

CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING MEDIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CORRELATION
BETWEEN LIFE TRANSITION AND NEWS MEDIA USE

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by

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CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING MEDIA

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING MEDIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CORRELATION
BETWEEN LIFE TRANSITION AND NEWS MEDIA USE

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ABSTRACT

For decades, marketing researchers have been interested in understanding the relationship between life-changing events and individual consumer preferences and behaviors. Researchers have examined the influences of significant life changes on a number of products, including appliances, clothing and food, and have determined that these changes often predicate shifts in the brands people prefer and the products they purchase. However, news media is rarely folded into the discussion despite the fact that news media consumption is in many ways the same as the consumption of any other consumer good. This research helps bring media consumption into the conversation by examining — via a survey — changes in media consumption habits individuals experience after undergoing a particular life change, the transition from life as a college student to life as a working adult. It finds that people tend to spend different amounts of time with various media forms and that they also tend to consume different media outlets upon leaving college and entering the workforce full-time. It also finds that the magnitude of the life change plays an important role in determining the degree to which individual media consumption habits are altered. The research shows that media consumption does, in fact, deserve a place in the discussion began by marketing researchers almost four decades ago.

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INTRODUCTION

Audience size has long been considered important to the success of news media organizations — and for good reason. The more eyes and ears there are taking in the advertisements found in most news media, the more money media outlets can charge advertisers and, in the case of subscription-based media, subscribers. It's no surprise then that, in addition to retaining existing readers, viewers or listeners, many news media institutions consider the attraction of additional readers, viewers or listeners a top priority. It's also unsurprising that much research has been devoted, by scholars such as Lin, Salwen and Abdulla (2003) and by professional news organizations, to understanding who consumes the news and why. Drawing on the principles laid out in uses and gratifications theory, researchers have analyzed how factors such as ethnicity, age, education level and socio-economic status are related to individual news consumption (Gezduci et al. 2007). However, a body of research, including studies from both within the field of communications research and without, suggests that *who* might not be the only question worth asking. The question of *when* — as in when individuals are most prone to adjust their news media consumption habits — might be even more important. More specifically, the aforementioned body of research indicates that it might be meritorious to further investigate the relationship between major life changes and the news consumption patterns of consumers. This study does just that by examining media consumption changes of individuals who have recently transitioned from life as college students to life as full-time members of the workforce. It seeks to determine the degree to which individuals who have recently made this life transition have altered their

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consumption of various news media forms as well as their consumption of individual news media outlets. It also seeks to establish a basis for discussion about why certain consumption habits change in the wake of a life transition by examining the magnitude of the transition itself as well as specific influencing factors, such as change in geographic location and change in personal income, that often go hand in hand with significant life transition.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Major Life Changes and Habit Realignment

A study by Verplanken and Wood (2006) suggested that it is often difficult to influence consumer behavior of individuals whose consumption has become habitual. That's because consumers tend to develop habits such as product purchasing, transportation modes and media use that work well with their present environments and expectations. Researchers found that even when consumers are persuaded that it would be wise to alter their habits, they tend to persist in their habitual behaviors if their environmental circumstances, and therefore environmental cues, remain the same. In other words, these individuals assume there are valid reasons why they engage in their habitual behaviors and are, therefore, reluctant to change them. However, if there is a change in the environmental cues that prompt habit persistence, consumers have been found to be more prone to a reexamination of their habits and, ultimately, habit adjustment. The authors wrote, "Specifically, environmental changes that disrupt habits also challenge habitual mindsets and thus increase openness to new information and experiences. Furthermore, because these environmental changes impair the automatic cuing of well-practiced responses, they enable performance of new actions" (Verplanken et al. 2006, 7).

Although the Verplanken and Wood (2006) study was not intended to exclusively address media consumption, many of the principles associated with uses and gratifications theory, the implications of which will be outlined below, suggest that

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similar forces are likely at play when it comes to individuals' media consumption habits. The same can be said of research by Wells and Gubar.

Although many life-changing events, such as personal injury, death of a loved one or natural disaster, are highly personal and difficult to predict, certain events tend to be shared experiences for large segments of the population. In 1966, Wells and Gubar authored a paper that would become foundational in the push to bring something called the life-cycle concept to prominence in marketing research, a field that certainly has implications on media consumption. They argued that commonly experienced life stages, the combination of which form an individual's life cycle, are more useful than age in predicting consumer behavior and tendencies to change existing behavioral patterns. That's because various life stages often come with specific challenges, expectations and needs that predicate consumption behavior. The authors broke down an individual's lifespan into six highly transformative stages that they believed most people were likely to experience. These stages are bachelorhood, newlywed, full nest I, full nest II, empty nest and solitary survivors (Wells et al. 1966). Admittedly, the world has changed considerably since this paper was first published, and some of the life stages discussed in the paper are less applicable in a society that is increasingly bucking the traditional institutions of marriage and dual parenthood. Nevertheless, transformative life changes and stages undoubtedly remain. By understanding what these life changes are and how they might affect consumers, researchers can start to predict behavioral patterns as they relate to consumer behavior and, as this study addresses, media consumption.

A paradigm known as the constancy principle underscores the importance of the in-transition nature of individuals who have recently experienced significant life-course

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changes. As it applies to the mass media, the principle states that although new media forms and outlets come and go, the consumer base remains essentially the same (Son et al. 1993). Although there is undoubtedly some capacity for media outlets to gain consumers who are entirely new to the media market, the researchers suggested that most audience gains and losses are simply trades between various media stakeholders. For example, when *GQ* gains a subscriber, it is likely that the individual's time spent with the magazine will result in the individual spending less time with another media outlet or combination of outlets. The loser in this instance could be a direct competitor such as *Esquire* or could be an outlet that has little in common with *GQ*, such as *The Wall Street Journal*. The constancy principle illustrates why, rather than pursue altogether new media consumers, it is prudent for media institutions seeking to boost their audience numbers to focus on understanding when existing consumers are most susceptible to modifying their media consumption patterns.

Changes in Non-Media Consumerism

Currently, only limited research exists related to the effects major life changes have on media consumption. However, there is an extensive body of research related to the effects of such events on general consumer behaviors. One of the earliest studies in this field was conducted by Alan R. Andreason (1984). Andreason theorized that the likelihood of a consumer or household to change consumption preferences and patterns is directly proportional to the magnitude of life-status changes (things such as marriage or the attainment of a new job) that the consumer or household has recently experienced. The researcher found that lifestyle changes tend to elicit dissatisfaction with consumer

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purchases. This trend seemed to intensify when those changes increase stress levels in the individual or household. This dissatisfaction suggests that consumers who have recently experienced significant life transitions will be likely to alter their brand preferences and, therefore, their consumption habits (Andreason 1984, 794).

More than 20 years after Andreason's research, another study explored the life change-consumption change concept further by examining the effects of a number of life changes — both stressful and stress-free — on the consumer preferences and behaviors of affected individuals. The researchers made two findings relevant to determining stress' role in altering consumer behaviors and preferences. First, no positive correlation was found between stress-free life events and an individual's susceptibility to changes in consumer behaviors or preferences. Conversely, a positive correlation was found between stressful events and such changes in behaviors and preferences. For example, the findings suggest that an individual who has recently lost a job, something most people would deem a stressful event, will be more likely to change his or her preferred clothing brands than another individual who has recently experienced a major improvement in financial status, something commonly associated with being stress-free. The authors suggest that this might be due to the coping behaviors people tend to employ when overcome with stress (Mathur et al. 2007).

Another study examined these stress-induced coping behaviors by exploring the influence of a particular life-changing event, widowhood, on the psychological and behavioral states of 10 women. The researcher found that the loss of a spouse prompted many of the research participants to undergo a process of "financial, social, spiritual and physical adjustments" (Cheek 2010, 345). She also found that the loss of a spouse caused

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many of the women to redefine themselves by shedding longstanding behavioral patterns. The women tended to broaden their social circles, take on new household responsibilities and even move to new homes (Cheek 2010). The study did not delve into changes in media consumption patterns, but it is an excellent example of how jarring stressful life events can be.

