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# The Variety of User Experiences: Literacy Roles and Stances on Story-Sharing Platforms

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Story-sharing apps foster youth engagement with reading, writing, and graphic design in new and instructive ways.

History has witnessed multiple conversations about literacy crises in youths (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). From panics about digital media browsing replacing print literacy, to fears about portrayed media violence, to arguments about today's "screenagers" reading and writing less because of reliance on screens, societies have witnessed many a crisis of the written word. In the contemporary landscape of worry about the stagnating literacy test scores and dwindling skills of young people enthralled by digital media, two headlines were surprising. One was for an article in *The Atlantic* that reported on a large-scale study showing that young people outread older generations (LaFrance, 2014). Another headline appeared in *The Huffington Post's* blog: "The Most Literate Generation: Wattpad & the Power of Social Reading" (Timoner, 2014). These headlines dispute the dictum that youths are reading and writing less than their predecessors.

The spotlight of these news reports was on the growing popularity of one story-sharing app, Wattpad (<https://www.wattpad.com/>), with over 65 million users globally who write, read, and socialize on the platform (Spangler, 2018). Similar burgeoning apps include Figment (<https://viromedia.com/figment/>) with about a million annual visitors, Teen Ink (<http://www.teenink.com/>) with 5 million, and Storybird (<https://storybird.com/>), which focuses on younger children, with 2 million (Alexa, 2018). At a time when the public perception of youth literacy is dim (Scholastic, 2013), it is instructive to examine literacy-rich environments that invite active participation from youths.

Literacy researchers have agreed that studying possibilities provided by digital environments can enhance

our understanding of how users engage with them, and inform the design of new learning environments (O'Brien & Voss, 2011). To date, few empirical studies have applied these constructs to hypersocial, mobile, and networked environments that represent the future of literacy ecologies. Because adolescence is a time marked by profound and complex changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Côté & Levine, 2014), disaggregating literacy practices of adolescents as early adopters of such technologies provides a nuanced understanding of how youths interact with story-sharing platforms as a new media genre.

Research on networked environments built for readers and writers has shown that these spaces can be inspiring for young learners (Jenkins, 2009; Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Magnifico, 2012) and generative of complex literacy practices (Ito et al., 2010; Thomas, 2007). Networked spaces provide opportunities for youths to collaborate, associate, socialize, create, and learn.

The purpose of our research was to investigate literacy roles and practices in networked, mobile, social media ecologies. Our aim is to describe reading and writing practices on emerging digital platforms that adolescent users engage with as they are working within the affordances and constraints of new media ecologies. These

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apps foreground practices that exemplify new media literacies, and fuse identity choices with particular ways with words. The apps employ a flexible architecture of participation that engages users on multiple levels and allows them to take different stances with respect to reading and writing. The experiences of young people immersed in app-mediated writing outline the affordances of dense media ecologies with multiple routes for legitimate participation and uptake of motivating tropes, such as social networking. Although the majority of the apps in focus leverage immersive participation into commercial success, the variety of user experiences reveal a layered infrastructure that occupies young people through various roles, tasks, and practices. This infrastructure remains applicable to most learning contexts that rely on attentional economies of young people. Narratives of users emphasize the diversity of practices and stances that challenge unitary labels of user, adolescent, and writer. Narrated varieties of experience support elastic literacy opportunities in the case of these apps. Here, the general and particular cases (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) of literacy practices on story-sharing apps provide insight into technologically mediated learning.

In this instrumental case study (Stake, 2005), we investigated a new genre of media and literacy technologies: mobile story-sharing apps. Although many technologies facilitating adolescent literacies have been covered in the research literature (Alvermann, 2010), these applications have received less attention, despite boasting more than 90 million users. By focusing on users of the most popular story-sharing apps, Wattpad and Figment, this study provides a window into the tools, affordances, constraints, and uses of this new media genre. Using strategic sampling techniques, we chose these apps and users of them to illuminate features salient to adolescent literacy and development. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What literacy roles, practices, and identities do story-sharing apps make available?
2. How do participants, as individuals and subgroups of adolescents, engage with these literacy roles, practices, and identities?

## Conceptual Framework

### *Sociocultural Theory: Tools, Mediation, and Networks*

According to the sociocultural view of literacy, as new tools develop, new literacy ecologies are born. We can

better understand the new literacy ecology through careful investigation of the new tools and the way adopters make meaning and knowledge from them. Young people's living, learning, and socializing are increasingly mediated by technological tools and more capable networked others (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Ito et al., 2010; Langer, 2011). In this study, we delineated the role that newly popular story-sharing apps play in young people's literacy practices and, in turn, the role that these practices play in these apps.

