

The risks and rewards of being an adolescent in the digital age

Should we rethink our ever-growing concerns that smart phones are terrible for teens?

By Madeleine J. George ([http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22George, Madeleine J.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22George,MadeleineJ.%22&sort=ContentDateSortdesc)) and Candice L. Odgers ([http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Odgers, Candice L.%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc](http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22Odgers,CandiceL.%22&sort=ContentDateSortdesc))



Adolescents are avid users of mobile devices. Close to 80 percent of adolescents in the United States now own a mobile phone and they are using them to send, on average, 60 text messages per day (Lenhart, 2012). As mobile devices become ever-present in the adolescents' lives, parents, educators and policy-makers are asking about the potential downsides of this type of connectivity. Concerns over how young people are spending their time are not new. Adults have long worried about how exposure to various forms of past media, such as the radio, television, video games and even comic books influence children. What is novel about recent concerns are:

1. Media consumption is at an all-time high — adolescents spend an estimated 7.5 hours per day consuming media.
2. Mobile devices now provide almost constant connectivity to peers, social networks and (increasingly) the media.
3. Much of what occurs online is public, or has the potential to be, raising concerns about privacy and the lasting effects of information shared online on adolescents' lives.

It may be that adolescents' high usage of new technologies, combined with their rapid cognitive, physical and social development, makes them more vulnerable to ill effects of technology (over) usage. Alternatively, the plasticity that characterizes this period may allow adolescents to optimize their potential within the digital world. Research is just beginning to emerge regarding how mobile technologies are influencing adolescents' still developing brains, bodies and relationships. A few

key — and some surprising — findings in this area are described below.

E-relationships: The Good and the Bad

As adults observe adolescents spending time ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2011) — physically together but each interacting with their mobile device — the concern is that young people are missing out on opportunities to develop key social and relationship skills. Experimental research has shown that simply placing a mobile phone on the table beside a pair of strangers decreases their closeness and the amount of personal information they disclose (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). If the mere presence of a mobile phone can influence the quality of conversations among adults, how are the relationships of young people who are born into the digital world affected?

Interestingly, most research has not supported the idea the time adolescents spend on their mobile devices is preventing them from developing or maintaining close relationships. While time spent online does displace time spent with friends and family, for most adolescents frequent virtual communication has been shown to strengthen the quality of existing relationships (e.g., Davis, 2012). In addition, network analyses of adolescents’ online communications illustrate substantial overlap between online and offline peers (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006), and fine-grained analyses of the content of their exchanges have shown that most online communication involves positive (or neutral) interactions between friends (Underwood, Ehrenreich, More, Solis, & Brinkley, 2014). Mobile devices also allow children and adolescents separated from close friends and family to stay more closely connected, including, for example, with deployed military parents or non-custodial parents.

Admittedly, mobile technologies have not had universally positive effects on young people’s social relationships. That is, most adolescents have been involved in or witnessed online victimization and bullying; this is important as involvement in cyberbullying is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). While most research shows that there is substantial overlap between adolescents who are bullies/victims online and offline, mobile platforms can also exacerbate offline risks. For example, perpetrators can remain anonymous and victimization may occur at any time of day or night.

To summarize, there is significant overlap between online versus offline relationships and communications among young people. For most adolescents, mobile devices have become a tool for engaging in routine exchanges with friends and strengthening existing relationships. However, mobile technologies have also introduced new tools for bullying — although not necessarily new bullies or victims.

Digital Natives: Tired, but Still Themselves in the Digital World

Approximately 4 out of 5 adolescent mobile phone owners report sleeping with their phones in or

near their bed (Lenhart, 2012). The majority of adolescents text message after they go to bed and many report keeping their phones under their pillows in order to avoid missing important messages at night (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). The use of mobile phones during the night increases the odds of being 'very tired' by two to four-fold the following day (Van den Bulck, 2007) and there is some emerging evidence that the light emitted from the screens of devices themselves could interfere sleep, although future research on exactly how mobile devices may influence adolescents' sleep time and quality is needed.

While mobile devices may be creating an additional distraction at night, they are also providing new contexts for adolescents to access information, explore sensitive topics and develop their identity. Adolescents use mobile technologies to get information for schoolwork, understand changes in their health and sexuality, and learn about the news and current events (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Adolescents do not typically go online to 'be someone else', and instead tend to experiment on online platforms to improve their social skills and strengthen their offline identity (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Online spaces may be especially valuable for some adolescents, such as shy adolescents using online tools to practice social skills (Bardi & Brady, 2010) or for those wanting information on mental health problems they may be experiencing (Burns, Durkin, & Nicholas, 2009). Thus, while mobile platforms may be keeping adolescents up at night, they are also providing easily access to important information and a context for healthy identity exploration and skill development.

Do Mobile Devices Offer New Opportunities to Connect with Adolescents?

Social scientists are struggling to keep pace with adolescents' rapidly evolving online behaviors. Creative approaches that go beyond the traditional reliance on self-report data are sorely needed to understand adolescents' online lives, and these studies are beginning to emerge. For example, Underwood and colleagues (2014) have studied the social networks, content and meaning of online exchanges among adolescents by sampling thousands of text messages in an ongoing longitudinal study. Others are using ecological momentary assessment studies administered via mobile phones for individualized assessments, unobtrusive monitoring of location, physiology and motion, and the collection of a wealth phone-based data (for a review see: George, Russell & Odgers, in press). In addition, mobile devices may help to connect with typically hard to reach populations, such as low-income and ethnic minority adolescents who are adopting mobile technologies at an unprecedented rate (Lenhart, Ling, et al., 2010).