Although these two studies monitor preferences and behaviors outside the media arena, it follows that the same principles would also apply to news media outlets such as television programs, newspapers, news websites and magazines. If, for example, recently widowed women are prone to change their social groups, acquire new hobbies, sell valuables and even move to a new home, it's possible that they are also susceptible to altering their media consumption habits. Mathur et al. summarized the importance of this knowledge:

“Whether changes in consumption activities reflect efforts to cope with stressful changes or stress-free responses to change, marketers who understand the circumstances that make people receptive to change might be in a better position to build their customer base and to preserve their existing base. Marketers who wish to attract new customers from among those who are using competing products may want to appeal to those who have experienced or are about to experience major life events, especially stressful events” (Mathur et al. 2007, 234).

Consumption Theories Applied to Media Habits

Although there is currently little research related to changes in news media consumption as a result of life changes, significant energy has been devoted to

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understanding and explaining the reasons why individuals tend to choose particular media forms over others. These studies generally fall under the category of uses and gratifications research.

Uses and gratifications theory emerged near the middle of the 20th century and challenged conventional wisdom by suggesting that, rather than passively consuming whatever comes their way, news audience members, at least at certain points in time, actively engage in choosing between various media outlets. The theory suggests that the main motivation behind these media choices is individuals' desires to fulfill certain informational or stimulatory needs (Katz et al. 1973). Since its establishment, the theory has slowly been refined in an attempt to better understand these needs and the ways in which various media forms and outlets gratify them.

A study by Scott Althaus and David Tewksbury (2000) indicated that various media forms differ in their suitability to gratifying various needs and suggested that a consumer's media selection is highly dependent upon the specific gratifications being sought by that consumer. By surveying a group of college students, the researchers determined that each of today's most prominent media platforms (the Internet, newspapers and television programs) tends to have uses distinct from other platforms. The Internet and prime-time television programs were found to be most useful in satisfying recreational needs. Newspapers and television news programs, on the other hand, tended to serve as the primary vehicles through which serious news was consumed (Althaus et al. 2000). A few years later, a trio of researchers found that the Internet was gaining a foothold in the serious news market and, as such, was less commonly perceived as a predominantly recreational medium. Additionally, the researchers found that the

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Internet's breadth of subject areas made it the medium best suited to gratify a range of consumption needs (Dimmick et al. 2004).

Thomas E. Ruggiero (2000) illustrated another important component of inter-media variability in his analysis of the Internet's impact on media uses and gratifications. The researcher explained that the very nature of the various media formats can render them incapable of fulfilling particular gratifications needs. The Internet, for example, has introduced altogether new gratifications needs such as hypertextuality, multimedia presentation and interactivity that many other media forms can't possibly meet due to the limitations imposed by their formats. It could be argued that these needs are simply new manifestations of age-old needs for belongingness or connectivity, but the fact remains that no other present medium can gratify those needs in the same way the Internet can.

A related study by Vincent and Basil (1997) found that certain gratifications needs seemed to play a more prominent role in individuals' media selection. The need for surveillance in particular was determined to be a more reliable predictor of newspaper, news magazine and television news consumption than other gratifications needs such as escapism or boredom.

It's also worth pointing out that there is tremendous room for variability within each media form. The research cited above tends to group media outlets by production format, an approach that has its uses. However, uses and gratifications theory can also be applied at the program or content level by examining, for example, the different gratifications fulfilled by two morning television news programs. Rayburn, Palmgreen and Acker (1984) did just that when they looked at the gratifications sought by viewers of "Good Morning, America" and the "Today" show. In the end, the researchers found that

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viewers did, in fact, believe their chosen morning show fulfilled gratifications needs that the other did not.

Althaus and Tewskbury (2000) reference both the Vincent and Basil (1997) and the Rayburn et al. (1984) research in their study and summarize the findings nicely:

“This suggests that the choice among available news outlets might hinge not only on an outlet’s usefulness for surveillance but also on its ability to fulfill secondary or tertiary gratifications: Ability to entertain or usefulness for passing time might be just as important as richness of information as an evaluative criterion for choosing among alternative news sources” (Althaus et al. 2000, 25).

Regardless of whether these uses and gratifications principles are being applied to various media platforms or to individual media outlets, they might well explain why individuals who have recently experienced life-stage transitions are prone to shed one media outlet for another. If there are indeed distinctions between the abilities of various media outlets to fulfill particular needs or interests, it seems reasonable that consumers would alter their preferred news media when their informational needs or interests change in the wake of a life-changing event.

News Consumption from a Psychological Perspective

As is the case with much mass communications research, the roots of uses and gratifications theory can be traced to psychology research. A study by Conway and Rubin (1991) explains how some of the psychological motivators mentioned in the above section on non-media consumerism lead consumers to seek particular media gratifications in television programs. More specifically, it looks at eight theories related to active media

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participation — that is, theories that assume audience members are active in deciding which media outlets they will consume — and examines how the gratifications consumers seek might be influenced by various psychological states. Summarily, these theories assume that people turn to the media for the following reasons: to seek balance and stability in life, to find explanations for their experiences, to fulfill a need for sensation or arousal, to achieve personal growth and to attain a sense of control over one's own life, to reduce negative tension, to play and to express the inner self, to fulfill a need for interpersonal interaction, and to obtain empowering information. Via a survey of 331 individuals, the researchers determined that psychological variables such as anxiety, sensation-seeking for the purposes of disinhibition, creativity, parasocial interaction and assertiveness helped to explain various TV use motivations (Conway et al. 1991). These findings are important to understanding how life-stage transitions might influence media consumption patterns because the psychological state of consumers is, in effect, the intermediate step between a life-changing transition and consumption-changing behavior. If certain events can be shown to affect — either positively or negatively — the same psychological states that Conway and Rubin (1991) have linked with media gratification, it would suggest there is a link between these events and the media consumption tendencies of the individuals who experience them.

Diddi and LaRose (2006) point out one last important psychological characteristic of the typical media consumer. Although one of the chief assumptions of the uses and gratifications theory is that of an active consumer, the researchers explained that the majority of media consumers spend very little time actively choosing between the various media forms and outlets. This harkens back to the findings of the Verplanken and Wood

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(2006) study cited at the beginning of this paper. Diddi and LaRose (2006) contended that media consumers tend to find a consumption pattern that meets their present needs and stick with it until there is a significant change in their daily routines or personal motivations — two things likely to change when individuals transition from one life stage to another — indicating that there are only a limited number of windows in which consumers are actually in a position to alter news media consumption patterns. Understanding when these windows are open is essential for media practitioners. It not only informs them of which demographic groups are worth targeting when seeking new viewers, readers or listeners but also informs them of which members of their current audience they are most likely to lose in the wake of major life changes.

Existing Research on Life-Stage Transitions as Related to Media Habits

Throughout the pages above, numerous life-changing events have been alluded to, including leaving the parental home, attending college, graduating from college, obtaining a new job, marriage, childbirth, death of a loved one and retirement. Add to that list things such as moving to a new city, moving to a new country and transferring to a new school, and it quickly becomes apparent that a multitude of research opportunities exist related to the effects of life-stage transitions on news media consumption habits. Although many of these life transitions and their effects remain unstudied by communications researchers, a handful, particularly those involving demographic groups easily accessible to academic researchers, have received some attention.

One such group is teenagers who are preparing to leave the parental home. Each year, the Annenberg Public Policy Center conducts a survey of parents and children

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called “Media in the Home.” The specific topics addressed by the study change from year to year, but in 1999, the subject of television viewing preferences among teens and their parents received some attention. The researchers found that there were significant differences between the sorts of programs parents indicated they would prefer their children watch and the sorts of programs the children themselves said they would like to watch. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the parents had a tendency to indicate a leaning toward public television programs rather than programs on broadcast or cable networks. The children, meanwhile, indicated a preference for programs on cable networks and ranked public television programs as the least interesting of the three categories (Stanger et al. 1999). This information indicates that children are primed to make dramatic adjustments in their television viewing habits upon leaving their parents’ homes. When parental oversight is removed during a teenager’s collegiate years, for example, it seems likely that the teenager will gradually begin to devote more of his or her television viewing time to programs he or she might not have been encouraged to watch while living at home. It can also be inferred that patterned use of other news media such as newspapers, magazines and Internet news sites will undergo similar changes as students form habits independent from parental influence.