Grounded in sociocultural theory, in this study, we engaged with literacy as a set of cultural practices mediated by tools and linked to identities. The sociocultural approach foregrounds the ways in which people use tools to live and learn (Wertsch, 1991). Thus, ways in which adolescents think and act relate to tools that are available to them. New tools, such as mobile apps, offer new possibilities for engagement in learning and literacy. Conversely, the users of these apps utilize them with an eye to their own needs, purposes, and literacy demands.

Within literacy studies, researchers have paid close attention to the impacts of new technologies on student learning, development, and communication (Bavelier, Green, & Dye, 2010; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Purcell, Heaps, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013). Studies have chronicled ways in which the introduction of computers affects student writing and development of selves as writers (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). This work has often shown positive associations between the introduction of new technologies and writing output. For example, the introduction of laptops into English language arts classrooms benefited student writing in terms of quantity and quality (Collins, Hwang, Zheng, & Warschauer, 2013). Such results are not unilateral and depend on many different factors. Collins et al. suggested that the benefits associated with laptop use may be diminished if students find the tasks at hand uninteresting. Indeed, local contexts, mind-sets, and environments matter when analyzing tools as mediators of literacy.

New media ecologies are powerhouses of literacies, and the popularity and reach of story-sharing sites stand testament to this power. Interactive and networked new media practices provide new avenues for meaning making, production, and participation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Such practices fuel possibilities for user content creation across channels and enable new kinds of literate participation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Merchant, 2009; Vasudevan, 2010). Studies of developmental writing have shown that resident new media features—authentic audiences, consequential contexts, and immediate feedback—impact

student writing (Magnifico, 2010). Such features activate youths' motivation and sense of investment. As a complementary construct to motivation, researchers use *investment*, which refers to ways in which people give of themselves to tasks and expect something in return (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The construct of investment can address ways in which media-infused literacy environments invite certain types of participation from their users and, in turn, how users choose to participate. The stakes of navigating media are mounting. With an increasingly restrictive outside world (Naftali, 2010), many youths turn to the internet for opportunities to express, experiment, and develop. As new media shape mass communication (Jones & Hafner, 2012; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), literacy becomes essential in claiming the right to speak (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

### **Adolescent Literacy Practices and Identities**

Sociocultural inquiry becomes particularly salient in the study of adolescence. Adolescence indexes transitions between childhoods and adulthoods (Larson & Wilson, 2004), with key drivers being the developing senses of self, potential, and authorship (Erikson, 1968). As such, adolescents are working out who they will become, the ways with words they need, and the worlds they will build. This period, then, is prime for analysis of developing literacies and identities. These constructs interweave as young people use reading, writing, and communication to position themselves and be positioned by others as particular types of students, knowers, producers, and people (Gee, 2010; Lammers & Marsh, 2015). Literacy practices enable youths to explore the world "as they begin to take their own stances, express their own opinions, and establish their unique identities" (International Reading Association, 2012, p. 11).

In contrast to essentialist studies of identity, sociocultural and sociolinguistic studies of plural literacies and identities foreground processes such as stance taking, positioning, marking, and indexing that let youths engage in mediated identity work to construct and be constructed as particular kinds of people (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Englebretson, 2007; Korobkova & Black, 2014; Olinger, 2011). Digital media and learning research (Buckingham & Willett, 2013; Gee, 2010) has underscored the importance of media in youth identity, literacy, and culture making and marking. Increasingly, public writing and social media mediate young people's sense of self, further linking literacies and identities.

Although adolescents as a group get painted with a broad brush, studies have suggested that there are

culturally specific, overlapping subgroups of adolescents with respective developmental needs (Scales, 2010). A century ago, theorists began to categorically differentiate children, adolescents, and adults. Similarly, in the last decade, researchers began distinguishing between early and late adolescents as subgroups (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Chango, Allen, Szewedo, & Schad, 2015; Curtis, 2015; Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Kroff, & Memmott-Elison, 2018). Younger adolescents (11–15 years old) undergo rapid change, marked by increased curiosity, connections outside the family, and metacognition (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). Older adolescents (15–25 years old) experience a movement toward self-direction (Spano, 2004). This stage indexes increasingly stable interests, a firmer sense of self, the ability to set goals and follow through, and greater self-regulation (Erikson, 1959; Rice & Dolgin, 2002). Accordingly, younger and older adolescents might use literacy for different purposes and in service of different tasks.

