

Selective Exposure to Television:  
A Focus Group Examination of VCR Usage

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#### Abstract

The impact of VCRs on selective exposure to prime-time television was measured using qualitative methods. The research question centered on whether television viewers are more selective in a new media environment. Respondents (N=50) were interviewed using two methods: focus groups and a computer-distributed self-selected sample.

Analysis of the transcripts produced six dominant themes about VCR use: (1) viewing is purposeful and selective; (2) television audio functions as background noise; (3) viewing choice is linked to boredom; (4) channel flipping is increasingly common; (5) viewing is associated with an awareness of interruption; and (6) viewing is related to either a sense of control or frustration.

The results indicated that people are using new media technologies such as the VCR to selectively view prime-time television. The implications of this study concern the decreasing utility of traditional program scheduling techniques based on lead-in audience ratings.

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Selective Exposure to Television:

## VCR Usage by Focus Groups

For more and more people, watching television is becoming a very selective process because of the advent of new media technologies such as premium cable channels, remote control channel changers, video games, home computers, and the videocassette recorder (VCR). The purpose of this paper is to explore the way viewers use their VCRs in this selective exposure process. Specifically, attention will focus on particular uses, basic needs, gratifications sought, rental versus time-shifting behavior, and how viewers perceive the experience of watching television when a VCR is present.

Four years ago, Zillmann and Bryant noted in Selective Exposure to Communication (1985):

The fact that the new communication technology allows the manipulation of audio-visual environments with enormous ease and provides an abundance of program choices at all times undoubtedly will have significant behavioral and social effects.

(p. 5)

Despite this significance, they complain that research on selective exposure has been "scarce, sporadic, and eclectic" (p. 5).

Mass communication research has emphasized the effect of mass

media consumption on the viewer. But as Zillmann and Bryant (1985) pointed out, the effect on message selection, as a dependent variable, remains neglected. This study seeks to increase the knowledge base of how viewers select television programs in the new media environment. This paper begins by discussing the technological evolution of audience behavior, the lack of research consensus on the phenomenon of selective exposure, the state of VCR research, and the need for an interpretive approach to the selection process. Using two different methods, focus groups and open-ended surveys, this study explores the thesis that television viewers are becoming more selective. This increased selectivity may indeed result from increased program options and easier means of choice through devices like the VCR and its accompanying remote control unit (Walker & Bellamy, 1989).

### The Technological Evolution

The theoretical assumptions under which mass communication researchers study audience behavior have changed over the past two decades. In addition, many technological innovations have brought about a change in the way people watch television: the growth of independent channels, cable television, satellite dishes, remote-control devices, videodiscs, home video games, and VCRs. Zillmann and Bryant (1985) asked what will happen "when news programs compete against abundant entertainment options such as comedy drama, and

sports?" (p. 8). While news is not the focus of this study, the underlying significance of media competition centers on the broader implications of this type of question.

In the past, researchers have anticipated the impact of cable television on traditional audience behavior (Agostino, 1980; Jeffres, 1978; Kaplan, 1978). These studies have presented evidence that cable television is changing the way people use television. Although cable television has existed much longer than the VCR, its rate of diffusion suffers slightly by comparison. For example, sales of home video recorders between 1979 and 1980 grew by 70% (Klopfenstein, 1985). The VCR is now found in many more homes than cable television (Staff, 1989).

Does the VCR have an effect on how people make choices within their video media environment? One valid way of uncovering rich responses to this type of question is to interview people (Lederman, 1988). Because interaction stimulates ideas that might not occur to people in an unstructured personal interview, this study used the focus group method to explore the selective exposure process. As a means of cross-validation and triangulation, an open-ended survey of a self-selected sample was also conducted. These methods are well-suited to the focus of this paper.

This study is looking for questions as well as answers. The perceptions of the viewers are paramount. Above all, this study is

concerned with the interpretations which viewers apply to the viewing process. By emphasizing how they conceive of the selection process, further research ideas can be generated and tested.

This goal addresses the criticism of the uses and gratifications approach to mass communication for its overemphasis on the non-interpretive, variable analytic method and a "deterministic and passive view of meaning" (Swanson, 1979, p. 46). On the other hand, non-exploratory research in the future should continue to consider antecedent needs. As Katz (1979) responded to Swanson: "We are indeed more interested in discovering and explaining regularities in the attribution of meanings than in cataloguing the infinite variety of human potential" (p. 76).

