

Understanding the Online Teen Media Scene

A review of



Digital Youth: The Role of Media in Development

by Kaveri Subrahmanyam and David Šmahel

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Reviewed by

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Need help understanding the evolving online media landscape of today's youth? Kaveri Subrahmanyam and David Šmahel's *Digital Youth: The Role of Media in Development* may be just the book to bring you up to speed. The authors provide an overview of research on a variety of issues related to the adolescent online media experience.

As acknowledged by the authors, this landscape changes so rapidly that research is almost outdated as soon as it is conducted. This is an ongoing challenge for those who conduct research on any aspect of popular culture, and for the most part the authors do a fine job of providing the most up-to-date data available at the time of writing. In addition, the book provides a refreshing focus on the positive aspects of the youth online media experience, as well as noting the many potential hazards.

The book is infused with a strong developmental perspective that helps unite such disparate topics as cybersex, civic engagement, and game violence, among many others. The

focus on three key developmental tasks of adolescence—sexuality, identity, and establishing intimate relationships—provides an effective organizing framework. The authors further set the stage with their assertion that, as well as being influenced by their digital world, young people affect the construction and impact of these experiences. In other words, the interactive nature of digital environments requires that users be a key part of a dynamic process of use, adaptation, and change.

However, their criticism of media effects theory as one-sided seems to ignore a key development. Anderson and colleagues' general learning model strongly emphasizes interactions among situational and person variables (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Carnagey & Anderson, 2005). This model has strong and ever-increasing empirical support.

Have you heard the term *digital natives*? How about *digital immigrants*? These terms were coined by game designer Marc Prensky (Prensky, 2001). The expressions capture the profound difference between the digital media experience of adults and that of young people. Youths are *digital natives* who have never known a world without the myriad forms of technology that connect them to each other and to a communication- and information-heavy world. Most are naturally comfortable with the currently available media and easily adapt to the next iteration. Their parents (and most seasoned media researchers) are *digital immigrants* who must choose to become acculturated to ever-evolving digital technologies. These differences lead to some apprehension on the part of the digital immigrants and perhaps to a focus on negative outcomes.

Take, for example, the widespread belief that time spent on the Internet is socially isolating. The authors cite research that suggests that online time for youths is actually a contemporary medium for enhancing communication and socialization. Digital immigrants may find this difficult to accept.

What are the ways in which communication and socialization may be enhanced in the digital world? Subrahmanyam and Šmahel point out several opportunities, including enhanced access to a diverse peer group and thus to one of the primary arenas for the development of social skills.

Identity development, too, can be facilitated through online communication as youths are free to determine how much to reveal about their offline identity and perhaps to feature different aspects of the self than what they display offline. For an adolescent who is struggling to define him- or herself, there must be a certain comfort in the baseline anonymity of the Internet. However, there is still much to learn about whether, for most youths, the anonymity of the Internet is primarily liberating or fraught with danger.

The potential for addiction to activities on the Internet is one possible and poorly researched danger zone. The authors rightly note that this is a complex issue: Is compulsive Internet use just a symptom displayed by a generally addiction-prone individual and not a true addiction to the Internet itself? There is much to learn about the factors that increase or mitigate the relative risk of developing addictive behavior in the online digital world, as well as factors that determine whether, overall, the physical and psychological impact of

engagement in this world is positive or negative. Given its potential for facilitating the completion of various developmental tasks, as well as providing opportunities for community and political awareness and engagement, the authors seem positive about the eventual outcome of online media experiences for most young people.

There are a few less commendable points to mention. Occasionally some descriptions of research findings seem contradictory and a bit confusing. (See, for example, the citation in Chapter 10 regarding Funk et al.'s research on violence exposure and empathy and attitudes toward violence. The opening sentences state that no relationships were found, but subsequent sentences note specific significant relationships.)

When research on youths is not available, the authors frequently cite findings from research on adults. Given the strong developmental framework of the book, one might expect more caveats about the applicability of adult-based research to people in a very different developmental stage. And, finally, the reader must decide for him- or herself whether the occasional comments about personal experiences with friends and family add to the book or detract from its scientific credibility.

In conclusion, the reader looking for a broad discussion of the issues related to the online digital ecosystem encountered by today's young people will find that *Digital Youth: The Role of Media in Development* provides some important food for thought. The authors have achieved their stated goal to "come to a better understanding of the developmental implications of adolescents' digital lives" (p. 22).

In particular, the book draws attention to areas where developmental task completion may be enhanced by youths' interactions online, which should be reassuring to those of us who are digital immigrants. Subrahmanyam and Šmahel's book will be of interest to a range of professionals concerned with the welfare of children and adolescents, including social, developmental, school, media, and clinical psychologists, as well as developmental pediatricians and communications researchers.

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