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The Impact of Technology on Mental Health of Young Adults : A Systematic Review

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Abstract :

In this era of globalization, With each new technology come concerns about its potential impact on people's well-being. In recent years, both scholars and the public have voiced concerns about the rise of digital technology, with a focus on smart phones and social media. To ascertain whether or not these concerns are justified, this review provides an overview of the literature regarding digital technology use and adolescent well-being. Overall, findings imply that the general effects are on the negative end of the spectrum but very small. Evidence from a variety of cross-sectional, longitudinal and empirical studies implicate smartphone and social media use in increase in mental distress, self-injurious behaviour and suicidality among youth; there is a dose-response relationship. Social media can affect adolescents' self-view and interpersonal relationships through social comparison and negative interactions, including cyber-bullying; moreover, social media content often involves normalization and even promotion of self-harm and suicidality among youth. High proportions of youth engage in heavy smartphone use and media multitasking, with resultant chronic sleep deprivation, and negative effects on cognitive control, academic performance and socio-emotional functioning. The most recent and rigorous large-scale preregistered studies report small associations between the amount of daily digital technology usage and adolescents' well-being that do not offer a way of distinguishing cause from effect and, as estimated, are unlikely to be of clinical or practical significance. Implications for improving future research and for supporting adolescents' mental health in the digital age are discussed.

Keywords : Globalization, mental-health, digital technology, cyber-bullying, Sleep deprivation, academic performance, social comparison

Introduction :

The rapid spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in recent decades has pushed the use of smartphones, tablets, and their applications to become pervasive tools used in everyday life, especially among adolescents (Khang 2013, Odaci and Cikrikci 2014). The possibility of being constantly connected significantly increases the amount of time adolescents spend online, and Web and mobile applications are prevailing in many adolescents' lives (Durak 2018). The use of digital applications has also dramatically changed the way adolescents relate to their peers, access information, and engage in social relationships, and has also had a profound influence on their health, including their well-being (e.g., the impact of smartphone uses on the sleep-waking cycle), and on their cognitive development (e.g., level of attention in carrying out a task). Given the importance of considering technology use as having a profound role in adolescent development, one key question many scholars are now attempting to answer concerns how adolescents' online presence shapes their offline lives; this question could be encapsulated as follows: "Is technology use changing adolescents' behaviors, their social, physical, and cognitive development?"

Our principle focus in this is on adolescence and digital natives. In this regard, we consider adolescence as the transition between childhood and adulthood, characterized by biological, cognitive, social, and psychological changes (Berk, 2017). Adolescents are also commonly referred to as "Digital Natives" (Prensky, 2001), meaning that they were born into a world where technology is central to daily life, they are learning and adopting technology from infancy, and as a result they think and process information in fundamentally different ways when compared to their predecessors. Considering this definition, it is also important to note that the duration of adolescence, its demands, and pressures vary substantially between cultures. Most tribal and village societies have only a brief intervening phase between childhood and the full assumption of an adult role. On the other hand, young people in Western societies (e.g., Europe and North America) face a prolonged dependence on their parents and the postponement of sexual gratification while they prepare for a productive working life. As a result, adolescence is often greatly extended in these countries. Then, considering all these aspects, the main goal is to include researcher on the impact of technology on adolescent development.

Papers published consider different fields of research (e.g., psychology, sociology, health, data science, cognitive science) that describe the impact of technology on behavioral, social, physical, and cognitive changes during adolescence, and how technology may influence these changes in both positive or negative ways throughout adolescent development (psychological, cognitive, physical and sociological).

Association between adolescent depression, mental health problems and digital technology usage :

In the United States, there have been rapid and unprecedented increases in adolescent depressive symptoms (Keyes, Gary, O'Malley, Hamilton, & Schulenberg, 2019) and suicidal behavior (Burstein, Agostino, & Greenfield, 2019; Naghavi, 2019). Deaths by suicide have increased among every age group, but have been especially drastic among girls, where there has been a tripling of the suicide rate among 10- to 14-year-old girls from 1999 through 2017 (Hedegaard, Curtin, & Warner, 2018). It is important to note that the United States is an outlier with respect to these trends as rates of suicide worldwide continue to fall (Naghavi, 2019); nonetheless, secular increases in emotional problems among young people have been observed, with increases in self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression documented in countries such as Greece, Germany, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, China, and New Zealand from the 1980s onwards (Collishaw, 2015). These increases have sounded alarms among parents, care providers and educators given the burden of disease and potentially devastating and deadly consequences for youth and their families. When plotted alongside increases in social media usage across this same time period, a powerful narrative has emerged that social media is driving changes in depressive symptoms and suicidal behaviors. Nonetheless, social media and digital technology usage has quickly emerged as a leading factor to explain the sudden jump in depression and related problems among girls.

Small associations still exist, as adolescents who report more depressive symptoms also tend to report spending more time online. However, as detailed below, a review of meta-analytic work and narrative reviews, recent large-scale public access and preregistered studies, and daily and momentary assessments of digital technology usage and mental health, show that that associations between time online and internalizing symptoms are often (a) mixed between positive, negative, and null findings, (b) when present, are likely too small to translate into practically or clinically meaningful effects (explaining less than 0.5% of the variance in symptoms with poor adjustment for relevant confounding factors and estimates that are virtually always derived from correlation designs), and (c) are typically not distinguishable in terms of likely cause and effect. In addition, a recent systematic narrative review of some studies of online help-seeking behaviors indicated that many young people suffering from mental health problems are spending their time online searching for means of alleviating and better understanding their symptoms.