This assumption was supported in a study by Vincent and Basil (1997) that examined media use variations among several groups of college students. Via a survey of students, researchers found that individual media use tends to evolve as college students advance through the academic ranks. For example, upper classmen (juniors and seniors) and graduate students tend to use media significantly more on average than college freshmen and sophomores. The differences were especially apparent in the measured

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areas of newspaper readership and CNN viewership. Conversely, magazine use showed little variation between the grade levels. The study also measured the various uses and gratifications needs of individuals and found that factors such as age, gender, grade-point average and year in school all correlated to specific gratifications sought. For example, students with higher grade-point averages were more likely to use the media as a form of surveillance and, therefore, spent more time consuming hard news media such as newspapers and CNN. Meanwhile, students with high levels of boredom, a common trait among the younger students, were less likely to consume print media such as newspapers and magazines (Vincent et al. 1997). For the purposes of the present study, the Vincent-Basil (1997) research is valuable because it lends credibility to the notion that media use fluctuates as individuals enter and subsequently prepare to exit a very transitional stage in life. However, the study also leaves a hole that the present research hopes to fill. Although it establishes links between variables such as grade-point average and media consumption, it does little to explain why students of different grade levels with similar grade-point averages varied so dramatically in the time they spent consuming the various media forms.

Transferring from one university to another also seems to be a catalyst for alterations in media consumption routines. The research team of Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt (2005) found that the changes in environmental cues that result from a change in academic setting tend to elicit new behaviors in areas such as exercise, television viewing and newspaper reading habits. By surveying 115 new transfer students, the researchers found that these students tended to spend more time reading newspapers and less time watching television following their transfers. Wood et al. (2005) suggested

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that these new behaviors were likely a result of altogether new environments and new daily routines. These findings support the claims made by Verplanken and Wood (2006) related to the role of environmental cues in habit persistence. The absence of certain cues coupled with the presence of new cues leaves the individual prone to adjustments in habitual behaviors. Wood et al. (2005) also suggested that the change in consumption patterns of transfer students could have been influenced by a conscious desire by the individual to change existing habits. “For example, participants with strong TV watching habits who wanted to discontinue this behavior might have decided to spend their time in places without TV at the new university,” the authors write. “In this account, changed contexts did not directly disrupt habits, but instead the wish to change habits was responsible for both the changed context and the changed behavior.” (Wood et al. 2005, 929)

A study by Reece and Palmgreen (2000) supports the idea that habit realignment is often the result of personal motivations. The researchers studied the media-use motivations of Indian graduate students, a group of people experiencing two significant life transitions (the attendance of graduate school and relocation to a new country) simultaneously. Via a survey of 99 students and subsequent in-depth interviews of 30 students, the researchers found that many of the students were highly motivated to consume American television programs as a means of acculturation. Conversely, the participants indicated that acculturation was not a significant motivator for watching Indian television programs. This suggests that personal motivations changed following a significant life transition and that media use changed concurrently to reflect these new motivations (Reece et al. 2000).

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Researchers Lee and Tse (1994) conducted a similar study related to the acculturation of Hong Kong natives who immigrated to Canada. Via a survey of 938 individuals, the researchers discovered that there were distinct variations in the media consumption habits of new immigrants, long-time immigrants (people who had lived in the new country for 7 years), Caucasian Canadians and people still living in Hong Kong. Hong Kong residents spent the highest percentage of total media time watching television, followed by new immigrants, long-time immigrants and Caucasian Canadians. The trend was reversed in terms of time spent listening to the radio. Caucasian Canadians allocated the highest percentage of media time to listening to the radio, followed by long-time immigrants, new immigrants and Hong Kong residents (Lee et al. 1994). This suggests that immigrants tend to cling to the media forms traditionally used in their home country initially but that they gradually begin to spend more time consuming the media used by the naturalized residents of their new country. This, in turn, suggests a number of things relevant to the study of life-stage transitions and their impact on media consumption habits. First, it indicates that there might be differences between the perceived usefulness of certain media (radio and television in this instance) for people in various stages of the life course. Second, it suggests the same thing as many of the other studies cited here: that life-stage transitions are, indeed, powerful predictors of changes in media consumption habits. Finally, it suggests the potential for the presence of a confounding variable in the current study. That is the idea that preferential and behavioral modifications do not necessarily immediately follow life-stage transitions.

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Potential Confounding Variables to the Present Research

Although many studies, including those of Reece and Palmgreen (2000) and Wood et al. (2005), have suggested the immediacy of media-use changes following life transitions, other studies (Lee et al. 2004, and Vincent et al. 2007) have suggested that these changes might be more gradual. T.M. Brown (1952) explained these gradual changes via something called habit persistence. In order to demonstrate the phenomenon, the researcher gathered personal income data for U.S. citizens between 1926 and 1941 as well as between 1946 and 1949. He then gathered similar data on the spending levels of U.S. citizens during the same periods. Brown (1952) found that there was a lag period between the point in time when a change in personal income occurred and the point in time when individual spending patterns began to reflect this change in income. When the average personal income increased, it took as many as two or three years for the population to increase spending to a level that reflected this new income level. Similarly, when income decreased, individuals were slow to spend less (Brown 1952).

Because media consumption falls within the realm of traditional consumerism, it is important to understand the theory of habit persistence. The combined body of mass communications research cited above neither conclusively confirms nor disproves the presence of habit persistence in media use following life transitions, but it does at least indicate that such a phenomenon might exist during some transitions. The present research does not control for this phenomenon, but it is worth keeping in mind as a potential explanation for any findings that indicate a lack of consumption change following the life-stage transition.

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It is also important to bear in mind factors other than life-stage transition that might elicit changes in individuals' news media consumption habits. The influence of technological innovations on news media consumption has been witnessed repeatedly throughout history following the advent of disruptive technologies such as radio, television and, most recently, the Internet. Ahlers (2006) demonstrated the influence of technological innovation when he examined the impact of the Internet on media consumption and found that consumption habits have been affected, albeit less significantly than many media analysts predicted, following the introduction of online news sources. The researcher demonstrated that, in 2006, approximately 12 percent of media consumers exclusively used online news sources. Another 45.1 percent of consumers used online sources in some capacity. These findings suggest a clear shift in consumption patterns — away from traditional print, radio or television media and toward online media — that could not have taken place without the Internet's intervention.

An article by Althaus (2002) suggests that national crises also tend to have tremendous influence over individual media use. Althaus analyzed the effects of the Persian Gulf crisis and 9/11 on American viewership of network and cable television news programs. The findings indicate that national crises have a direct influence on the media consumption habits of the population, at least temporarily. Following 9/11, for example, many people began spending less time with newspapers and news magazines and more time with cable news programs. Similarly, the evening news audience grew by 13.8 million viewers, just shy of 10 percent, between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in July of 1990 and the beginning of the air war six months later. The author suggested that the

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spike in viewership can likely be attributed to a sudden and temporary need for breaking news that is unlikely to be habit-forming (Althaus, 2002).

Although it is useful to be aware of the external factors that might influence media use, it is perhaps more important to recognize the key dissimilarity between personal life-stage transitions and broadly impactful events such as national crises and technological innovations. Personal life-stage transitions are much more predictable and less sensitive to outside influences than their more macroscopic relatives and are, therefore, much easier for media institutions to act on when attempting to attract new consumers and retain current readers, viewers and listeners. This distinction underscores the practical usefulness of a study focused on understanding the life-stage transition from college student to member of the workforce and the transition's correlation to news media consumption habits. It also harkens back to this study's key hypothesis: It is predicted that the transition from life as a college student to life as a working professional is correlated to changes in individuals' news media consumption habits. In the sections ahead, the hypothesis is tested by examining (1) changes in the amounts of time individuals spend consuming various news media forms (newspaper, magazine, TV news, etc.) as well as by examining (2) these individuals' perceived changes in their consumption of individual news media outlets (specific newspapers, magazines, TV news programs, etc.). Secondary consideration is given to understanding whether the magnitude of these media consumption changes is influenced by the magnitude of each individual's life-stage transition — in other words, the extent to which their present life stage differs from their previous stage. Finally, some time is devoted to understanding the

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extent to which various factors associated with life transitions appear to play in altering individuals' news consumption habits.

METHODOLOGY

This study is meant to serve as the first of many such investigations into the relationship between common life-stage transitions and changes in individual news media consumption habits. Uses and gratifications theory served as the theoretical basis for the research. The theory operates under the assumption that individuals are active, at least at certain points in time, in choosing between various news outlets (Katz et al. 1973). It also assumes that individuals choose which news media they consume based on perceived differences in the abilities of various news media forms and outlets in gratifying particular needs (Althaus et al. 2000).