As social positioning and opportunities to learn mutually shape each other (Bartlett, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Wortham, 2006), it is incumbent on literacy researchers to study the identities of adolescent writers and to understand differences among subgroups and individuals. These identities give shape to how adolescents learn, what they do, and the learning spaces that they inhabit. Understanding literate identities from ecological points of view can help in examining and building rich learning spaces.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

We recruited a diverse group of 39 international participants through messaging systems native to the apps. Most participants spoke more than one language and, at the time of the study, lived in the United States, Canada, Australia, India, Britain, South Africa, and the Philippines (see Figure 1).

The average age of participants was 16. Eight participants were under the age of 15, fitting the definition of younger adolescents (Curtis, 2015). The remaining participants were older adolescents, as they were 15 or older. The majority of participants were white or Asian, with 15.4% identifying as black and 7.7% identifying as mixed race (see Figure 2).

The adolescents in this study used a range of technologies. A third (32%;  $n = 13$ ) used a laptop daily, and another third (31%;  $n = 12$ ) used a mobile phone daily (see Figure 3). Many participants used devices in tandem, such as using a smartphone to check notifications, updates, and friend requests while using a laptop to type

Figure 1  
Participants' Countries of Residence



Figure 2  
Demographics of Participants

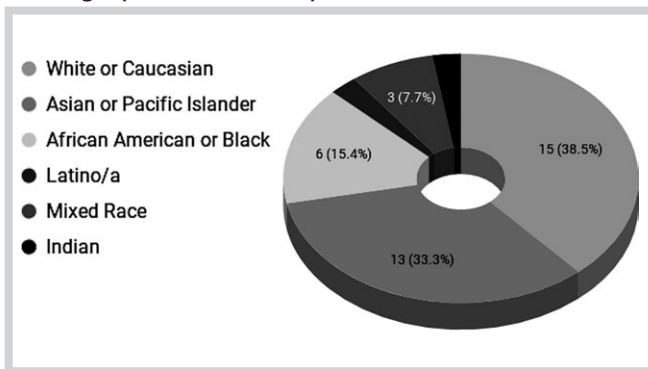
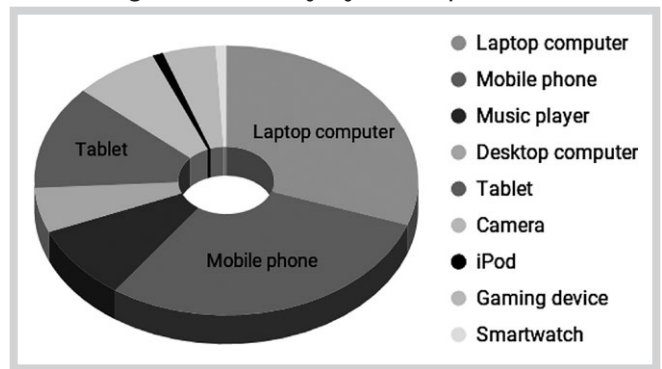


Figure 3  
Technologies Used Daily by Participants



up new chapters of their stories and to publish them online.

The participants were, for the most part, tech-savvy teenagers with access to multiple technological tools. Most of them (85%;  $n = 33$ ) were adolescent girls who identified as first- or second-generation immigrants with more than one language being spoken at home.

**Data Collection**

Presented here is an analysis of narratives of youths involved in publishing stories on story-sharing apps, sampled through a purposeful sampling design (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This method involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or



experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As this was an inquiry into a new media genre, we studied the two most prominent story-sharing apps: Wattpad and Figment. We collected information from the following data sources: content in the app, background surveys of focal participants (see Figure 4), and interviews with participants (see Figure 5).

Through biweekly visits to the site and its blog, we examined the literacy infrastructure and its provision of literate opportunities. According to Magnifico, Lammers, and Curwood (2013), sustained, systematic observation in online spaces aims “to determine the various roles available to participants, to trace how activity is distributed amongst participants, and to answer questions about what constitutes participation and activity for different users” (p. 83). Surveys and interviews implemented in this study worked to describe participation patterns and activity systems in which users took part (Engeström, 1987).

We used the background surveys, administered via an online survey service, to gather demographic and usage information for the participants. Questions focused on background, available technologies in the household, and a closed-ended inventory of the participants’ activities (e.g., writing, reviewing, making book covers, participating on forums). The gathered background information contextualized the literate practices, identities, and roles of each participant.