#### Review of Related Literature

##### Selective Exposure

A survey of empirical research literature shows both support (Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny & McDermott, 1973; Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Webster & Wakshlag, 1982; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985; Zillmann, Hezel & Medoff, 1980) and also lack of support for selective exposure (Bryant, Carveth, & Brown, 1981; Christ & Medoff, 1984; Milburn, 1979; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Signorielli, 1986). This inconsistency of survey and experimental research results is troubling and suggests that the clarification of selective exposure may require qualitative methods.

Zillmann and Bryant (1985) defined selective exposure as

"behavior that is deliberately performed to attain and sustain perceptual control of particular stimulus events [original emphasis]"

(p. 2). This rather broad definition includes a wide range of purposeful activities, including, "watching television intently" (p. 2).

This study focused on their definition of selective exposure as it pertains to watching television, but the issue of how intently or passively such viewing takes place is a thorny issue.

Zillmann and Bryant insisted that the audience is "active" -- a word whose ambiguity is discussed later in this article. They maintained that past difficulties in deciding the presence or absence of selective exposure: "can be circumvented by determining whether or not exposure to the program or the segment was intended and/or was the primary perceptual activity during the time course of the program or segment [original emphasis]" (p. 5).

Attention to selective exposure has spawned articles on the idea of an "active audience." Allen (1981) questioned whether television viewing is accurately conceptualized as attentive or sporadic. Biocca (1985) traced the phrase "active audience" to psychologist Raymond Bauer (1964) and argued that the concept of the active audience is trivial and exaggerated.

Blumler (1979) explained the confusion that has surrounded the concept of the active audience:

The notion of "the active audience" has conflated an extraordinary range of meanings, including those of utility (mass communication has uses for people), intentionality (media consumption is directed by prior motivation), selectivity (media behavior reflects prior interests and preferences), and imperviousness to influence. (p. 13)

He noted that, however it is conceived, activity is not an either/or matter. Blumler also stated that different media call for varying levels of activity. Hence, the VCR may change the selective nature of watching television.

Levy and Windahl (1984) explored the active audience concept and identified two dimensions of audience activity. They constructed a typology of audience activity from these two orthogonal dimensions. The first is a qualitative dimension where audiences are portrayed as being "selective," "involved," or in a "using" relationship to television (p. 53). The second dimension is a temporal one: It considers the audience before exposure, during exposure and after exposure. Nine types of activity are possible by crosstabulation, but Levy and Windahl examined only three: selective exposure-seeking, decoding and interpreting, and social utilities. From this typology, they created a model of audience activity and gratifications. Using data from a study conducted in Sweden, they supported the finding that different members of the audience "will display different types and amounts of



activity in different communication settings and at different times in the sequence of communication" (p. 74). This represents a compromise between a totally active audience and a totally passive audience.

Rubin (1984) found evidence of two types of viewing: ritualized (habitual or diversionary) and instrumental (intentional or goal-directed). He noted the danger of portraying the active audience as superrational. Using a purposive quota sample of 300 respondents in two midwestern communities, he surveyed their motives for watching television, as well as their personal viewing habits, preferences and affinity for television. Rubin found that viewers make different distinctions for why they watch at certain times. Information seeking was not a consistent motive among the respondents. Furthermore, ritualized viewing was correlated with a high regard for television as a medium, whereas instrumental viewing seldom recognized the importance of the medium. The author cautioned "ritualized and instrumental television use may not be clearly dichotomous" (p. 76) and noted that the usual demographic variables were inadequate predictors for viewer categorization.

Only a few researchers have considered the impact of new media technologies on selective exposure to television (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1985; Webster, 1986). Webster documented the increasing ease with which people can manipulate their audio-visual environments by

using new communication technologies, such as VCRs, pay TV and remote-control devices.

For the purposes of this research, selective exposure is more narrowly defined as the viewers' total experience of choosing among video alternatives when a VCR is present. This definition avoids the issue of whether or not the viewers express intent. Not only is there an interest in the preferences of viewers, but also in how they might avoid certain types of programs by using the VCR.