Past research related to media uses and gratifications has differed somewhat in terms of the types of media studied. Some researchers have concerned themselves solely with hard news media outlets such as newspapers, news magazines and network TV news programs (Vincent et al. 1997) while others have broadened the scope to include media such as prime-time television programs and entertainment-centric websites (Althaus et al. 2000). Because one of the chief assumptions with this study is that new media habits are closely linked to the new informational needs that arise from life-stage transitions, news media will be defined as media forms that primarily aim to provide information rather than entertainment. This includes traditional news media such as newspapers, news magazines, radio news programs, local and national television news programs and news websites as well as more loosely defined news outlets such as niche magazines and even information-centric blogs. The term news media does not include any media forms that

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primarily provide entertainment such as music radio programs, gaming websites or television sitcoms.

Habit change will be defined in two ways. The primary interest of this study is to determine if news media consumers spend different amounts of time consuming various news media forms (newspapers, magazines, etc.) after their transition from college student to working professional. If, for example, an individual spent two hours per week watching local television news while in college but now watches local television news an average of four hours per week, this would signify change. Of secondary concern is change in the amount of time an individual spends consuming a particular news media product (*Rolling Stone*, *CBS Evening News*, etc.) after transitioning from life as a college student to life as a working professional. In this instance, change would be defined as any fluctuation in the amount of time one spends consuming a particular news media product. Similar measures of change have been used in studies by Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt (2005); Lee and Tse (1994); and Reece and Palmgreen (2000).

Other important definitions include that of college student and that of working professional. College student will be defined as anyone who attends a college or university full-time, and working professional will be defined as anyone who considers himself or herself to be employed full-time.

As cited in the review of literature, previous research suggests that there are a limited number of windows during the course of an individual's life when the individual is likely to alter his or her habitual media consumption. This reluctance to change appears to be related to the environmental cues that reinforce the individual's current pattern of news media viewership, readership and listenership. The aforementioned windows are

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most likely to appear when other aspects of a person's environment — that is, his or her routine events such as going to work and engaging in social activities — are in flux (Verplanken et al. 2006).

Although there are a multitude of events that have the potential to throw off the routine aspects of an individual's life, many of these events would be difficult for media institutions to use when hoping to better understand which population groups to target as new readers, listeners or viewers. That's because many events, such as significant personal injury or natural disaster, are highly unpredictable or unlikely to be experienced by large segments of the population. The unpredictable and uncommon nature of these events makes it difficult to identify large groups of individuals who have recently experienced the life-changing events.

It is far more useful for media institutions to find groups of people who have recently experienced, or who are about to experience, life-changing events that are considered parts of the common life course. This is for two primary reasons. First, these events tend to happen to a large percentage of the population (Wells et al. 1966), meaning media messages and campaigns for readers, viewers and listeners can be targeted toward, and disseminated to, a large group of people whose similar life situations are likely to result in similar informational needs. Second, the commonality of these events as parts of the life course means that they are somewhat predictable. For example, it would be much easier for a media institution to predict the approximate time when an individual will retire than it would be to predict when an individual will have his or her home demolished by a natural disaster. Although it is undoubtedly true that people transition

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between life courses at different ages, it is also true that the majority of people progress through the various life stages in a similar order (Wells et al. 1966).

One such predictable life transition is the transition from life as a student to life as a working professional. Although not all American adults enter the workforce, the majority do. An October 2011 study by The Bureau of Labor Statistics determined that 58.3 percent of American adults were then employed. Additionally, common experience suggests that many adults enter the workforce shortly after leaving school, whether that school is a high school, a trade school or a university.

Due to the fact that this research is taking place on a large college campus, the researcher has access to a large number of individuals who have recently graduated from college and moved on to life as working adults. Although such a population group narrows the scope of the research by excluding people who entered the workforce without attending college or without completing college, it also makes it possible to generate results that are generalizable for the large number of people who do enter the workforce after graduating from a university. This group includes people who have recently graduated with four-year degrees and people who have recently graduated with advanced degrees. It is with the objective of within-group generalizability in mind that it was decided to pursue a large sample population that was systematically and randomly generated from a broader population of people who recently left college and began working. Although the findings will not be generalizable to all people who experience common life-stage transitions, it is hoped that this research will serve as the first of many examinations of such transitions and their relationship to media consumption habits.

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Former studies of similar in-transition population groups have employed surveys to probe the actions and ideas of the research participants who meet the very specific criteria. Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt (2005) administered a survey to a narrowly defined population group when they attempted to better understand the habitual, intentional and behavioral changes of college students who were transferring from one university to another. In the Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt (2005) study, the researchers asked participants to report on their habits both one month prior to and one month following their transfer to the new institution.

A population-specific survey was also used by Lee and Tse (1994) when the researchers attempted to measure acculturation via media use among Hong Kong natives who had recently emigrated to Canada. In this instance, the researchers broke subjects into the following four groups: current Hong Kong residents, Hong Kong immigrants who had emigrated less than seven years prior, Hong Kong immigrants who had emigrated more than seven years prior and English-speaking Caucasian Canadian consumers. This division allowed for a between-groups comparison rather than the within-groups comparison made possible in Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt's (2005) study.

A third related study, which incidentally was also focused on the acculturation process of a specific group, also involved a survey approach. Reece and Palmgreen (2000) examined the media use of the graduate students and how that media use related to the students' perceived need for acculturation. In this instance, the researchers opted for a within-groups comparison that was derived from a survey administered all at once rather than before and after the life change.

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From the combined body of research cited above, it is clear that a survey method can be employed to measure the media consumption of a narrowly defined people group. What is less clear is how the survey ought to be administered.

Perhaps the easiest method to rule out is that of Lee and Tse (1994). The authors write of their method, “Acculturation is a dynamic process; thus, it is necessary to assess how immigrants change over time” (p. 62). Although there is likely a certain degree of acculturation inherent in the transition from student to member of the workforce, it is unlikely that such a transition is analogous to the transitional process of an immigrant. Whereas newly employed graduates might grapple with their new responsibilities, commutes and incomes, immigrants often must learn new cultural customs, new social interactions and even a new language. In short, workplace acculturation is unlikely to take as long as true acculturation. Additionally, the present study is concerned with the changing habits of individuals; thus, it seems counterintuitive to conduct a between-groups comparison that invites a number of confounding variables such as divergent personal preferences, incomes and education levels of individuals in the compared groups.

The methods of the other two research teams are more closely related in that they compare the same group of participants against itself. The Reece and Palmgreen (2000) method seems to be inferior in that it requires participants to recall actions and thought processes that took place several months or even years prior to the survey. On the other hand, the Wood, Tam and Guerrero Witt (2005) approach of surveying participants both before and after their transitions is less feasible for the present study in that it requires a much longer commitment of time on the part of the researcher. If applied to the study at hand, the method would require the researcher to administer a survey to a large group of

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students who are expected graduate within a few months and then re-administer the same survey after the participants had left the university and obtained jobs. In light of the poor economy and thus the bloated job market, it might take participants several months or even years to find employment. Given that this was a thesis that needed be completed within a few months, this approach is quite simply unfeasible. It is for these reasons that this study most closely resembles the within-group survey method employed by Reece and Palmgreen (2000).

The Present Research

In order to find a suitable population of potential participants, the researcher looked to the alumni association at a large Midwestern university. The association was able to provide the names and email addresses of 2,449 individuals who had graduated from the university within the past year and a half. The information was then entered into a database and sorted in random order. From this list, it was hoped that at least 200 individuals who met the criteria of having entered the workforce after graduation would agree to participate in a survey about their news media consumption.

Because it was impossible to initially exclude those who had not yet entered the workforce, a screening question was created to isolate these individuals and exclude them from the participant pool. As a precautionary measure, a second screening question was also created to verify that all potential participants were recent college graduates. Other questions on the survey were created by the researcher and pretested on five individuals who had recently graduated from college and entered the workforce. Following the pretest, the questionnaire was revised to the version found in the Appendix. The revised

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questionnaire included measures of media use prior to college graduation; measures of media use after entering the workforce; and a number of Likert-type questions related to changes in informational needs, time available to consume media and time spent with individual media outlets.

In order to encourage participation, participants were offered the chance to be entered into a random drawing for their choice of either a Kindle Fire or a \$200 Best Buy gift card. The winner was randomly selected from all those who completed the survey at the conclusion of the data-collection process.

