Are cell phones and technology changing college students?  
Psychological perspectives from a media-use study

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary college students use technology more than any previous generation for social, entertainment and academic reasons (Lanham, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). This dramatic rise has led to speculation about the effects of media on psychological well-being and social interaction (e.g., Rideout, 2012). Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010. This study hypothesized that increased use of technology and media would be associated with lower levels of emotional intelligence, ego control and ego resiliency. Significant negative correlations were indeed found between ego control and media use. Correlations between several forms of media use and ego control were found to be strongest among females. Media diaries showed TV-watching and texting were disproportionately high among participants, who also indicated frequent multitasking. Interviews with participants indicated high levels of anxiety, impatience, need for immediate gratification, and overall dependence on technology. These findings suggest that how media may affect students’ self-control, emotional regulation and social adeptness in interpersonal relationships; foster greater understanding of contemporary college students; and raise questions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Speculation about the effects of increased exposure to media of all types on psychological well-being has increased (Rideout, 2012). Research has produced mixed results. Detrimental effects on interpersonal skills have been suggested, including poor emotional regulation, appraisal of emotion in others and assessment of appropriate boundaries, all of which are essential for healthy relationships. There is evidence that youth who engage more with media report lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Furthermore, increased internet use has been associated with lower social involvement, less communication within the family, community and friends, and higher levels of stress and depression (Letzring, Paterson, Lundmark, Kasler, Mokdad, & Schorl, 1998). To continue exploring these questions, an interdisciplinary study was developed, which assessed media and technology use among undergraduate students. A questionnaire was constructed, as well as diary logs and follow-up interviews to gather more in-depth information. Possible psychological correlates were examined, including measures of emotional intelligence, ego control and ego resiliency.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 210 undergraduate college students (129 female) attending Wesley College, who volunteered. There were 62 freshmen, 74 sophomores, 42 juniors and 28 seniors. Ages range from 18-33, although most were traditional college age students from 18-21. Informed consent was obtained. Twenty-one of these participants completed a detailed, hour-by-hour, week-long media use diary. Of those, eleven were interviewed further about their use.

Measures

Student Technology and Media Use Survey: a 38-item self-report assessment designed to measure participants’ technology and media use, detailing the type and frequency of technology and media use and multitasking (e.g., social networking, listening to music, and texting); was given to participants (highest score possible = 379, lower score = 38). The survey was modeled from The Student Technology Use Survey (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007) and the 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation Study (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT): a self-report measure (5-point Likert scale) of emotional intelligence (EI) developed by Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Hoppberger, Cooper, Guskin, & Dornheim (1999). The test items relate to the participants’ ability to modify their level of control in varying contexts and in response to environmental needs. The measure used in the current study was a single, integrated measure: 17 CE items (highest score possible 137, lower score 7), 17 EC items (highest score possible 137, lower score 7), and 14 ER items (highest score possible 56, lowest score 14).

Media Use Diary: chronicled subjects’ use of media in 30-minute intervals, over 24 hours, for 1 week. These diaries detailed collected information about media and technology use and multitasking, including location and social interactions during media use.

Individual Interviews: consisted of 20 questions, dealing with subjects’ degree of emotional control and social interaction, perceptions of their technology and media use, and level of anxiety related to their use.

RESULTS

Several significant correlations were found between ego control and media use and a number of the media use survey subscales (see table below). Subjects with less ego control appear to engage in greater multitasking, and engage in more multitasking. Correlations that were either among the strongest or were the most relevant according to media diaries and interviews, were further analyzed by gender. In all cases, the correlations were stronger for females than males (see scatterplots below).

DISCUSSION

Students report spending a good portion of their day using various forms of media and technology. As found in other recent studies (e.g., Rideout, 2012), students prefer texting to talking on the phone and often engage in multiple forms of media at once. According to data from the media diaries, participants’ most frequent activity was watching TV, followed by texting. Media use overall tends to be most common between 3-6pm, though significant throughout the day. Students reportedocio and late night. Interviews supported and emphasized students increasingly relying on cellphones.

Interviews indicated that participants experience frustration when there is no access to media and technology. Most reported having cell phones at all times and experiencing anxiety when they misplace or forget them. Also, they become impatient, frustrated and worried if they do not get a prompt response when texting. Many stated they would do a lot more reading, be less lazy, less dependent on parents, and have more personal interactions if they did not have so much access to technology and media.

Participants indicated in the media diary, for each half-hour time period throughout the day, if they engaged in one of the listed media activities. As shown in the graphs below, texting, listening to music and TV were the most common activities, and use was high and consistent from 9 a.m. to midnight.