#### VCR Research

Recently there has been a great deal of research activity on the VCR. In summarizing early research, Levy (1987a) described VCR use as "a behavioral complement to existing patterns of television exposure" (p. 465). However, he cited Roe (1983) and Williams, Phillips and Lum (1985) as finding unique uses and gratifications for the VCR. In another study, Levy (1987b) reported evidence from Israel: "VCR owners are essentially an active audience . . . in general their orientations to VCR use are selective, somewhat involving, and often useful" (p. 273). He also found that most VCR users "actively discount the reality of the videos they see" (p. 274) and that levels of activity, as reflected by weak intercorrelations, vary considerably within individuals.

One dimension of audience activity that has been studied is utility. Rubin and Bantz (1987) identified time-shifting and

convenience (e.g., overnight rental and personal library) as two important uses of the VCR. More importantly, their study of VCR use gave evidence that television viewers are more "motivated and intentional in their behavior" (p. 482) than suggested by earlier "direct effects" models of research. Yorke and Kitchen (1985) also described VCR behaviors now known as zipping (ignoring commercials at the fast-forward speed) and zapping (deleting commercials while recording).

Gunter and Levy (1987) presented evidence that VCR use is highly individualistic:

Even more so than exposure to off-air television, VCR use occurs in a social context that appears to be one of individualized media exposure . . . often unshared even between members of the same household. (p. 491)

While not conclusive, this finding suggests that interpersonal and mass communication behavior may become increasingly fragmented.

Some VCR research (Roe, 1987; Greenberg & Heeter, 1987) focused on individual differences among young people who use VCRs. While many of these findings have been negative, these studies were performed when VCRs were not very common (at best, 39% penetration level). Now that the VCR is more commonplace than black-and-white television (Klopfenstein, 1989), any discussion of the haves and the have-nots is less pertinent. Instead of looking at what

VCRs are doing to us, we need to learn more about how we use VCRs. This "uses and gratifications approach" (Blumler & Katz, 1974) may prove more revealing than looking at direct effects.

Another aspect of audience behavior has been the impact of lead-in programs on prime-time program selection. This topic has been studied previously using traditional survey methods (Anast & Webster, 1985; Boemer, 1987; Davis & Walker, 1990; Greenberg, Dervin, & Dominick, 1968; Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988; Webster, 1985; Webster & Wakshlag, 1982). Greenberg et al. (1968) found evidence that television viewers "watch programs" rather than "watch television." However, all of the other studies supported the widely-held belief that a television program's position in the prime-time schedule significantly determines the number of viewers. Webster and Wakshlag (1983) proposed a model of program choice which supported such a view. If their model is still accurate, the process of selection may not be an on-going phenomenon for most viewers. But how has the growth of new technologies, specifically the VCR, affected viewers' selective behavior? This study seeks possible answers for this question.

### Method

One relatively recent technique for doing qualitative research is the focus group (Calder, 1977; Greenbaum, 1988; Krueger, 1988). The idea originated with the concept of the "focused interview" (Merton,

Fiske & Kendall, 1956). Byers and Wilcox (1988, p. 3) defined a focus group as a "discussion group that concentrates on a particular topic or topics, is facilitated by a trained moderator and typically consists of eight to twelve participants." They pointed out that the advantages of such a technique are: rich details of personal experiences, a wide range of responses, more flexibility than a solitary interview, greater facility to handle contingencies, easier to interpret, less time-consuming, and a "valuable source of exploratory information" (p. 6). This final objective seems to be the strongest reason for using focus groups. The researcher is better able to test hypotheses based on true audience behavior: "Focus groups may provide a more human side and perspective to a purely quantitative study thereby bringing out variables that otherwise might be missed" (Byers and Wilcox, 1988, p. 3).

Of course, there remain the problems of bias and generalizability. The group moderator can minimize biased results by using the careful procedures outlined below. Generalizability is problematic for all social science research, both qualitative and quantitative. But it becomes less important for studies designed to generate hypotheses for future research.