The primary method of procuring information about participants’ literate practices and identities was semistructured interviewing that built on survey data. Hour-long interviews prompted narrative descriptions of participants’ usual activities, focusing on tools, rules, and roles (Engeström, 1987; see Figures 4 and 5). For example, if participants described themselves as taking the role of reviewer but not writer in survey response, the interview delved into how they were making sense of the articulated roles. Available literacy roles emerged from content analyses and surveys, and the stances that users took toward those roles came from thematic analysis of participants’ articulations of their practices.

### Analytic Approach

In coding the data, we used in-depth content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and iterative open-ended, axial, and thematic coding (Saldaña, 2009) with the mixed-methods analytic software Dedoose to follow and derive thematic categories that emerged with regularity across the data sources and participants (see Table 1).

Figure 4  
Background Survey Excerpt for Wattpad Users:  
Practice Items

How long have you been a Wattpad member?  
 Less than a month    1 month to 1 year  
 1–2 years    3–5 years    More than 5 years

How many works have you published?  
 I publish stories:  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I comment on other people’s stories:  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I participate in the forums on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I connect with my friends on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I read stories on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I draft stories on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I “like” other people’s creations on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I “follow” people on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I chat with other authors using Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I read stories on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I get help on my writing on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I help others with their writing on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I use Wattpad to upload pictures.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I use Wattpad to get feedback on pictures.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I participate in challenges on Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I create book covers for Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I create video trailers for Wattpad.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I access Wattpad using a computer.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

I access Wattpad using a mobile device.  
 Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Frequently

In connection to the site, I consider myself (check all that apply):  
 A novice writer    An expert writer    A reader  
 A graphic designer    An editor    A critic  
 A friend

**Figure 5**  
**Sample Open-Ended Interview Questions**

- What do you like about Wattpad/Figment? What don't you like about it?
- What inspires you to participate in this writing community?
- Do you submit work to beta readers? If so, what motivates you to do so?
- Do you participate in other writing spaces beyond Wattpad/Figment, either online or offline?
- How does the writing process differ on Wattpad/Figment compared to other spaces, including the classroom?
- Does the writing you do in one space inform the writing you do in another space?
- What kinds of advice from fans/readers do you find most/least helpful?
- When you create your profile, what information is important to share/not share?
- What do your parents and friends think about your writing/reading interest?
- What keeps you going in contributing to this writing community?
- How, when, and where do you write?
- What have you learned about writing in those places?
- How did you learn these things about reading and writing?
- What kinds of reading, writing, and creating are important to you?
- How did these come to be important to you?
- How does one become a better writer?

For instance, when more than one participant termed their activity on the sites as “friending,” “fanning,” or “following,” those terms became codes.

Although this study cannot generalize to all adolescents, we aim to provide a nuanced account of how individuals and subgroups within the age group engaged with this new genre of media in service of their needs and goals.

## Findings

Survey responses mapped a variety of roles and practices that the two studied apps furnished and that the users chose to take up in articulating particular identity stances toward literacy. Although they engaged in the same apps, participants conveyed a preference toward a role on the site—as writer, reviewer, reader, fan, friend, and graphic designer—and a penchant for features that emphasized either sociality or writing output. Such choices structured the topography of

participants' literacy stances that led them to participate in these sites in different ways, with noted sources of variation being age, device availability, and current set of interests.

## *Divergent Orientations: Focus on Social Features or Writing Output*

Although story-sharing sites represent their patrons under the unitary label of user in all public relations materials, finer grained analyses suggest multiple user types. Survey analysis indicated patterned differences within participants' literacy stances. Stances underwrote activities that clustered together either as socially oriented, such as “liking” others' works, making friends, and joining clubs and conversations, or as publishing oriented, such as typing, editing, getting the next chapter “out there,” and getting critiques. Both stances used writing but for different purposes. Three quarters of the participants indicated relying on writing as social networking, chronicling activities such as “following,” “fanning,” and “liking” as the forefront of their participation. The remaining quarter indicated an orientation toward writing as publishing, such as word processing, revising, critiquing, and reviewing. These orientations rarely overlapped.

The social orientation was prominent in users who assigned to themselves the identity stance of friend or fan, versus those who saw themselves as writer or graphic designer. Those who represented their identity on the site as being a friend were more likely to say that they went on story-sharing apps to chat with people ( $n = 19$ ) and comment on stories ( $n = 17$ ) than those who did not identify as a friend. Those who identified as friend were more likely to say that they use story-sharing sites to connect ( $n = 15$ ) and to follow other users ( $n = 18$ ). Articulated identity stances within this space tracked reported practices. Those who chose the label of friend engaged in social networking features akin to sites such as Kik, Instagram, and Tumblr. These tools served as referents for participants to understand their socializing practices on Wattpad and Figment.