The survey prompt and questions (see Appendix A) were entered into online survey site surveymonkey.com. Potential participants were then sent an email from the researcher that included a short description of the research, an explanation of the incentives for participation and a link to the survey. One week following the initial solicitation email, a follow-up email was sent to all those who had not yet completed the survey. A second follow-up email was sent two weeks after the initial email. Potential participants who did not respond within one week of the second follow-up email were ruled out of the study. If, for any reason, a participant failed to answer a question or complete the survey, all of the individual's responses were removed from the study.

After two weeks of data collection, the survey was closed. After cleaning the responses to remove incomplete surveys, 267 responses were left. This amounted to a response rate of 10.9 percent. In terms of gender, 66 percent of respondents were female, and 34 percent were male. In terms of race/ethnicity, 93 percent of respondents identified as Caucasian (white/of European ancestry), 4 percent identified as Black American, 2 percent identified as East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) and 2 percent identified

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as South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.). No other ethnic group achieved representation of greater than 1 percent. (Note: Respondents were permitted to choose more than one ethnic group if so desired.) The median age for the group was 23.6.

RESULTS

This study examined the relationship between one common life-stage transition — the transition from life as a college student to life as a working adult — and changes in individual news media consumption habits and determined that individuals' news media consumption habits do appear to be correlated to this specific life-stage transition. This was determined via a survey of 267 individuals who had recently graduated from a Midwest university. The survey addressed four primary questions.

First, respondents were asked to indicate the amount of time they spent in an average day consuming various media forms while in college. Second, the respondents were asked to indicate the amount of time they spend in an average day consuming those same media forms post graduation. By comparing the means of these two answers, it was possible to determine the significance of media consumption changes both within each medium and across media as a whole.

A third question was intended to gauge the amount of change in participants' use of particular news outlets. Respondents were asked to use a Likert scale to indicate the extent to which their consumption of programs, websites and periodicals had changed between the time they were in college and now. The means of these various outputs allowed for an analysis of the perceived changes within each medium and also allowed for comparisons to be made between these perceived changes between the various media under investigation.

A fourth and final question asked participants to rank various factors in terms of the degree to which they had influenced any changes in their media consumption habits.

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It was hoped that these rankings would serve as a means of interpreting the results of the previous questions.

Despite the successful employment of a pretest prior to the release of the survey, two unexpected results were generated once the survey was disseminated to the sample group. First, approximately half the participants failed to appropriately rank the influence factors in the fourth question. The program used to house the survey did not allow the researcher to limit respondents to using each ranking only once, though the language of the question did give this instruction. As a result, instead of assigning each ranking (one through five) to a corresponding factor, many of the respondents ranked each factor independent of the others and ended up assigning, for example, a five ranking to three different factors. Fortunately, this was not problematic because the fourth question was not imperative to the central aims of this study. Rather it was intended merely to provide a means for discussing any consumption changes that might have occurred. As such, this discussion can still take place after eliminating the responses of participants who did not appropriately rank the variables.

A second unexpected occurrence resulted from participants' responses to a question related to their employment status following graduation. As mentioned at various points throughout this study, this research was intended to analyze the life-stage transition that takes place when individuals graduate from college and enter the workforce. Therefore, it was decided that in order for this life-stage transition to have occurred, participants would need to have graduated from college within the past year and a half and obtained a full-time job since graduating. Although almost all participants had in fact graduated from college in the past year and a half, a surprisingly high number,

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40 percent, had not yet obtained a full-time job. Because college graduates who are not employed are presumably not supporting themselves and are, therefore, presumably less independent (at least financially) than those with jobs, this meant that 40 percent of the sample population had completed only half of the life-stage transition. Thus, they were likely still in transition.

On its face, this appears to be a significant problem for the study. However, it actually adds depth to the research. Not only can researchers better understand the media consumption changes of recent graduates but they can also compare these changes among individuals who had completed the life transition and those who were still in transition. Thus there are additional questions to answer and discuss.

Time Spent With Various Media Forms

A paired samples t-test revealed that there was little consistency among the chosen media forms in terms of whether significant changes occurred in individuals' time spent with each medium during college and following graduation. Participants experienced significant change in three media forms, near-significant change in two and no significant change in three others.

Respondents indicated that they spend significantly ($p = .002$) less time each day reading local newspapers following college than they did when they were in college. The same can be said of national and international newspapers, which showed the most significant change of all ($p = .000$) with respondents spending less than half as much time reading them now than when they were in school. News blogs, on the other hand, saw a

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significant ($p = .001$) uptick in the amount of time individuals spend with them in a given day post-college.

As might be expected given their similarities, news websites mirrored the trend of blogs, albeit just shy of significantly ($p = .051$), with respondents increasing their daily time allotments for websites after college. Radio news programs also approached significant change ($p = .163$) with respondents suggesting that they spend a bit more time listening to radio programs now than when they were students.

Respondents indicated very little change in their consumption of magazines, local television news programs and national and international television news programs before and after the life-stage transition. Neither of these three media forms saw a change in allotted time of greater than 1.31 minutes.

Despite the significant changes found within several news media forms, there was not, on average, a significant change in the overall amount of time spent consuming news media. Respondents reported an average of 131.74 minutes spent with news media each day while in college and an average of 136.68 minutes spent with news media each day after graduating. This 4.92-minute difference is not significant ($p = .339$).

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Table 1: Changes in Time Spent by Medium

| Media Program Type | Mean Minutes/Day | Difference | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| College Radio Current Radio | 13.32 15.71 | 2.39 | .163 |
| College Local Newspapers Current Local Newspapers | 9.24 6.54 | -2.70 | .002 |
| College Nat./Internat. Newspapers Current Nat./Internat. Newspapers | 7.31 3.47 | -3.84 | .000 |
| College Magazines Current Magazines | 10.66 10.33 | .33 | .731 |
| College Local TV Current Local TV | 19.02 17.71 | -1.31 | .449 |
| College Nat./Internat. TV Current Nat./Internat. TV | 18.85 18.84 | -.015 | .990 |
| College Websites Current Websites | 36.64 41.05 | 4.41 | .051 |
| College Blogs Current Blogs | 17.45 23.57 | 6.12 | .001 |
| College Combined Current Combined | 131.73 136.68 | 4.92 | .339 |

It appears that individuals who had not yet obtained jobs and, therefore, had not yet completed the full life-stage transition were less prone to changes in time spent consuming many media forms than those who had completed the transition by obtaining full-time employment (See Table 2). Radio news was the only media form to demonstrate this on its own, but, most importantly, the trend was evident when all forms were combined.

Whereas participants who were still in transition now spend an average of 3.07 minutes less listening to radio news programs in a given day than when they were college students, participants who had completed the life-stage transition spend, on average, 5.83 minutes more. That's a difference of 8.90 minutes between the two groups ($p = .011$).

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Although significance was not achieved, many other media forms also showed disparities between the two groups. News blogs showed an average change of 8.73 minutes among those with jobs and an average change of 2.07 minutes among those without jobs for a net difference of 6.66 minutes ($p = .072$). News websites also demonstrated this trend and showed an average change of 6.73 minutes among those with jobs compared to .79 minutes among those without jobs, a difference of 5.96 minutes ($p = .202$).

The trend was also demonstrated, albeit with less disparity, for local newspapers. Magazines, national and international newspapers, and national and international television news programs showed almost no disparity between the two groups; and local television news programs was the only media category to buck the trend significantly with those employed full-time watching essentially the same amount of local news (a difference of -.07 minutes) while those without full-time jobs watch a bit less (a difference of -3.23 minutes) after college.

With all media forms combined, participants employed full-time had a net change of +14.10 minutes, compared to a net change of -9.33 minutes among those without full-time jobs. These numbers not only indicate that those who had finished the life-stage transition were, on average, much more likely to spend more time with the various media forms than those who were still in transition but also show (via a paired samples t-test) a significant ($p = .028$) difference between the two groups in terms of overall changes in time spent with media.

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Consumption Changes Among Media Outlets

On the whole, participants believed the news media outlets they consume in their current life stage differ slightly from the outlets they consumed while in college. However, there was considerable variability among media forms in terms of the degree to which respondents believed their consumed outlets had changed. For example, participants indicated greater changes in the individual news websites they visit than in the radio news programs they listen to.