This study conducted three focus group sessions lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. Each group consisted of eight participants enlisted from a cross-section of college students and faculty who

either own VCRs or who have unrestrained access to a VCR on at least a monthly basis. Sessions were moderated according to the guidelines as suggested by Axelrod (1975): (1) clearly defined objectives; (2) group homogeneity; (3) good recruiting; (4) relaxed environment; (5) a moderator who mostly listens; (6) unstructured but planned agenda; (7) honest, open, free-flowing dialogue; (8) restrained group influence; (9) careful qualitative analysis; and (10) control of details.

Participants were recruited through networks with colleagues and classroom students: eight were undergraduates, five were on faculty, and eleven were graduate students. Equal numbers of males and females were achieved, though not by design. Focus groups need not represent a generalizable cross-section of the population. It should be noted that the group of eight undergraduates comprised a single focus group.

Each participant received an offer of free food in exchange for two hours in a research project. Appointments were made with those qualified subjects who responded earliest to limit the size of each group. The focus group setting was a classroom television studio equipped with comfortable couches and an unobtrusive microphone to record the proceedings with the group's consent. The studio setting served as a reminder of the topic.

The moderator used a television set connected to a VCR as a

prop to stimulate discussion of viewing behavior, by asking the viewers about their methods and motivations for television program selection. Analysis of the complete transcriptions from both sessions enabled an interpretation of the meanings attached to the viewing experience from each actor's point of view. A colleague familiar with VCR use also analyzed the transcripts to cross-validate the results.

Research using the focus group technique needs a list of questions suggested by past theory and research. In order to probe the topic of VCR use and audience behavior, the following questions guided the focus group procedure:

1. How would you describe the experience of watching television?
2. When you watch TV, do you do other things? What?
3. How often do you watch alone? How often in groups of more than two? How do you decide what to watch when there's a conflict?
4. When you watch TV, do you watch particular programs or do you watch TV as an act in itself? What factors affect your decisions?
5. If you watch a program at a particular time, is there a tendency to stay with the same channel throughout the remainder of your viewing?
6. Do you have cable TV? Why? Has cable changed the

way you watch TV?

7. In what ways do you use your VCR?
8. What are the main advantages of having a VCR? Main disadvantages?
9. Do you know how to program the timer on a VCR?  
What types of shows do you record?
10. Do you "zip" or "zap"? Do you use the remote control to flip back-and-forth through several programs? How often? Why?
11. How often do you rent tapes? What types?
12. How large is your personal library of shows? What kind of programs do you keep? How long?
13. Does your use of the VCR change the amount of news programs you might otherwise watch?
14. Do you sometimes feel that the TV set is using you, instead of the other way around? How?
15. Do the programs you choose reflect your personality and beliefs? How?
16. When the VCR is unavailable, for whatever reason, do you watch TV differently?
17. Are there times when you feel more "involved" in watching TV? When?

These questions were only a guide. Adjustments to the moderator's



agenda followed when the group raised unanticipated issues which were related to the topic.

The questions were also administered verbatim to a nationwide group of television enthusiasts connected by an electronic bulletin board computer network. Replies were received from various sites (e.g., Baltimore, Palo Alto, Berkeley, Austin, Boulder, Ottawa, and Boston). This self-selected sample of 24 respondents gave detailed responses which provided a source of similar data for comparison purposes.

### Results

A careful textual analysis of the transcripts from the focus groups and the typed responses to the electronic survey produced several dominant themes spanning categories which emerged from the data. The method involved cutting apart the transcripts into separate segments of text. The segments were sorted into groups representing many categories, some of which became the dominant themes. All quotations presented below are verbatim.

The most common theme expressed was that watching television with a VCR is a purposeful and selective activity. This was true even for those who reported the general experience of television use as a passive or a source of background noise. When VCR use was specifically addressed, everyone was quite certain that their behavior was more than mere happenstance. For example, two respondents in

different groups each insisted that TV was merely a backdrop:

It's just there. Half the time I know what they're doing and half the time I don't. (Person H)

I like to watch it because it's got noise. I don't have enough noise in my house . . . I like to watch people. I watch some pretty bad television, just for the people moving and noise.

(Person W)

Yet, Person H admitted renting a tape for her VCR once every two weeks: "I have a friend who also likes old musicals and we have a girls' night where we make popcorn and everything." Similarly, Person W plans her VCR use: "I do a lot of time-shifting. When I'm in school, I'll tape every night between 9 and 10. And I tape The Jetsons. I have 20 tapes." Most importantly, almost everyone acknowledged their planned use of the fast-forward button to avoid watching commercials. These same people often denied being influenced by lead-in program, e.g. tuning away during the weaker program between Cosby and Cheers on NBC.