Many linked their personal social media accounts on their story-sharing app profile, and some created social media pages specifically for their writing or graphic design ventures. Most people used YouTube- and Facebook-inflected terms for connecting with others on the sites, including *friending*, *liking*, *following*, *commenting*, and *subscribing*. For example, 17-year-old Faith narrated her social orientation like this: “I have several friends on the site, all who are writers and readers like me....When I'm not chatting with friends, I'm reading. I have several authors who I'm completely dedicated to.”

**Table 1**  
Participants' Identity Stances and Roles

Pseudonym	Age	Number of works	Number of followers	Novice writer	Emergent writer	Expert writer	Reader	Graphic designer	Editor	Critic	Friend	Fan
<i>Up to 15 years old: N = 14</i>												
Alicia	14	5	372		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Anna	15	0	0		✓		✓					
Caramel	14	3	151		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Connie	14	8	687					✓	✓		✓	
Daphne	15	19	510	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hannah	15	17	79		✓							
Jabari	13			✓			✓				✓	✓
Kaleesha	13	6	10	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Khan	11				✓		✓				✓	✓
Lauren	13			✓								
Rosemary	15	5	36	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Sandra	13			✓				✓			✓	✓
Stella	15	5	360	✓			✓				✓	
Tammy	15				✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
<i>Over 15 years old: N = 25</i>												
Akshata	19	6	786	✓				✓			✓	✓
Angel	18	26	6,000	✓			✓					
Biri	20	3	42	✓								✓
Charlene	18						✓				✓	
Charlotte	19	3	46	✓				✓			✓	✓
Chris	21	2	50	✓			✓		✓			✓
Christine	17	1	135	✓			✓				✓	✓

(continued)



**Table 1**  
Participants' Identity Stances and Roles (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Number of works	Number of followers	Novice writer	Emergent writer	Expert writer	Reader	Graphic designer	Editor	Critic	Friend	Fan
Connor	16	11	595	✓			✓	✓			✓	
Elena	16	4	215	✓				✓			✓	✓
Emma	16	4	143	✓				✓			✓	✓
Faith	18	6	283	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓
Jade	26	14	58,000	✓				✓			✓	✓
Jenn	20	20	223			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Larissa	18	6	595		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Ley	17	1	223	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Masha	21	5	708	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓
Megha	16	7	264	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	
Min	18	1	36	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓
Mindy	17	2	211	✓								
Morgan	17	1	215		✓		✓					
Olivia	17	1	58	✓				✓			✓	✓
Priya	19	4	54	✓			✓				✓	✓
Rahma	21	14	359	✓			✓					✓
Rhea	16	1	130	✓			✓				✓	✓
Zahra	17	5	62	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Although all participants engaged in a hybrid genre of practice, with social, cognitive, and developmental functions of their literacy activity, there were distinct subtypes of users: those more concerned with networked sociality (80%) and those more interested in writing outcomes and products (20%). Rosemary (age 15), an example of a writer for whom publishing was prime, said of her dispositions and goals connected to participation on story-sharing sites, “My main goal is to be published and making money off of my books. Quite possibly on *The New York Times* Best Selling list. That last one is the highest thing I can ask for.”

Participants’ patterns of participation were associated with preferences and stances as literate producers. Users who placed a premium on sociality (Long & Moore, 2013) engaged in more interpersonal activities, such as “connecting” and “following.” Conversely, users who revealed a focal interest in publishing engaged in tasks directly related to writing output. Thus, participants’ interests and stance on the site shaped their architecture of participation, even though they were nominally engaged in one activity system.

### ***Differences in Novice, Emergent, and Expert Stances***

Participants who labeled themselves primarily as writers further articulated their stance as a specific type of writer within their narratives. These participants saw themselves as novice, expert, or emergent writers (categories that emerged in analysis), and such stances underpinned different patterns of use. Novices were more likely to report asking for help, incorporating visual elements in their stories, and mining forums for writing advice. For example, more participants who identified as novice writers said they created book covers ( $n = 12$ ). For instance, Priya (age 17) explained that although Wattpad is known as a reading and writing application, she had found her niche by creating book covers for trending authors. She considered herself a developmental writer but suggested that honing her graphic design skills had given her stature in the community. Her investment into making book covers yielded a sense of expertise and a close-knit network of like-minded learners. Some of these like-minded friends began working with Priya to hone her writing skills as she taught them about making book covers.