Participants were asked to consider any changes in the individual news media outlets (programs, sites, publications, etc.) they consume within each particular media category. They were then instructed to indicate whether their consumed outlets had undergone no change, slight change, moderate change, substantial change or complete change since graduating from college. These responses were coded into numerical values with no change equaling 1 and complete change equaling 5 (See Table 4).

At first glance, the data appears to indicate that respondents did not experience much change in their consumption of individual news media outlets. However, given the persistent nature of news media consumption habits, even slight change is a deviation from the norm. Additionally, the results indicate clear differentiations among the various media categories in terms of change experienced. Respondents indicated the lowest level of changes in their consumption of national and international newspapers, radio news programs, magazines and news blogs. Local newspapers and national and international TV news programs underwent a bit more change. And the most significant changes belonged to the outlets within the local TV news programs and websites categories.

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Table 2: Media Outlet Changes Within Various Media (Descriptives)

| Medium | Mean Change |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Radio | 1.85 |
| Local Newspapers | 1.98 |
| Nat./Internat. Newspapers | 1.69 |
| Magazines | 1.87 |
| Local TV | 2.18 |
| Nat./Internat. TV | 2.00 |
| Websites | 2.35 |
| Blogs | 1.88 |

As was the case in the analysis of the time spent with each media form, there were differences in the extent of changes between individuals who had completed the life-course transition by obtaining a full-time job and individuals who had not yet obtained a full-time job and were, therefore, deemed to be in transition.

The most significant examples of this phenomenon were observed in three categories after performing an independent samples t-test. In terms of changes in the local TV news programs they consume, those with full-time jobs indicated an average change value (with 5 representing complete change and 1 representing no change) of 2.34, while those without full-time employment recorded an average change value of 1.94 ($p = .012$). A similar disparity was found in the national and international TV news programs category; those with full-time jobs indicated an average change value of 2.13, while those without showed a change of 1.81 ($p = .020$). Websites, meanwhile, were given an average change value of 2.45 by participants who were employed full-time and a value of 2.17 by participants who were not ($p = .039$).

Two other categories approached significant findings. The average change value for national and international newspapers was 1.78 among those with full-time jobs as

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opposed to 1.57 among those without ($p = .113$). Blogs were given an average change value of 1.97 by full-time workers and a value of 1.76 by those not working full-time ($p = .147$).

Radio news programs, local newspapers and magazines did not show such significant disparities between the two groups. However, the results for seven of the eight media categories indicated that those who had completed the life-stage transition by obtaining a full-time job experienced greater changes in the news media outlets they consume than did in-transition individuals who had not obtained full-time jobs. The magazine category was the only exception, with a slightly higher change value (1.85 as opposed to 1.90) indicated by those without full-time jobs.

A significant difference was also found after combining the results for all media groups. Participants showed an average change value of 2.06 among those with jobs and an average change value of 1.86 among those without jobs ($p = .016$).

Factors Contributing to Consumption Change

In an attempt to at least partially understand the factors that contribute to media consumption change, the survey instructed participants to rank five factors from most influential (5) to least influential (1) in changing their media consumption habits since graduating from college. Approximately half of the participants properly ranked the factors. Therefore, the results that follow reflect the answers given only by individuals who did in fact rank the factors against one another.

Changes in geographic location appear to have been the greatest motivator of change and yielded an average ranking of 3.28. Income changes were also quite

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influential and yielded an average ranking of 3.13. Changes in informational needs were a bit less influential with an average ranking of 2.93. And at the bottom of the list were changes in available time to consume news media (average ranking = 2.84) and changes in the level of motivation to consume news media (average ranking = 2.78).

Post-hoc Analysis

As indicated above, respondents indicated that the greatest outlet-specific consumption changes occurred in the news website category. Upon examination of the initial results, two findings appeared to be at odds and required some post-hoc analysis. Changes in geographic location and changes in personal income were deemed the most influential factors in eliciting changes in media consumption habits. Additionally, respondents indicated that their greatest outlet-specific consumption changes took place in the news website category. Yet geographic and income changes appear to be unlikely determining factors for changes in an individual's consumption of specific web news outlets given that news websites are rarely hyperlocal and even more rarely require payment from users. Thus an additional descriptive test was conducted to determine if those participants who expressed the greatest levels (moderate, significant or complete change) of outlet-specific consumption change in the news website category also indicated different change factors as the most influential. It was determined that the individuals who had indicated the greatest amounts of outlet-specific changes in the news website category did not indicate strong differentiations among the various factors likely to influence media consumption habits. In general, the influencing factors were grouped more closely together by these individuals than by the rest of the group.

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Table 3: Influencing Factors in Website Consumption Changes (Descriptives)

| Factor | Mean Change Ranking |
|---|----------------------------|
| Income changes | 2.84 |
| Geographic changes | 2.92 |
| Changes in informational needs | 3.01 |
| Changes in motivation to consume news | 2.79 |
| Changes in time available to consume news | 3.10 |

DISCUSSION

Rooted in the principles of uses and gratifications theory, researchers have devoted considerable time to understanding if factors such as ethnicity, age, education level and socio-economic status are tied to individual news consumption habits (Gezduci et al. 2007). This work has predominantly been done in an attempt to answer the question of who is most likely to adopt various media consumption habits. The present research is concerned less with who and more with when. Although previous research has revealed correlations between various personal traits and the types of media individuals consume, it does not reveal much about why individual media habits sometimes change despite consistencies in the very traits that appear to influence media consumption. Calling upon the research of Verplanken et al. (2006) and Andreason (1984) that says habits tend only to be broken in the wake of major environmental changes, this study takes a closer look at the correlation between one potentially life-altering event — the transition from life as a college student to life as a working adult — and changes in media consumption habits. The hope was to determine if this transition, which is likely to result in changes to an individual's environment, might be an indicator of impending media consumption change.

The specific transition examined in this study was selected for two primary reasons. First, it is a transition that involves a large group of individuals who were reasonably easy to find and contact because of their affiliation with the university at which the research was being conducted. More importantly, the transition was selected because it is largely predictable. Although there are undoubtedly unpredictable events, such as natural disaster and war, that are likely to have major implications on individuals'

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environments, similar environmental changes can also be elicited by routine events such as life-stage transition. The predictability of these transitions from one stage to the next coupled with their tendency to elicit changes in consumption habits make them particularly useful to media researchers and organizations hoping to find people susceptible to changing the media they consume — either to attract new consumers or retain those they already serve (Mathur et al., 2007).

Overall Changes in News Media Consumption

One way to measure the implications of the transition from life as a college student to life as a working professional on media consumption patterns is to examine the amounts of time recent college graduates spend consuming various media forms. The present research found that since graduating these individuals had experienced significant changes in the amounts of time they spend with local newspapers, national and international newspapers and news blogs. Near-significant changes were also experienced in the time individuals spent with news websites. On the whole, participants indicated they spend less time reading both newspaper forms and more time consuming news on the Internet — either on a blog or a website. Interestingly, when time spent with all media forms was added together, participants did not indicate significant differences in their overall time spent consuming news media. This suggests a number of things.

First, it indicates that the constancy principle discussed previously in this study held true for the present research. The principle suggests that the media consumer base tends to remain more or less constant. Neither do individuals suddenly experience significant drop offs in their media consumption nor do they suddenly begin consuming

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media at a significantly greater rate (Son et al. 1993). Although the participants experienced significant changes within various media forms, their overall time spent consuming media remained essentially constant (136.68 minutes per day after graduating compared with 131.73 minutes while in college). Furthermore, this constancy was corroborated by participants' rankings of the factors that influenced their media consumption changes. Of the five factors ranked, "changes in the amount of time you have available to consume news" was deemed to have the second-smallest amount of influence over media consumption changes.

A second implication of the findings is that participants appear to have largely replaced newspapers with blogs and websites upon leaving college. It might seem logical to attribute this shift away from a traditional medium and toward new media forms simply to changes in technology. However, the status of these individuals as recent graduates — all participants graduated no more than a year and a half prior to being surveyed — makes this seem less likely. News blogs and websites have coexisted with newspapers for almost two decades, and no major technological innovations have widened the gap between these media forms in recent years. A possible alternative explanation is income or, more precisely, the cost of consuming the two media forms. National and international newspapers are freely available to students at various locations on the campus of the university from which the respondents were recent graduates. However, upon graduation, free newspapers most likely were no longer available to the majority of participants. Thus, in order to continue reading a newspaper, these recent graduates would have needed to sign up and pay for a subscription or to have routinely purchased a newspaper at a newsstand. Given that "changes in your personal income"

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was ranked as the second-most influential factor in media consumption changes, it seems quite possible that participants simply opted to get news via free blogs and websites rather than purchased newspapers. Those with jobs might be especially prone to this given that many employers provide employees with free Internet access in the workplace.

