: 35%
Female: 22%

I like to stay in touch with my friends at all times
Male: 12%
Female: 6%

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How the poll was conducted

The Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll was conducted from June 23 to July 3 using the Knowledge Networks' Web-enabled panel, which provides a representative nationwide sample of U.S. households. Of the 4,466 minors and young adults invited to participate in the survey, 1,904 (43%) responded to the survey, with 1,650 qualifying. The 1,650 qualified respondents included 839 minors (ages 12 to 17) and 811 young adults (ages 18 to 24). The margin of sampling error for both groups is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In order to provide as representative a sample as possible, the survey results were weighted to U.S. census figures for 12- to 24-year-olds in the United States in
terms of age, race or ethnicity, gender and region, and for urban or rural residence and Internet access.

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Source: Times/Bloomberg poll

Contrary to expectations

So most young Americans get their news from Jon Stewart’s "The Daily Show"? Don’t be so sure. The first annual Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll managed to bust a number of myths. Among them:

**Myth:** More young adults cast ballots for "American Idol" than vote in political elections.

**Truth:** Only 21% of poll respondents ages 18 to 24 said they had voted for an "American Idol" contestant. But 53% said they had voted for a candidate for public office.

**Myth:** Kids run rampant on the Internet, evading the supervision of their parents, who are too old to figure out what their children are up to.

**Truth:** Nearly 7 in 10 of 12- to 17-year-olds said their parents knew how they spent their time online. Nearly 3 out of 5 12- to 14-year-olds said their parents restricted what they could download. About a third of boys and girls ages 12 to 14 are not allowed to go on social networking sites such as MySpace.com. Only 19% of boys and 13% of girls reported having no parental restrictions on computer use.

**Myth:** It's the rare teen who doesn't have a MySpace account these days.

**Truth:** More than half of teens ages 12 to 17 don't use social networking sites.

**Myth:** The Internet and MTV play a key role in influencing the music young people buy.

**Truth:** Fifty-seven percent of teens and young adults said they first heard new music on the radio. At least 3 out of 10 in both groups learned about new music by watching a music video on TV.

**Myth:** Time on the computer has replaced all those hours spent watching TV.

**Truth:** Almost half of teens said they spent up to two hours on the Internet each day, 29% said they spent up to four hours and 15% said they spent more than four hours. Twenty-three percent said they spent more than four hours watching TV. Many do both simultaneously.

**Myth:** Box-office receipts have suffered in recent years because the movies are bad and young people don’t like bad movies.

**Truth:** The main reason young people give for not liking the theater experience is that tickets and concessions cost too much. Bad movies were ranked below moviegoers who talk during the feature and too many advertisements.

**Myth:** Most young adults get their news about current events from satirical shows such as "The Daily Show" or the Internet.

**Truth:** Just 3% of teenagers and 6% of young adults cited such programs as "The Daily Show" as their main source of information about current events. Only 10% of teens and 11% of young adults said blogs or other websites were their best source. Teens and young adults said they most frequently kept up by talking with friends and family and watching local TV news.

Source: Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll

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The Entertainment Poll

Today

A new Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll finds that most 12- to 24-year-olds are bored with their entertainment choices. Their solution? Even more options. Plus: Busting myths about teens and young adults.

Tuesday

The old Hollywood movie model doesn't interest younger audiences. They want to see films as soon as they come out at home — whether on TV, computer or the next new gadget.

Wednesday

Within the music industry, copied CDs are considered a greater threat than illegal peer-to-peer downloading. But young people are confused about where sharing ends and piracy begins in the era of iTunes.

Thursday

Is new technology the answer for TV and video? Teens and young adults — the generation most likely to be the early adopters of this new technology — have yet to fully embrace it.

Friday

A day in the life of a typical plugged-in tween. Plus: Does multi-tasking hurt homework?

On the Web

More about the Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg entertainment poll at latimes.com/entertainmentpoll.

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Times staff writer Matea Gold contributed to this report.