Tellingly, those who saw themselves as novices sought out avenues for showing and developing expertise apart from publishing well-liked stories, such as visual communication and production. Expert writers

expressed confidence in their ability to produce popular works on the apps through their craft. Teens called on different genres of participation in relation to the identity stance that they assumed.

### ***Developmental States and Patterns of Use***

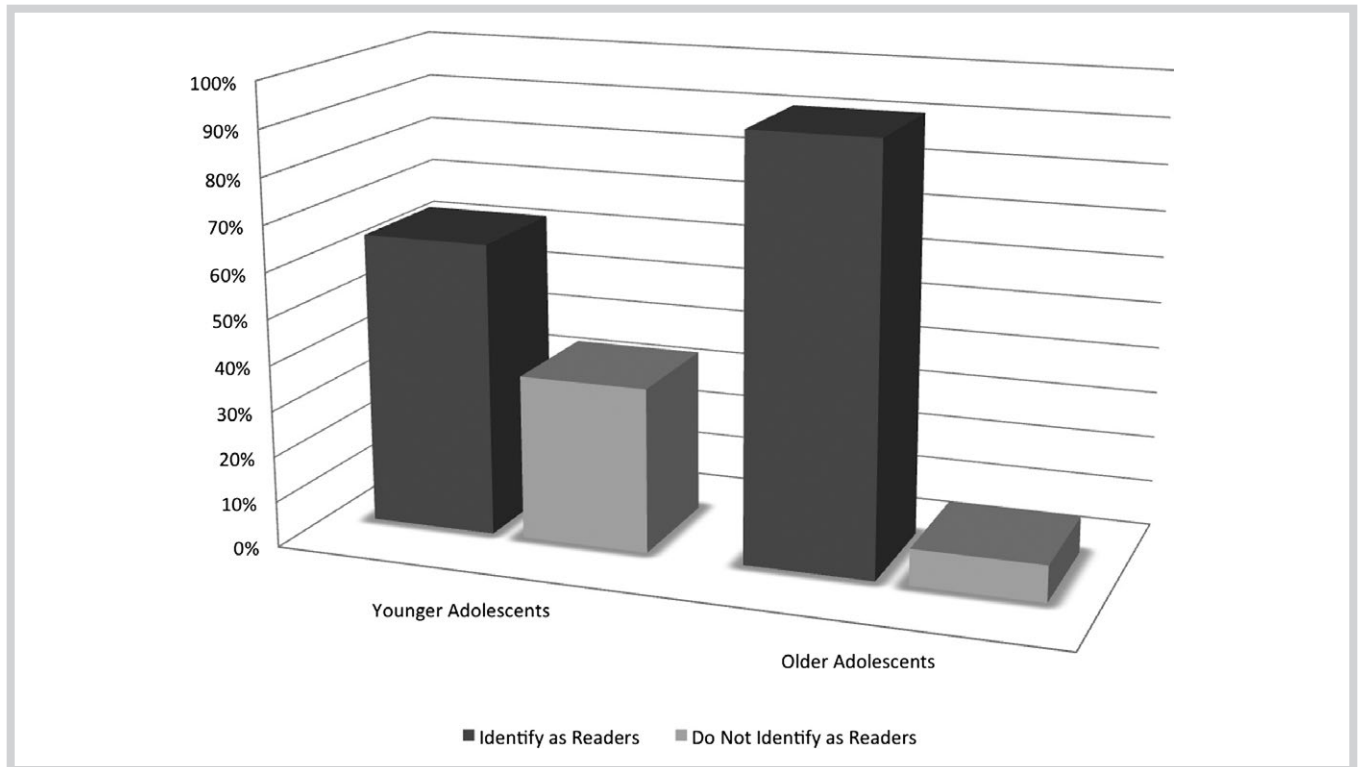
Although research has frequently treated adolescents as one group, we found different literacy identity stances of younger and older adolescents and attendant interactions with Wattpad and Figment. Younger adolescents were more likely to use story-sharing sites with an eye toward sociality. In contrast, older adolescents emphasized pursuits, such as polishing and publishing their manuscripts and artwork. For example, Megha’s (age 16) narrative of participation was laser-focused on editing and publishing her sophomore publication: a path of participation consistent with her self-identified stance of expert writer. Similarly, older adolescents were more likely to use networking features as a means of furthering their craft, such as reviewing works or participating in writing contests, rather than making friends. Indeed, Connie (age 17), taking the stance of designer, ran a graphic design club, delegating art design tasks to budding artists and publishing finalized designs on the website.

