Girls Just Want to Be Plugged In -- to Everything

Multi-tasking youths are constantly linked to entertainment and friends by technology.

By Gina Piccalo, Times Staff Writer
August 11, 2006

Like a lot of 14-year-olds these days, Julia Schwartz's cellphone is more reflective of her personality than her bedroom. It's decorated with Asian good-luck charms and carries snippets of her favorite Sugarcult song and video clips of the She Wants Revenge concert she saw with her older sister.

She uses the phone to text-message friends more than call them. When she's not texting, she's surfing iTunes or watching TV or exchanging rapid-fire AOL instant messages on her wireless laptop. Or she's doing all three while fending off her mother's steady stream of inquiries about what exactly she's doing.

Julia and her peers have vastly more access to a broader and more global spectrum of pop culture than any generation before them. Her favorite movies, music and TV shows are less a reflection of her age or status than they are of the infinite array of content available now. She's a fan of "Saturday Night Live" alumnus Dana Carvey — whose career peaked in her infancy — and an avid devotee of the Finnish rock band H.I.M. She switches between the science-fiction stories on FanFiction.net and an old Anne Rice novel, the cartoon "The Fairly OddParents" on Nickelodeon and a video clip of comic Dat Phan posted on his MySpace.com page. She rents a DVD every week (most recent fave was the 2004 film "Bring It On Again") but only occasionally sees a movie in the theater; her home is her entertainment center.

Despite all this, Julia is often left wanting more. "I find there's always something to occupy me," she said, "just not always something new."

Julia's voracious appetite for all types of entertainment — and the tech-savvy ways she consumes it — is typical of girls her age, according to a new Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll that surveyed the habits of 12- to 24-year-olds. Girls ages 12 to 14 are the most deeply motivated by TV: 65% say they are influenced by a TV show or network, are more likely to multi-task than boys of their age group and are easily bored — 41% say there are too few choices of entertainment.

They are the most sensitive to degrading depictions of women — 78% find this type of content most offensive — and the most enthusiastic about viewing content on iPods, laptops and cellphones. They're also the most carefully monitored by parents: 68% say their parents know how they spend their time online.

To Hollywood, these kids are among the most coveted demographic because of their insatiable appetite for entertainment. And yet they're the most difficult to corral, with elusive, often unexpected tastes and a penchant for ever-evolving technology. They're sophisticated, demand authenticity and bristle at even the slightest hint of condescension.

*They are smarter than we think," said Jenny Wall, who heads integrated marketing for Sisters (Anne Cusack / LAT)
Girls Just Want to Be Plugged In — to Everything – Los Angeles Times

For the most part, Julia follows her mother's house rules: No computer before school.

Julia lives in a large, two-story home in Pacific Palisades and attends the private Windward School in Mar Vista, whose Hollywood alumni include Jason Schwartzman and Anna Paquin. Her father, Marty, a radiologist, runs the radiology departments in five hospitals, and her mother, Anne, left a career as a jewelry designer to stay at home with Julia and her sister, Robyn, 17. When Julia grows up, she said, she wants to be a trauma surgeon or a dance studio owner.

Julia is a black belt in karate and a big fan of sci-fi movies. "Wayne's World" and "Wayne's World 2." Thanks to them, she said, she has learned to reach. You have to make sure you're very targeted and very direct with your message."

Often called Generation Y, the Millennials or Echo Boomers, these kids are known by economists, sociologists and marketing experts as optimistic team players and rule-followers, born into "child-centered" families and raised as part of the most celebrated, protected and overscheduled generation in memory. Technology has been so much a part of their lives that, to them, life before e-mail and the Internet was "the Stone Age."

Julia, like a lot of girls her age, is constantly linked to her friends by technology. In fact, she spends hours surfing iTunes and almost never buys CDs. She heard from a friend about H.I.M. but didn't "get hooked" on them until after she pulled up their name — not snail-mail addresses and phone numbers.

During class time at school, she said, it's common to see kids texting or talking to each other on their cellphones from across the room.

