Digital Media Addiction: An Emerging Problem Among College Students

A Generation in Denial?

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INTRODUCTION: RECOGNITION OF A SOCIETAL ISSUE
The increased dependence of college students on digital electronic media, primarily smartphones and laptop computers, is raising concerns among researchers in mental health, education, sociology, and computer science. The number of published studies on the adverse impact of excessive use of digital devices on learning, attention span, relationships, civility, and health is increasing.

Greenfield and Orzack, who each studied and treated addiction, is used interchangeably with technology addiction. Other terms that have been described to describe this phenomenon include problematic computer use and an inability to remove oneself from the Internet.

A TIMELINE OF MODERN COMMUNICATION

- **1951**
  - Heinrich Hertz shows that electricity can be transmitted over a distance.
  - Samuel Morse creates the first practical telegraphic code.
- **1941**
  - The Complex Number Calculator, the predecessor to computers, is developed.
- **1950s**
  - The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants under 18 months be kept away from screens, and children age three or younger should have no more than one hour of media consumption per day.
- **2013-2017**
  - People are poor multitaskers.
  - Heavy media multitaskers perform worse at controlling their money, paying attention, and learning.
  - Multitaskers are poor at filtering out what is not relevant to their current goal when there are multiple sources of information coming from both the screen and the real world.

BENEFITS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

- Instant access to information
- Long-distance communication (voice, text, and video calls)
- Global Positioning System access
- Electronic payments
- Online viewing of film, art, opera, ballet, and other entertainment

ADVERSE EFFECTS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

- Exposure to and reinforcement of false information
- Privacy concerns
- Expectation of constant contact
- Less exercise
- Corporations dictate content
- Hate speech promoting violence
- Ubiquity of pornography
- Reduced relaxation
- Fear of missing out
- Decrease in job productivity
- Accidents caused by texting and driving
- Cyberbullying and incivility
- Decline in reading
- Environmental pollution

DECLINE IN SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

- Technology use has an adverse effect on information retention and overall school performance.
- The majority of college students use or have used laptops during lectures.
- Students who use laptops in class have lower grade point averages than those who do not by a magnitude of 0.14 to 0.25 grade points per class.

DIMINISHED ATTENTIVENESS

- Cellphone use leads to the inability to focus on the task at hand, not just for academic assignments.
- Even the presence of a cellphone may decrease attentiveness.
- When crossing the street or driving, cellphone use compromises safety because users pay less attention to traffic.

PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Text messaging can lead to neck text, which is the unnatural curvature of the upper spine due to constantly looking down one's cellphone.
- Digital media use can cause computer vision syndrome, a term for various forms of eye strain or damage.
- Technology overuse can result in poor sleep quality and decreased sleep time when used immediately before going to sleep.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Young adults with a higher frequency of Internet and cellphone use have greater rates of depression and stress.
- High levels of texting can result in burnout and depression in college students.
- Individuals who experience anxiety in social situations use electronic media, particularly texting, more than those who do not feel anxious.

IMPACT OF MEDIA ON CHILDREN

- Digital media devices can displace interactions between parents and children, which is a major threat to educational learning (problem solving, empathy, social skills).
- Children learn best when learning is continuous; cellphone interruptions during parent-child teaching decrease children's abilities to learn efficiently.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants under 18 months be kept away from screens, and children age 18 to 24 months be limited to 1 hour of media consumption per day.
- In contrast, children ages 8 to 12 spend 6 hours per day consuming media; teenagers, 9 hours per day.

INCIVILITY

- Phone users are less polite, attentive, and honest in face-to-face conversation.
- crawling conversations can damage the impression another person has of that individual.
- Men and the 18-34 year age group, as opposed to women or any older group, find texting more appropriate in any situation.

LESS SATISFYING RELATIONSHIPS

- Partner phubbing is defined as attending to a cellphone instead of communicating with a significant other.
- Digital media use when interacting with a significant other decreases romantic intimacy and relationship satisfaction.
- Cellphone use can diminish autonomy, because individuals expect their significant others to respond to texts and messages immediately. A lack of contact can result in decreased relationship satisfaction.

EFFECTIVE MULTITASKING: AN OXYMORON

Throughout the 20th century, the harmful effects of cigarette smoking were downplayed by tobacco companies and ignored by consumers. Nor did the public realize that digital childhoods were a major threat to educational learning (problem solving, empathy, social skills).

Moderate media multitasking involves the use of multiple devices to perform two or more activities simultaneously, such as browsing the internet while communicating with a significant other. Providing context to calls and messages immediately. A lack of contact can result in decreased relationship satisfaction.

LACK OF RECOGNITION BY UNIVERSITIES

Examples of colleges and universities that either acknowledge or address students’ growing digital media dependency are few and far between. Liberty University has created a WiFi-free Center for Digital Well-Being, which aims to educate, inform, and study together without any distractions from electronic media. The Center’s founders, Dr. Sylvia Frejd, note that “many students are immersed in their technology and are almost uncomfortable in real-life situations. The Center plays a role in awareness, education, and prevention of technology overuse.”

CONCLUSIONS

A growing body of evidence suggests that digital media addiction is increasing among college students and that the problem has not been addressed by universities. As dependence on digital media grows, adverse consequences are likely to intensify.

CIGARETTES AND CELLPHONES


In order to summarize the research findings on the impact of digital media use on the health and well-being of college students, we searched the following databases for articles published between 1995 and 2017: PubMed, Science Direct, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Education Full Text.

We are calling the constant attachment to digital media addiction, which is used interchangeably with technology addiction. Other terms that have been described to describe this phenomenon include problematic computer use and an inability to remove oneself from the Internet.