The subject of TV-as-noise was more common than anticipated. It emerged as the second theme. Some of the comments included:

I don't like the house quiet, so I'll usually turn the TV on.

(Person B)

I turn on the TV just for noise, even though I don't know what to watch. (Person N)

I always do homework with the TV or the radio on; the constant noise, a dull hum. I don't understand what they're saying; it's just the fact that there's something there helps me concentrate on what I'm doing. (Person V)

I have Headline News on all the time. Even though they repeat the same stories, it's noise in the room. It's accompaniment.  
(Person S)

However, others saw their personal involvement with the act of watching television as a dominant mode of consumption.

In fact, active selectivity in general received two unsolicited acknowledgements:

The VCR allows people to be more selective . . . I know that I'm more selective because of the clicker. You can just flip around or watch CNN for a half an hour. (Person B)

The VCR and cable definitely makes you more selective. It makes me more selective. (Person E).

Another participant in a different session said:

TV is something I'm actively involved in when I'm watching. The time just flies by. When you're doing something you don't like or where you're not actively involved in, I find so slow. Even when I'm watching something that's boring, time just shoots right by. (Person X)

Boredom itself was a frequent topic of discussion among the

participants and emerged as the third theme.

The boredom variable was not unexpected, based on a study on the use of television to alleviate boredom and stress by Bryant and Zillmann (1984). However, no one in the three focus groups mentioned stress or any similar affective state. The closest emotion was frustration, which was often cited as an outcome rather than as an antecedent condition:

[The experience of watching television] is frustrating for me, because I don't always find something that I feel is worth my time to watch. Even with cable, I am real frustrated finding anything I really want to watch. (Person S)

When I watch TV, there's usually nothing on worth watching, so I feel frustrated . . . [when I flip around and can't find a better show] I feel frustrated. (Person V)

The only other reference to stress could be implied by the frequent mention of relaxation as a motive for viewing.

Channel flipping was a fourth dominant theme, partly because of a direct question by the moderator. The fifth overall theme concerned the respondents' sense of interruption. Many of the respondents claimed a desire to be alone:

I prefer to watch TV alone. One of my biggest pet peeves is when people make a comment or ask a question about anything that happens, like a football game. When I'm watching TV, it's

like I'm in my own little world; I just have tunnel-vision to the TV and I don't like people invading that. (Person X)

Watching TV is a time of peace. If there's any conflict at all, I'll get up and leave the house and find some place else. I do not want that conflict. I gotta get away from it. I'll go watch the other TV. I have ten brothers and sisters and 35 nieces and nephews. I want to be left alone. Peaceful. (Person T)

Another person also wanted to watch alone. However, all three assertions were in response to a question on group viewing.

Several participants admitted to fighting over the remote control: My roommates and I fight over the remote. When we leave the room we hand it off to another guy to make sure someone else doesn't get it. Sometimes we'll hide it. Reminds me of people who call the remote God [because it] controlled their life.

(Person A)

The element of control thus emerged as a sixth theme. Often this was related to the a sense of frustration at the person who controlled the remote control:

My dad is a cruiser. He'll flip it back and forth and it gets real irritating. (Person I)

My dad does that, just something fierce. It makes me so mad. Cause I'll sit down and he'll be watching something and I'll watch it and just at the point--I don't know how he does this--

just at the point when I'm getting in to it, he'll flick it to something else. Then I'll watch that, and I'll just be getting in to it, and he'll flick to something else. Everyone gives him a hard time, but he thinks they're kidding him. (Person K)

Most of the laughter generated in the focus groups resulted from comments made about remote control use, both for channel changing and avoidance of commercials.

Another kind of control was sensed by one of the more addicted television users:

I tape a lot of entertainment shows. TV dictates part of my life now, because of my VCR. Whereas before, I used to dictate TV: now TV is dictating my life. (Person E)

He described an almost compulsive routine of VCR time-shifting behavior.