These patterns of engagement mirrored stances adopted by older and younger adolescents as literate beings. For example, in the surveys, almost all of the older adolescents identified as readers, whereas only half of the younger adolescents shared this view of themselves. This difference was statistically robust ( $\chi^2 = 4.68$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Figure 6), reflecting attunement to the variety of roles provided by Wattpad and Figment.

Similarly, although it may appear counterintuitive, older adolescents were more likely to consider themselves novice writers ( $\chi^2 = 3.79$ ,  $p < .06$ ; see Figure 7). Indeed, 80% of the older adolescents saw themselves as novices, compared with about 50% of the younger adolescents. Older adolescents may use professional novelists as their reference group, while younger adolescents, who were more likely to use storysharing apps as a social platform, may use their peers as a reference group.

These findings point to adolescents using these platforms in keeping with their needs. These age-related variations amplify differences found in patterns of use based on identity stance, investment, and device availability. The diversity in available literate roles and practices contributes to the appeal and popularity of these media. Similarly, multiple pathways to legitimate literate participation associated with more positive literacy

Figure 6  
Self-Identification as Reader by Subgroup of Adolescents



dispositions. This design feature of the apps in focus applies to all literacy environments.

## Discussion

In this study, we chronicled variation in use and identity stance adoption in adolescents on sites that fuse social networking and textual production. The adolescents flexibly took on literacy stances, in accordance with available roles on the site, the devices that they had access to, their personal investment, and their developmental needs.

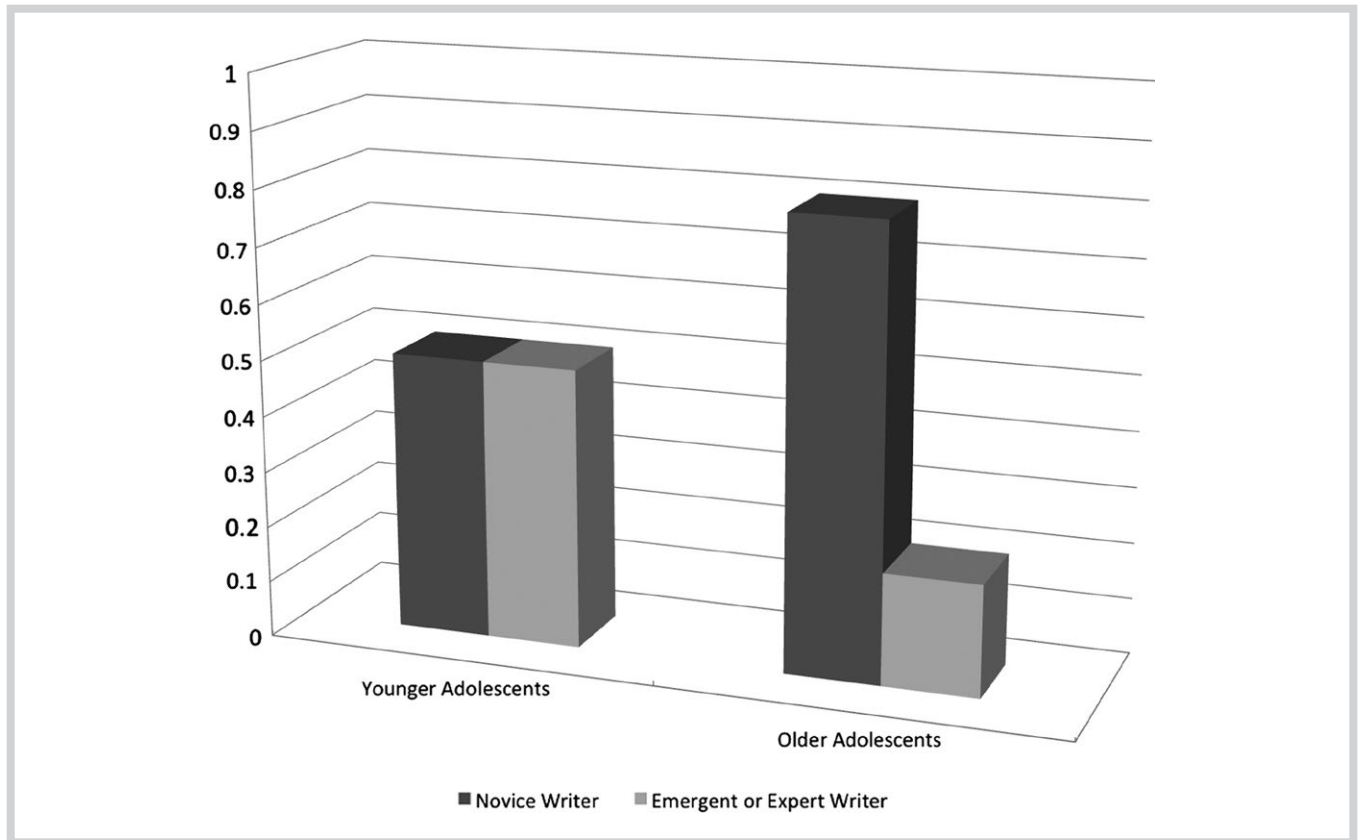
In contrast to more essentialist models of adolescent literacy and identity (see McLaren, 1995), participants drew on available literate roles in the environment to stake out particular stances, which funneled their investment into genres of participation. Younger adolescents, those who relied on smartphones, and those who adopted stances as fans and friends prioritized socially oriented features. Older adolescents and those who instantiated themselves as expert writers and prolific readers were more interested in textual production, output, and evaluation. The distinct affordances allowed different users and

