

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL RISKS OF DIGITALIZATION IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The paper is primarily focused on the psychological and social risks of digitalization in adolescent girls and boys. Recently, we have witnessed an increasing digitalization in adolescents, especially during Covid-19 restrictions. Several factors play a positive and negative role in using digital media in the development process. In this paper, we focus on clarifying key problems from the psychological point of view. The research was based on a qualitative (interview) research design. The sample consisted of 45 adolescents aged between 16- and 23-year-old. It is well known that contemporary adolescents are surrounded by digital media that fulfil entertaining and educational, informational, and social functions. It is essential to have good models during identity-forming, and adolescents are often looking for their models online. Our findings showed fundamental problems of adolescents these days: the FOMO effect (Fear of missing out), feeling of loneliness and cyberbullying. On the other hand, we found a high level of digital literacy, a substitute for face-to-face social interaction by the mobile application during Covid-19 restrictions, and the use of digital devices for relaxation, entertainment, and education.

Keywords: *Adolescents, digitalization, lifestyle, identity.*

1. Introduction

Digitalization is a phenomenon that brings us both benefits and threats. Technological devices have become more accessible to young people. We can see the benefits of easily accessible information, faster decision-making and problem-solving. In this paper, we focus on the positive and negative aspects of digitalization in adolescents. Among the threats, we should mention lower physical activity, higher anxiety, feeling of loneliness, threat of dependence on digital media, and cyberbullying, i.e., a method for bullies using digital media. We see a revolution in usage with the arrival of smartphones on the market, both among children, young people, and adults. It is well known that digital technology affects all generations, but adolescents are more vulnerable because of the identity process.

Adolescence is a period between puberty and adulthood, with a more open-minded, risk-taking, and impulsive behaviour (Hammond et al., 2012). Identity development during adolescence and young adulthood is the topic of many studies or books (Erikson, 1968; Berzonsky & Pappini, 2015). The emphasis is on normative developmental tasks (Erikson, 1968), an effort to formulate meaningful identities in the social context (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2020). Nowadays, gender, sexuality, digital technology, and social media play a particular role in forming identity when young people are concerned with resolving “issues of intimacy, generativity, and integrity” (Ferrer & Kroger, 2020, p.12). Apprehension about adolescents’ social media and digital technology use is undeniable (e.g., UNICEF, 2017). They are continuously connected for entertainment and communication. They make virtual profiles to try different forms of presentations of themselves (Manago, 2014), which is the phase of identity process creation. On the other hand, we must focus on a very serious problem these days, the FOMO effect (fear of missing out), fear of missing something, and fear of disconnection. It is hazardous in adolescents’ development period. The period of creating their identity when being a part of a social group is significant. To be accepted by their peers on social networking sites such as Instagram or TikTok, and to be informed through instant messengers such as WhatsApp (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020) are crucial. Adolescents’ fear of missing out on what is happening on social sites should be taken seriously.

Digital literacy should be developed since young childhood, all the way through adolescence and adulthood (van Laar et al., 2017). “Digital literacy can be defined as a social practice that involves reading, writing and multimodal meaning-making through a range of digital technologies” (Marsh, 2020, p.21). Despite described issues, the popularity and use of digital technologies by young people will rise. Therefore, it is essential to know not only what types of digital devices adolescents use and how, but also whether they are aware of the perceived threats from digital technologies.

2. Methods

The research was based on a qualitative research design that used semi-structured interviews. There were 45 participants (N=35 girls, N=10 boys) between 16 and 23 years old (AM=19,8 yrs). The interview lasted 45 minutes, was recorded on audiotapes with their written consent, and subsequently transcribed. The interview scenario was divided into four sections: 1/ time spent with digital technologies; 2/ how technologies are used by themselves and with other people (family, friends etc.); 3/ digital-free leisure; and 4/ perceived threats from digital technologies. We used thematic analysis to uncover the main topics which are linked to the construction of adolescents' identities focusing on digital technologies.

3. Results

The findings showed that adolescents' life with technology is grouped into five main topics. 1/ the importance of digital media in adolescents' life; 2/ activities on social networking sites; 3/ online games activities; 4/ offline activities; 5/ threats in the digital environment.