Evidence Base : Meta-analytic studies and reviews.

Six recent reviews summarizing the associations between digital technologies and adolescents' mental health completed between the years of 2014 to 2019 are described below. The reviews were

selected due to the fact that they targeted or included adolescent populations and included a focus specifically on the associations between amount of digital technology usage and mental health. The main results from each review are described briefly below, followed by a synthesis of findings and limitations across this work. Details on the individual studies included in the reviews are also provided.

Recent reviews on Youth Digital Technology Use and Mental Health:

	<u>Study Design</u>	<u>Sample Mean Age</u>	<u>Sample Size</u>	<u>Mental Health Measure</u>	<u>Tech Use Measure</u>
<u>Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A Systematic Narrative Review. Children and Youth Services Review, 41, 27-36.</u>	<u>Systematic narrative review</u>	<u>Adolescents</u>	<u>43 studies</u>	<u>Mental Health and well-being</u>	<u>Online communication and Social Media.</u>
<u>Baker, D. A., & Algorta, G. P. (2016). The relationship between online social networking and depression: a systematic review of quantitative studies. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19 (11), 638-648.</u>	<u>Systematic review of quant studies</u>	<u>Adolescents and Adults</u>	<u>30 studies</u>	<u>Depression</u>	<u>Social networking site</u>
<u>Seabrook, E. M., Kern, M. L., & Rickard, N. S. (2016). Social networking sites, depression, and anxiety: a systematic review. JMIR mental health, 3 (4), e50.</u>	<u>Systematic review</u>	<u>Adolescents and Adults</u>	<u>70 studies</u>	<u>Depression and Anxiety emphasis. Overall wellbeing</u>	<u>Social Networking Site</u>

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Huang, C. (2017). Time spent on social network sites and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis. <u>Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 20</u> (6), 346–354.	<u>Meta-Analysis</u>	<u>Adolescents and Adults</u>	<u>67 samples (61 Studies)</u>	<u>Self-Esteem, Life satisfaction, loneliness and Depression</u>	<u>Social Networking Site</u>
Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2019). A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. <u>International journal of adolescence and youth, 1–15.</u>	<u>Systematic review</u>	<u>13-18</u>	<u>13 papers</u>	<u>Depression, anxiety and distress</u>	<u>Social media</u>
McCrae, N., Gettings, S., & Purssell, E. (2017). Social media and depressive symptoms in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review. <u>Adolescent Research Review, 2</u> (4), 315–330.	<u>Systematic review</u>	<u>5 to 18</u>	<u>11 studies</u>	<u>Depression</u>	<u>Social media</u>

Three of the six reviews focused exclusively on adolescent or child populations. In one of the earliest and largest reviews, Best and colleagues (2014) conducted a systematic narrative review of 43 studies. Across studies, they observed contradictory evidence of mixed, null, and positive associations. Potential benefits of social media engagement that were identified included: increases in self-esteem, perceived social support and social capital, safe identity experimentation, and increased opportunities for self-disclosure. Specific potential harms of social media for well-being that were identified included: increased social isolation, depression, and cyberbullying.

The remaining three reviews included a mix of adults and adolescents in the sampling frame.

Conclusions were consistent with those summarized for the adolescent populations above in that cross-sectional research designs, retrospective reporting of symptoms and digital technology usage, and small and mixed patterns of associations were the norm and often limiting factors in drawing reliable conclusions in this area.

Discussion :

To summarize, a review of meta-analytic work, large-scale preregistered studies, and intensive daily and momentary assessments provides little evidence that engagement with digital media has substantial associations with adolescents' mental health symptoms at the population level. It is also worth noting that one of the primary studies that has been frequently cited as a source of panic related to a possible connection between social media and depression is the Monitoring the Future Study.

This study reported on a correlation that accounted for <1% of the variation in depressive symptoms; that is 99.666% of the variation in adolescent's depressive symptoms was due to other factors, and the small correlation between digital technology usage and depression (0.4%) was cross-sectional and was estimated based on both self-reported depressive symptoms and technology usage.

Similar to the vast majority of other studies reviewed here, there was no way to sort out cause from effect in this study. While it is true that small effects can have clinically meaningful and important implications for public health, this requires that the effects are causally estimated and there is compelling evidence of directionality and impacts. Given the lack of evidence for strong connections between the amount of time that adolescents spend on social media and related technologies and their mental health, the question becomes: why has digital technology so quickly and adamantly been identified as a cause of recent upticks in adolescent depression? Some have suggested that each generation is able to easily find fault in the choices, time-use, and overall character of the next and that moral panic around new technologies is an expected and well established cycle that plays out as new technologies are introduced.

Another possibility is that the instincts and parental/clinical intuitions among those connecting social media with depression and anxiety are correct and the scientific community has simply not caught up or kept pace with new technologies in ways that allow us to capture their true impact and measurable effects. While future research may identify clear or stronger linkages, at present the available evidence falls short of the standard of proof required to identify digital technology use as a acknowledged environmental cause of adolescent mental health problems.

Conclusion :

Digitally, there have been unparalleled and rapid changes in how adolescents spend their time, connect to the world, and communicate with each other. Mobile device ownership and social media

use have reached unprecedented levels among adolescents. Perhaps this is not surprising as digital devices, and the affordability that they provide, are especially strong fascinator for young people given their heightened need for affiliation, social approval, and novelty seeking. As adolescents spend an increasing amount of time interacting with digital technologies, there is an urgent need to both understand effects of this usage and leverage new technologies in ways that support versus harm their mental health and well-being.

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