Another way to measure the implications of the transition from life as a college student to life as a working professional on media consumption patterns is to home in on specific media outlets to see the extent to which the outlets individuals consume after leaving college differ from those they consumed while in college. The findings suggest that the greatest changes tended to be present in the news websites and local TV news programs categories. Respondents indicated the lowest amount of change in the national and international newspapers category.

Two of these findings seem entirely logical given respondents' indication that "changes in your geographic location" was rated the most influential factor in changing the media they consume. Although local TV news stations are increasingly making broadcasts available online, it makes little sense for someone who has recently moved to a new city to continue watching his or her favorite local newscast from his or her previous location. As was the case in Reece and Palmgreen's (2000) study of Indian graduate students in America, people who have changed location typically have acculturation needs that local media outlets can help satisfy. A similar train of logic helps to explain why respondents indicated the least amount of media outlet change in the national and international newspaper category. These outlets are typically designed to serve readers in a wide variety of locations by offering news that is anything but local. Therefore, a change in geographic location is unlikely to cause consumers to become

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more or less interested in the sort of information offered by national and international newspapers. What is perhaps most curious about these findings is that the changes in local newspapers and national and international TV news programs did not mirror these findings. In fact, the data suggests that local papers and national and international TV news programs were in the middle of the pack in terms of outlet-specific change. The scope of this research does not allow for any analysis of this phenomenon, but it might be meritorious to devote future research to uncovering such an explanation.

As indicated above, respondents indicated that the greatest outlet-specific consumption changes occurred in the news website category. This is odd given that it seems websites, more than any other medium examined, by their nature should be impervious to the factors respondents suggested are most likely to influence their media consumption. Although the varied nature of web content makes it difficult to generalize about the medium, it would seem that the majority of news websites are unlikely to be rendered more or less useful by geographic changes or changes in personal income. Few news websites are hyper-local — even newspaper websites tend to feature a combination of local, national and global news — and even fewer require users to pay for the content offered. This apparent contradiction led to a need for some further analysis of the data for this particular subgroup. After isolating the data sets for respondents who indicated outlet-specific change of moderate, significant or complete change in their consumption of web-based news media, it was determined that these individuals — unlike the rest of the group — did not deem any of the studied factors to be much more influential than the others. New informational needs were deemed slightly more influential than the other factors, but this deviation was far less pronounced than what was witnessed in the larger

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group's responses (when changes in geographic location clearly emerged as the most influential factor). This suggests that a variable not accounted for in this study is likely at play. Although the data under consideration makes it impossible to determine what this variable is, it might be useful for any future researcher interested in identifying this variable to focus on the nature of the web platform itself. News websites, by virtue of the impermanent nature of the Internet and the minimal costs required to launch them, come and go at a rate unrivaled by any other news platform. As such, it seems unlikely that news consumers would show the same kind of loyalty to news websites as they do to more traditional news media outlets. Perhaps it is the constantly changing landscape of news websites — an external factor — rather than some kind of internal or personal change that causes consumers to adjust their consumption habits. Maybe the very newness of a recently launched Internet-based news site is enough to turn heads and change consumption patterns.

Complete and Incomplete Life-Stage Transition

As mentioned previously, an unforeseen yet ultimately advantageous wrinkle was introduced to this study by the fact that nearly half of the participants indicated that they had graduated within the past year and a half but that they had not yet obtained a full-time job. Remember, the life-stage transition under investigation is the move from life as a college student to life as a working professional. Thus, the individuals who had not yet obtained full-time jobs were likely still in transition and, therefore, had potential to have different levels of media change than individuals who had completed the transition by

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both graduating and finding full-time employment. This possibility was confirmed by the findings.

In terms of the amount of time participants spend consuming various media forms, the data does not initially appear to indicate significant differentiation between those who had obtained a full-time job and those who had not. Of the eight media forms under examination, a significant difference between those with full-time jobs and those without was found only in the radio news category. Individuals with full-time jobs indicated that they spent an average of 5.83 minutes more in an average day listening to radio news currently compared to when they were in college. Those without full-time jobs, meanwhile, indicated that they spent an average of 3.07 minutes less with radio news programs. Significant differences were not revealed for any of the other seven media forms.

However, when all eight forms are combined, significance is apparent. Those without full time jobs indicated an average combined media change of -9.33 minutes per day after leaving college, while those with jobs indicated a change of 14.10 minutes. How is it possible that individual categories with negligible differences between the two groups yielded a significant difference when combined? A closer examination of the data reveals that, in most instances, the two groups moved in similar directions in terms of time spent with various media forms. For example, both groups indicated that they spend more time reading news blogs and less time watching local TV news programs after graduating. However, those with full-time jobs tended to indicate lesser declines in the news media categories with which they were spending less time and greater increases in the news media categories with which they were spending more time. For example,

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although both groups indicated greater time spent reading news blogs after graduation, those with full-time jobs indicated an average increase of 8.73 minutes per day while those without full-time jobs showed an increase of only 2.07 minutes per day on average. This difference is not sufficiently large to indicate a significant difference for the blog medium, but when combined with similar disparities in the media categories, it reveals a clear division between the two.

This division was even more apparent in terms of the two groups' indications of changes among the individual media outlets they consume. There were significant differences in the average amount of change the two groups indicated for Local TV news programs, national and international TV news programs and news websites. Significant differences were also found when all categories were averaged together.

It is also worthwhile to point out that in seven of the eight media categories those with full-time jobs indicated a greater level of change than those without. The sole exception to this trend occurred in the magazine category, where the two groups indicated essentially the same average change value (1.85 for those with jobs and 1.90 for those without). This, perhaps more than any other finding, suggests that in terms of media consumption changes, there is a noticeable difference between those who have completed the transition between life as a college student and life as a working professional and those who are still in the midst of that transition. This corroborates the findings of Andreason (2010), who theorized that the likelihood of a consumer or household to change consumption preferences and patterns is directly proportional to the magnitude of an individual's recent life-status changes. Because one group had not yet entered the

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workforce full-time, it is likely that the magnitude of the life-status change was not as great for these individuals as it was for their peers who had obtained full-time jobs.

Usefulness of the Findings

The results of this study suggest that there is at least a partial link between life-stage transition and changes in media consumption habits. The research shows that when individuals make the jump from college student to working professional, they are likely to experience significant changes in the media forms and outlets they consume. It also suggests that the intensity of changes brought about by the life-stage transition is directly related to the intensity of the transition itself. The fact that participants who had obtained a full-time job tended to experience more significant consumption changes than participants who had not indicates that those without a full-time job have not undergone as significant a life-stage transition as those with a full-time job. Thus, the greater the change in an individual's life status, the greater the potential for change in that same individual's media consumption habits.

These findings show the important role life-stage transitions appear to play in altering otherwise static news media consumption patterns. Past research, such as that of Diddi and LaRose (2006), has shown that individuals rarely deviate from their media consumption routines, but the present study suggests that there are likely windows during which these routines are at an increased likelihood to be broken. News media organizations that understand these windows and are able to anticipate them would be wise to target individuals currently undergoing a life-stage transition in an attempt to gain new audience members. They would also be wise to put efforts into maintaining existing

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audience members who are in the midst of life-stage transitions in an attempt to prevent them from leaving the organization's audience base. The results indicate that web-based media companies as well as local newspapers and TV stations are especially likely to benefit or suffer from the changes that tend to take place in the wake of life-stage transition.

Limitations

As mentioned above, the current research is limited in that it is only generalizable to a very specific group of people (those who have recently made the transition from college student to working professional). However, the primary objective of the research was to determine if there appears to be a relationship between life-changing events and changes in media consumption habits. If such a relationship does exist in the context of a transition from student to professional, it will be meritorious to investigate similar relationships in the context of other life-changing events.

An additional limitation might exist in regard to the availability of free newspapers on the campus from which participants were drawn. It is possible that the presence of the free newspapers on campus resulted in greater newspaper readership during participants' college years than is typical of students on campuses that do not provide free newspapers.