"I know people who are really, really fast," she said. "They can write, like, an entire sentence in five seconds."

As with a lot of girls of her generation, Julia doesn't really adhere to gender stereotypes. She hangs out with a large group of boys who, she said, quote constantly from "Wayne's World" and "Wayne's World 2." Thanks to them, she said, she has learned to appreciate the band Sum 41 and Johnny Knoxville's antics on the MTV show "Jackass." She's a black belt in karate and a big fan of sci-fi movies.

The poll showed that, like Julia, today's teens contradict long-held assumptions about gender. For example, the survey found that when it comes to offensive content, 66% of boys and girls ranked disrespecting women at the top of the list. Teen girls are especially facile with technology, in some cases more so than boys their age — for example, 21% were open to the idea of watching a movie on an iPod, compared with 16% of teen boys.

Julia spoke as she scrolled through hundreds of downloaded songs as varied as the Japanese heavy rock band Dir En Grey to vocalist Josh Groban. "I have other things that are pop-ish, like Ashley Parker Angel," she said, her speech lilting upward as if each thought were a question. "I think he was part of the band O-Town? But I'm not sure. Also? If I see a movie and I really like the soundtrack? I'll get it? Like 'Underworld: Evolution'? It's all this, like, really, heavy rock stuff? But it's totally cool."

Julia spends hours surfing iTunes and almost never buys CDs. She heard from a friend about H.I.M. but didn't "get hooked" on them until after she pulled up their MySpace.com page and downloaded some of their songs.

While Julia and her peers have more access to more content than any group of teens in history, they're also more carefully monitored by their parents. Sixty-eight percent of girls ages 12 to 14 say their parents know how they spend their time online; a third say their parents check their social networking sites; 31% say parents check their e-mail; 58% know the content rating of their video games.

For the most part, Julia follows her mother's house rules: No computer before school.
No text-messaging in the car. No TV before 5. Julia even voluntarily deleted her MySpace.com page after her mother showed her a TV news segment about sexual predators who stalk teens online. But even with these restrictions, Julia stays plugged in most of the time.

"My computer is almost always open," she said. "My music is almost always on. My cellphone is almost always on."

Even, her mother pointed out, when Julia's watching television. She might, for example, watch Disney Channel's "That's So Raven" or her favorite "Saturday Night Live" rerun (she first saw Carvey's shtick on her friend's iPod) while IM-ing two or three friends and talking on her cellphone.

As Julia detailed her likes and dislikes, her mother always seemed just around the corner, often drifting by to offer her own two cents. They agreed on very little, and Julia was clearly energized by contradicting her mother. When Anne Schwartz mentioned the sexy pop group the Pussy Cat Dolls, Julia's face flushed and she became suddenly animated.

"I think they're degrading to women!" she blurted. "They're sluts! They wear the booty shorts and the shirts down to here!"

Her mother was unmoved.

"I just think they have good figures," Schwartz said. "Might as well flaunt it."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Bored or multi-tasking?

Most kids don't give homework their undivided attention.

Q: When you are doing homework, do you usually prefer to focus on just your homework, or do you like to do other things at the same time?

Ages 12-17

Focus on the homework: 41%

Do other things at the same time: 53%

Doesn't apply to me: 6%

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Asked of those who do other things at the same time while doing homework

Q: Which of the following do you usually like to do while doing your homework? (Multiple answers allowed.)

Ages 12-17

Instant message: 15%

Go on the Internet: 21%

Send or read e-mail: 13%

Text message: 13%

Listen to music: 84%

Talk on the phone: 32%

Play a video game: 6%

Watch a TV show: 47%

Watch a movie: 22%

It depends on the homework I have: 6%

Other: 2%
Note: More information on this poll can be found at latimes.com/entertainmentpoll

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.

Source: Times/Bloomberg poll

The Entertainment Poll

Monday

A new Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll finds that a large majority of 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.

Today

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

On the Web

Readers weigh in: How has the entertainment industry failed today's young people? Plus, read previous installments of this series. All at latimes.com/entertainmentpoll.