

## **The Dilemmas of Electronic Media Use**

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Smartphones, social media and other electronic media sources have revolutionized the ways in which humans engage in communication and social interaction. Productivity, global connectivity, and instant access to unlimited information are undeniable advantages of an ever evolving and interconnected technological world. However, issues such as endless scrolling, excessive screentime, social isolation, a generational increase of anxiety and depression, and data collection are a few potential negative consequences that smartphones and social media have on our communities and society. With a growing body of evidence to suggest that electronic media platforms are doing more harm than good, it is equally important to consider why they continue to be so irreversibly integral to our daily lives. With such incredible innovation right at our fingertips comes detrimental effects on mental health, personal privacy, and addiction.

Excessive use of electronic media among children and adolescents has resulted in a generational increase in poor mental health outcomes and changes to brain development. Today's children and adolescents are immersed in an overwhelming world of computers, tablets and smartphones. Research from Nagata et al. (2024) states "adolescents are 50% more likely to experience a major depressive episode today than in the early 2000s" (p. 2). With such staggering statistics, it is important to consider the role that excessive screen time and social media plays on young people's development and mental welfare. A major contributor to this generational saturation of screen-based electronic media is the COVID-19 pandemic (Santos et al., 2023). According to Santos et al. (2023), "media related activities occupy about 6 to 9 hours of a young American's day, excluding housework and schoolwork" (p. 2). With so much of young American's time being spent on a screen, researchers suggest that daily screen use can result in a manifestation of behavioral problems, such as a weaker neural inhibitory control and

award seeking behavior (Chen et al., 2023, p.1). A two-year comparative study conducted by Chen et al. (2024) state:

Excessive daily screen exposure may augment the impact of children's reward-seeking tendencies on the inhibitory control network, and the consequence of prolonged daily screen exposure has a similar effect to that of habitual addictive seeking behaviors on the inhibitory control system in the brain. (p. 6)

At such a critical time for growth and development, excessive use of electronic media can significantly impact the maturing brains of young children and adolescents. Potentially irreversible changes to neural development may impact an entire generational future as impaired impulse behavior regulation and the ability to be a productive member of society will be affected.

Data collection and privacy are also growing concerns in our digital world. It is a common practice for online companies to personalize services to enhance and increase user engagement based on consumer self-disclosure. This self-disclosure, however, has led to concerns of privacy exploitation and behavioral manipulation of personal user information. According to research examining the willingness of Generation Z to give personal information in exchange for benefits of digital services:

Digital service providers often share their data with other companies without consent, leading to the potential misuse of sensitive information. Consequently, Generation Z is particularly concerned about the lack of control over how providers handle and distribute their data collected through the technology.

(Rózsa et al., 2024, p. 247)

The research suggests that digital literacy and privacy protection are improving with younger generations; however, forfeiting personal privacy is influenced by perceived “brand relationships” (Hayes et al., 2024). As suggested by research from Hayes et al., (2024) “stronger brand relationships bolstered perceived benefits and thus the perceived value of disclosing personal information” (p. 25). Although consumers are becoming more cautious and informed about consenting to share personal data online, strategic brand marketing builds perceived trust with the consumer, which therefore influences the willingness to share private information (Hayes et al., 2024).

Social media has undeniably transformed communication, social interaction, and the ways in which businesses and industries operate. Global connectivity, however, has revealed dangerous addictive tendencies which have profound impacts on mental health and human behavior. Research from Bhargava and Velasquez (2021) suggest “social media platforms have introduced reward schemes designed to take advantage of our desire for social validation and reciprocity, among other psychological tendencies and needs” (p. 327). Social media addiction functions similarly to other addictive activities, such as gambling, shopping, and drug abuse, revealing they are specifically designed to be addictive and therefore raise ethical concerns regarding their design (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). More vulnerable groups, such as children, adolescents, individuals with low self-esteem and mental health issues, and people in isolated or stressful environments can develop an unhealthy reliance on social media. Without oversight or regulation, such groups will continue to be exploited without consequence. Social media platforms will continue to design addictive software with impunity to increase user engagement for monetary motivations.

Electronic media poses detrimental consequences to mental health, brain development, and personal privacy and security. Due to the prevalence of the internet being so unavoidable in our daily lives, it is difficult to navigate away from digital and electronic media platforms. Ethical considerations must be considered regarding electronic media use as growing bodies of research indicate it contributes to behavioral and mental health consequences. Therefore, businesses and digital providers must be held accountable for harm against vulnerable groups and the exploitation of human behaviors. Public health oversight and the transparency of intentions will help establish responsibility and trust against excessive electronic media consumption.

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