Many adults have expressed concerns over the high usage of mobile devices among adolescents and the potential risks posed by the online world. However, adolescents' online versus offline lives and risks tend to look very similar. While some new risks have emerged in the area of cyberbullying and sleep, for the most part, adolescents are using mobile devices as tools to strengthen their existing relationships, skills and identities. Mobile devices do not appear to be a problem for adolescents, but instead are a potential tool for better understanding and supporting their positive

development.

References

- Bryant, J. A., Sanders-Jackson, A., & Smallwood, A. M. K. (2006). IMing, text messaging, and adolescent social networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*(2), 577-592. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00028.x
- Burns, J. M., Durkin, L. A., & Nicholas, J. (2009). Mental health of young people in the United States: what role can the Internet play in reducing stigma and promoting help seeking? *Journal of Adolescent Health, 45*(1), 95-97. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2008.12.006
- Davis, K. (2012). Friendship 2.0: Adolescents' experiences of belonging and self-disclosure online. *J Adolesc, 35*(6), 1527-1536.
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*[®]. doi: 10.1037/a0035618
- Lenhart, A. (2012). *Teens, Smartphones & Texting*. Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project.
- Lenhart, A., Ling, R., Campbell, S., & Purcell, K. (2010). *Teens and Mobile Phones*. Washington: University of Michigan Department of Communication Studies; The Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project.
- Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A., & Zickuhr, K. (2010). *Social media & mobile Internet use among teens and young adults*. Washington: The Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project.
- Przbylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2012). Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 1-10*. doi: 10.1177/0265407512453827
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books.
- Underwood, M. K., Ehrenreich, S. E., More, D., Solis, J. S., & Brinkley, D. Y. (2014). The BlackBerry Project: The hidden world of adolescents' text messaging and relations with internalizing symptoms. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 1-17*.
- Valkenburg, P. M., Schouten, A. P., & Peter, J. (2005). Adolescents' identity experiments on the Internet. *New Media Society, 7*, 383-402. doi: 10.1177/1461444805052282
- Van den Bulck, J. (2007). Adolescents use of mobile phones for calling and sending text messages after lights out: Results from a prospective cohort study with a one-year follow-up. *Sleep, 30*, 1220-1223.

SUBSCRIBE

Related APA Resources

- Newsletter Article (582)
-

▪ Magazine Article (507)

▪ Web Page (446)

▪ Digital Media (295)

▪ Press Release (101)

[More resources \[+\]](#)

▪ Review (67)

▪ Web Article (64)

▪ Newsletter (58)

▪ Scholarship/Grant/Award (53)

▪ Profile (46)

▪ Book/Monograph (43)

▪ Fact Sheet (43)

▪ FAQ (40)

▪ Journal (39)

▪ Continuing Education Program (31)

▪ Journal Special Issue (31)

▪ Brochure/Pamphlet (22)

▪ Children's Book (21)

▪ Curriculum (20)

▪ Psychology Topic (19)

▪ Council Policy (18)

▪ Video (15)

▪ Magazine (13)

▪ Report (13)

▪ Call for Papers/Proposals/Nominations (12)

▪ Database/Electronic Product (11)

▪ Toolkit (11)

▪ Manual/Handbook (9)

▪ Psychology Subfield (6)

- Blog (5)
- Conference Materials (5)
- Guidelines (5)
- News Responses (5)
- Amicus Brief (4)
- Bibliography (4)
- Chart/Table/Figure (4)
- Opinion/Editorial (4)
- Policy/Procedure (4)
- Speech/Transcript/Script (4)
- Survey/Survey Results (4)
- Newsletter Homepage (2)
- Summary (2)
- Bylaws (1)
- Directory (1)
- Legal/Government Document (1)
- Presentation (1)

[Show fewer resources](#)

Advancing psychology to benefit society and
improve people's lives



PSYCHOLOGISTS

Standards & Guidelines

PsycCareers

Divisions of APA

Ethics

Early Career Psychologists

Continuing Education

Renew Membership

STUDENTS

Careers in Psychology

Accredited Psychology Programs

More for Students

ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY

Science of Psychology

Psychology Topics

PUBLICATIONS & DATABASES

APA Style

Journals

Books

Magination Press

Videos

PsycINFO

PsycARTICLES

More Publications & Databases

ABOUT APA

Governance

Directorates and Programs

Policy Statements

Press Room

Advertise with Us

Work at APA

Contact Us

MORE APA WEBSITES

ACT Raising Safe Kids Program

American Psychological Foundation

APA Annual Convention

APA Center for Organizational Excellence

APA Education Advocacy Trust

APA Practice Organization

APA PsycNET®

APA Style

Online Psychology Laboratory

Psychology: Science in Action

GET INVOLVED

Advocate

Participate

Donate

Join APA

[Privacy Statement](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

| [Accessibility](#) | [Website Feedback](#) | [Sitemap](#)

FOLLOW APA



more



© 2018 American Psychological Association

750 First St. NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242 | Contact Support

Telephone: (800) 374-2721; (202) 336-5500 | TDD/TTY: (202) 336-6123