An unexpected finding was the frequent admission that viewing was more satisfying through the VCR, even when the shows could have been watched live. The convenience of being able to fast-forward through commercials and unwanted program material was often given as a reason. Five persons, representing no more than two per group, confessed to using their two VCRs to pirate copies of rented movies. Although guilt regarding viewing was otherwise frequently expressed, the exclusive response to video software theft was laughter.

Another surprise was the occasional response that watching live programs through the VCR afforded the opportunity to exploit the remote control channel changer to "graze" or "cruise" through several programs at once. Although many reported a separate remote control unit for their television, this finding points to an even more rapid diffusion of "clickers." Indeed, a common response concerned occasional confusion over which remote control had been picked up.

Some other focus group findings were interesting. The verb want was mentioned five times as often as need. The verb hate was used twice as often as love. The word movie (in reference to videotape rental) appeared more frequently than any other noun, including news. Only four references to PBS or educational were spoken, except in the individual electronic surveys.

A comparison of the two methods of data collection pointed to clear differences in the amount of response bias. The faceless responses via computer mail were rarely punctuated with expressions of guilt over either the amount or type of television watched. In stark contrast, the focus group respondents frequently prefaced their descriptions of personal VCR use with phrases such as: "I guess", "I feel somewhat guilty because", "I'm almost embarrassed to admit this," and "I feel like I'm spilling my guts."

Another verbal cue used in the focus groups was the sentence-beginning "I find myself [doing something]." This seemed to be a

way for the respondents to put distance between admitting something and saving face. This phrase was totally absent from the written responses to the open-ended survey.

A comparison of the six major themes found that the self-selected sample shared a sense of purposeful and selective use, need for control, channel flipping, and an attention to noise, boredom, and interruption. However, the need for control and concern for interruption was somewhat less pronounced than in the focus groups. Minor themes which coincided with the focus groups included the desire to be entertained and the realization that new media technologies produced increasing viewing. Several people mentioned that they watched more than before: "I think I am watching more TV with the VCR than without it."

All of the findings were validated by a colleague who studied the transcripts. He also uncovered another major theme: the unimportance of television as interpreted by the respondents. It has become so commonplace that viewers consider it a lazy or last resort activity. Similarly, he found the phrase "I only rent one or two tapes a week" curious, considering weekly movie attendance in the three decades of television before the VCR.

### Discussion

The data clearly suggest that viewers are more selective in their new media environments. Yet, the use of television as noise was a



common thread which sometimes ran counter to the active viewer model. The explanation for this contradiction most likely lies in the varying contexts in which different viewers create meaning. Anderson and Meyer (1988) summarized this interpretive myriad of meaning levels by noting that television "means many different things" (p. 251).

Zillmann and Bryant (1985) also anticipated this contradiction in audience activity and would argue that TV as noise violates their "primary perceptual activity" requirement discussed earlier. Nevertheless, the distinction is being ignored by the usual methods used to measure television audiences. The data in this study suggest that audience ratings which disregard the involvement of the viewer may misrepresent the true number of persons viewing a sponsor's commercials.

The fact that noise is the one theme that does not fit the remaining five also confirms that viewers watch television in two different modes: active and passive. One important finding that may mitigate this apparent contradiction is that the new media environment elicits more active modes than passive ones. On a theoretical level, this suggests that viewers are interacting more than ever before. The traditional exposure model has portrayed television as hapless couch potatoes who react to stimuli with little resistance. Statistical methods which support the traditional model may prove less useful in explaining and predicting a world where the viewer

behaves more independently and selectively.

This study finds support for several ideas found in the review of literature. The theme of interruption as it concerns viewers' watching alone ties in with the recent idea from Gunter and Levy (1987) that viewers are increasingly individualistic. The active/passive viewing contradiction had been foreshadowed by the work of Blumler (1979), Allen (1981) and Biocca (1985).

One significant limitation of this study is that all the respondents have strong mass media interests. The data do not necessarily represent the patterns of media use among mainstream viewers. Future research needs to address more diverse groups. In addition, the findings are subject to subtle response biases associated with self-report data.

Perhaps the most important implication for further research is the decreasing utility of the lead-in program strategy used by television programmers. This study found strong qualitative support for the hypothesis that traditional measures of network program flow are less useful as predictors of viewership. New models need to be forthcoming based on additional research, both qualitative and quantitative.

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