3.1. The importance of digital media in adolescents' life

This topic was dominated by the need to advocate for increased use of digital technologies both **for leisure activities** and for preparation **for school**: “*We are still doing projects and have to look for information on the internet*” (P28). In terms of the number of digital technologies, participants admitted to owning a mobile phone (100%), a tablet (32.5%), a laptop or desktop computer (87%), and a game console (35.2%). Several adolescents admitted that the laptop, tablet, and desktop was purchased during the first wave of Covid-19 when they were forced to take classes from home. The need to use mobile technologies was also rationalised for leisure activities: “*...since we are banned from going out to play sports (government restrictions related to the second wave of Covid-19, authors note), I go for long walks with my dog. I use an app to measure my step count and listen to Spotify's music*” (P31).

3.2. Activities on social networking sites

Research participants spent 7.4 hours in digital technology environments, with the most time spent on social media (4.3 hours) Instagram, TikTok, YouTube. Time spent on social networks was filled with satisfying the need for **fun**: “*it is fun to see the different tricks on TikTok*” (P21), **social contact**: “*...during my covid time, I took videos and photos and put them on Instagram and kept track of how many likes I got*” (P41), and **learning new things**: “*I learned the Spanish language thanks to a YouTube tutorial because I like their culture and food*” (P8).

3.3. Online games activities

Online games activities were in the second place in the use of digital technologies. Adolescents preferred **sports, strategy-oriented, and adventure-oriented games**: “*I have very high score...you know...it is a great feeling if I win against Peter in football*” (P45).

3.4. Offline activities

Offline activities were mainly concentrated on **board games** with siblings, parents and friends: “*I like to play Activities during weekends....it is amusing*” (P12). **Housework** represented other activities without digital technology: “*I helped my mother with cooking and gardening*” (P19). **Manual skills** were practiced both indoors and outdoors: “*My mom taught me to knit. I am very proud of myself*” (P4); “*...my dad and I were making a new shed for Ali, the dog*” (P21).

3.5. Threats in the digital environment

Adolescents consider **cyberbullying** to be the biggest threat in the online world: “*I have experienced abuse and gossips of my person on social networks...I did not tell anyone. I was shamed...*” (P9). However, we have also encountered other problems such as **FOMO**: “*I am afraid of missing something if I switch off my mobile phone...*” (P22), **loneliness**: “*I often feel that I am the only one in the*

world...I do not have any friends” (P33), **insomnia**: “...yes, I sometimes feel that I do not need to sleep...but in the morning, I am exhausted (P41), **anxiety**: “I am afraid that something will happen...you know, the Covid-19 virus is very dangerous...I fear for my grandparents’ lives...you know, they are old and weak...” (P37). There are fully aware of threats in the digital environment and the need to be protected: “I do not communicate with strangers, I think about what information can be on my social profile...” (P44).

4. Conclusions

Digitalization is having a significant impact on everyone's life. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at how it affects the lives of adolescent youth, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The time that, among other things, has caused an increase in the use of digital technologies (online learning from home) among adolescents. Therefore, our research aim was to find out what and how adolescents use digital devices if they are aware of the perceived threats from digital technologies. The results pointed out five key categories/topics associated with digital technologies: 1/ the importance of digital media in adolescents' life; 2/ activities on social networking sites; 3/ online games activities; 4/ offline activities; 5/ threats in the digital environment. The first topic, “the importance of digital media in adolescents' life”, is used mainly for leisure activities and duties and linked with school. The second topic, “activities on social networking sites”, uncovered the need to connect with friends and present themselves through online networking sites. They also have much fun with digital technologies and preferred online games primarily oriented toward sport, adventure, and strategy, which was contained in the third topic, “online games activities”. The fourth topic, “offline activities” concerned housework, board games, and manual skills. The fifth topic, “threats in the digital environment”, expressed awareness of the digital space threats such as cyberbullying, FOMO (fear of missing out), loneliness, insomnia, and anxiety. On the other hand, digital literacy was high, although the participants were aware of their reserves and wanted more practical teaching based on experiential learning.

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