Additionally, the unexpectedly high number of survey respondents who had not yet obtained full-time jobs suggests it's possible that this study's respondents were not an ideal representation of the population group under examination. It is quite possible that a

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disproportionate number of individuals who were not employed agreed to participate because they had more free time available than their peers who were employed full-time.

Finally, this study deals with several news media forms. However, it does not include any examination of a relatively new media form, news applications that run on electronic tablets and smart phones. At the time of this study's data collection process, it was impossible to examine applications because the relative newness of the applications and the devices on which they run meant it was unlikely participants would have been able to consume them while they were college students.

Future Research

The purpose of this study is to determine if a relationship exists between a particular life-stage transition and changes in individual media consumption habits. The findings suggest the existence of such a relationship but do little to explain why it exists. To better understand why changes in individual media consumption habits tend to follow the examined life-stage transition, it would be worthwhile to add a qualitative perspective in the form of focus group discussions or individual interviews with individuals who have experienced the sorts of changes demonstrated in this study. Such an approach would allow researchers to better understand what it is about life-stage transitions that makes them catalysts for changes in media consumption routines.

Although the present study shows a connection between one life-stage transition and changes in media consumption habits, it does not prove that all life-stage transitions are equally influential. It would be meritorious for future research to focus on other life transitions, such as the transition from full-time worker to retiree or from nonparent to

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parent, in an attempt to understand if these life-stage transitions tend to elicit similar media consumption changes to those elicited by the transition from college student to working professional.

Finally, this study covers a fairly wide range of news media forms. However, it does not include any examination of the newest media forms such as news applications built for electronic tablets and smart phones. Such an examination was impossible during the data collection process because the relative newness of applications meant it was unlikely participants would have had much if any exposure to the news applications or the devices that run them while they were college students. This limitation will not exist in the near future. Given the fact that participants indicated the greatest consumption changes in electronic media forms such as news websites and blogs, it seems likely that significant changes will also be present in the tablet and smart phone application categories.

APPENDIX

Survey Device

I am conducting a short, confidential survey about news media consumption. The results of the survey will be used to help researchers at the University of Missouri better understand the connection between major life events and news media use. It should take less than five minutes to complete the survey.

1. Did you graduate from college sometime in the past year?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. When you were in college, did you attend full-time?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Have you obtained a full-time job since graduating?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Please indicate your sex.
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
5. Please indicate your race or ethnicity.
 - a. Caucasian (White/of European ancestry)
 - b. Black American
 - c. Black Non-American (African, West Indian, etc.)
 - d. East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)
 - e. South East Asian (Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc.)
 - f. South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.)
 - g. Pacific Islander (Filipino, Samoan, etc.)
 - h. Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/Puerto Rican
 - i. Bi-racial/Mixed/Multicultural/Multi-racial
 - j. None of the above
6. Please enter your age in the box below. _____
7. Please indicate your estimated household income.
 - a. Less than \$10,000
 - b. \$10,001 to \$30,000
 - c. \$30,001 to \$50,000
 - d. \$50,001 to \$75,000
 - e. \$75,001 to \$100,000
 - f. More than \$100,000

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8. Please indicate your highest level of education.
 - a. High school graduate
 - b. Some college, no degree
 - c. Associate's degree
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Master's degree
 - f. Doctoral degree
 - g. Other

The following questions will require you to think back a few months to your time as a college student. The questions will pertain to your use of news media forms such as print newspapers, magazines, news radio programs, television news programs, online news sites and blogs. This excludes media geared entirely toward entertainment (such as sitcoms, sports events and online games) but includes media that focuses primarily on delivering information to viewers, listeners and readers (such as consumer magazines, newspaper sports sections and opinion blogs).

9. When you were in college, approximately how much time per day did you spend listening to radio news programs?
10. Approximately how much time per day did you spend reading printed editions of local newspapers?
11. Approximately how much time per day did you spend reading printed editions of national or international newspapers?
12. Approximately how much time per day did you spend reading magazines?
13. Approximately how much time per day did you spend watching local television news programs?
14. Approximately how much time per day did you spend watching national or international television news programs?
15. Approximately how much time per day did you spend viewing news websites?
16. Approximately how much time per day did you spend viewing blogs?

The next set of questions will be very similar to the last but will instead ask you about your current media consumption.

17. Approximately how much time per day do you spend listening to radio news programs?
18. Approximately how much time per day do you spend reading printed editions of local newspapers?
19. Approximately how much time per day do you spend reading printed editions of national or international newspapers?
20. Approximately how much time per day do you spend reading magazines?
21. Approximately how much time per day do you spend watching local television news programs?

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22. Approximately how much time per day do you spend watching national or international television news programs?
23. Approximately how much time per day do you spend viewing news websites?
24. Approximately how much time per day do you spend viewing blogs?

The next set of questions will require you to think about differences between the various media outlets (individual newspapers, radio news programs, magazines, etc.) you consumed while in college and the media outlets you currently consume. For each news medium listed below, please indicate which of the terms best describes the extent to which the programs, websites and periodicals you currently consume has changed since when you were in college and now.

25. Radio news programs
 - a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
26. Local newspapers
 - a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
27. National and international newspapers
 - a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
28. Magazines
 - a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
29. Local television news programs
 - a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
30. National and international television news programs
 - a. No change

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- b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
31. Websites
- a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change
32. Blogs
- a. No change
 - b. Slight change
 - c. Moderate change
 - d. Significant change
 - e. Complete change

The final question will ask you to think about the reasons behind any changes that have taken place in your media consumption since graduating from college and today.

33. Please rank the following factors from most influential (1) to least influential (5) in affecting your news media consumption.
- ___ New informational needs
 - ___ Changes in your personal income
 - ___ Changes in the amount of time you have available to consume news
 - ___ Changes in your motivation to consume news
 - ___ Changes in your geographic location

*Tables***Table 4: Changes in Time Spent by Medium and Job Status**

| Media Form | Full-time Job Obtained? | N | Mean Change (Minutes/Day) | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Radio | Yes | 163 | 5.83 | .011 |
| | No | 102 | -3.07 | |
| Local Newspaper | Yes | 163 | -3.79 | .121 |
| | No | 102 | -1.02 | |
| Nat./Internat. Newspaper | Yes | 163 | -3.42 | .546 |
| | No | 102 | -4.29 | |
| Magazine | Yes | 163 | -.09 | .767 |
| | No | 102 | -.68 | |
| Local TV | Yes | 163 | -.07 | .376 |
| | No | 102 | -3.23 | |
| Nat./Internat. TV | Yes | 163 | .17 | .845 |
| | No | 102 | -.31 | |
| Website | Yes | 163 | 6.73 | .202 |
| | No | 102 | .79 | |
| Blog | Yes | 163 | 8.73 | .072 |
| | No | 102 | 2.07 | |
| Combined | Yes | 163 | 14.10 | .028 |
| | No | 102 | -9.33 | |

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Table 5: Media Outlet Changes Within Various Media by Job Status

| Medium | Full-Time Job Obtained? | N | Mean | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Radio | Yes | 163 | 1.90 | .518 |
| | No | 102 | 1.80 | |
| Local Newspapers | Yes | 163 | 2.03 | .469 |
| | No | 102 | 1.92 | |
| Nat./Internat. Newspapers | Yes | 163 | 1.78 | .113 |
| | No | 102 | 1.57 | |
| Magazines | Yes | 163 | 1.85 | .712 |
| | No | 102 | 1.90 | |
| Local TV | Yes | 163 | 2.34 | .012 |
| | No | 102 | 1.94 | |
| Nat./Internat. TV | Yes | 163 | 2.13 | .020 |
| | No | 102 | 1.81 | |
| Websites | Yes | 163 | 2.45 | .039 |
| | No | 102 | 2.17 | |
| Blogs | Yes | 163 | 1.97 | .147 |
| | No | 102 | 1.76 | |
| Combined | Yes | 163 | 2.06 | .016 |
| | No | 102 | 1.86 | |

Table 6: Influencing Factors in Media Consumption Changes (Descriptives)

| Factor | Mean Change Ranking |
|---|---------------------|
| Income changes | 3.13 |
| Geographic changes | 3.28 |
| Changes in informational needs | 2.93 |
| Changes in motivation to consume news | 2.78 |
| Changes in time available to consume news | 2.84 |

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