subgroups of users to invest in a genre of practice as defined by the environment.

A participant like Connie (age 17) was able to choose an identity stance from an array of those available, given her current set of interests, investments, devices, and developmental needs. At the time of the study, she was invested into the stance of graphic designer, which structured her choices of activities and affiliations, foregrounding practices such as making book covers, assigning design tasks, and reviewing embedded graphics of others' stories. As she put it, at that time, her writing was put on the back burner. Connie's stance demonstrates the analytic purchase of documenting literacy practices from ecological and sociolinguistic perspectives. Tracking available roles, devices, and avenues for participation in a given literacy ecology makes visible participants' possible stances, purposes, and the routes that they may take.

Disposal of distinct architectures of participation rendered Wattpad and Figment rich literacy infrastructures for different types of adolescent users as they chose stances vis-à-vis the platforms, flexibly drawing on roles, needs, devices, and interests. Design principles animating these rich, diverse, yet structured

Figure 7  
Self-Identification as Novice Writer by Adolescent Subgroup



environments inform curricular planning, as learning designers work to build multiple pathways to participation, expression, and success and draw on learners' motivations, investments, and developmental needs.

## Implications

This research holds implications for researchers and practitioners interested in adolescent literacies. In terms of research, the observed variance in users and usage of adolescent story-sharing app participants suggest the importance of treating study participants and adolescents as a heterogeneous group. Moreover, the developmental differences in participant stances point to the importance of testing survey questions and using observations to supplement surveys of usage patterns. Being a writer can have many shapes. The variety of user experiences vis-à-vis writing revealed that multiple legitimate ways of participation in an immersive literacy ecology led users to be able to use the ecology in service of their own needs and interests and ultimately develop stances of inquiry, expertise, and production.

This research also shows the fruitfulness of in-depth investigations of youth investment into literacy. The explored diversity in users and patterns of use is instructive for literacy practitioners, such as teachers and coaches. On story-sharing sites such as Wattpad and Figment, users are able to differentiate their identity stances and practices and create a positive disposition toward literacy. The attributes that make story-sharing apps meaningful for these participants rely on the disposal of multiple paths to full participation. These attributes include access to authentic audiences, availability of multiple roles and stances, and a flexible infrastructure.

Consistent with other work in adolescent literacy studies, this study showed the prowess of identifying learners' needs and interests, allowing for heterogeneity and flexibility, and providing multiple stances and avenues to succeed within the literacy infrastructure of the environment. Sustained inquiry into networked sociality, public writing, and diversity in stance and practice will complicate and contextualize the phenomena of contemporary and future adolescent literacies.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Take an inventory of students' dispositions to make available a variety of stances in literary production.
2. Consider students' developmental needs, personal investments, and dispositions when designing literacy environments.
3. Allow learners to take part in all aspects of an authentic publishing process, such as allowing some to engage in drafting, reviewing, and graphic design.
4. Allow for the production of professional-looking artifacts and provide access to authentic audiences.
5. Ensure multiple routes to legitimate participation in the learning space of your design.
6. Facilitate critical conversations with students about the affordances of different writing environments.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

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