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LIGHTS - Human/Well being

Mind the mind: the need to develop higher awareness among young adults regarding digital wellbeing

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Abstract

The use of digital technologies, in particular the use of smartphones, presents serious threats to young adults' mental health as well as to their academic performance. This impact paper presents insights from the digital wellbeing research. It suggests the need to increase young people's awareness regarding the implications, impact on daily life, and risks of the extensive use of digital technologies. Results of a pilot study are discussed, including actions that academic institutions can undertake to create awareness regarding digital wellbeing.

Keywords: digital wellbeing, mental health, young adults

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Mind the mind: the need to develop higher self-awareness among young adults regarding digital wellbeing

Introduction

The process of diffusion of innovations alternates phases of **enthusiastic acceptance** with phases of **reflection and regulation**. The pervasive use of digital devices and social media by young people is revealing some **threats to their wellbeing** and now it requires in-depth investigation by researchers. Despite the novelty of this phenomenon, several studies have been recently published and they converge in the identification of a **causal relationship**, between the pervasive use of digital devices and mental health problems and poorer academic performance (Gerosa *et al.,* 2022).

Impact on Mental Health

After the publication of the report by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2023), entitled *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*, some governments and institutions started to implement restrictions to the use of mobile phones in schools and universities.

Numerous intricate elements contribute to the impact of social media on the mental wellbeing of young people, encompassing factors such as the duration of their engagement on platforms, the type of content they consume or are otherwise exposed to, the interactions facilitated by social media, and the extent to which all this interferes with essential activities such as **sleep**, **socializing**, and **physical activity** (Gerosa *et al.,* 2022).

The correlation between mental wellbeing between the ages of 18 and 24 and the age of initial smartphone acquisition is significant, even among individuals without traumatic childhood experiences. Mental wellbeing consistently demonstrates improvement with **later acquisition of smartphones or tablets**, with a more pronounced change observed in females compared to males (Sapiens Lab, 2023).

Impact on Academic Performance

Considering the **variety of *stimuli* and opportunities** students have at their disposal, managing to study **two-three hours in a row** and **completing their assignments**, can be considered almost "heroical actions". Technologies interfere with the academic experience inside and outside the classroom.

Various studies have demonstrated the **negative relationship** between multitasking in the classroom (texting, emails, social networks, chatting with neighbours, …) and learning outcomes (Jamet *et al.*, 2020). Fewer studies investigated how these technologies affect ability to study, attention span, memory, concentration, or critical thinking, **outside the classroom**. In general, it is evident that many **cognitive processes** are impacted by an extensive use of technologies, but we are not able yet to assess the extent of its implications.

Brain functioning

Considering students as "**cognitive professionals**," it's important to equip them with foundational knowledge about brain functioning. For example, ensuring adequate sleep, maintaining a balanced diet, engaging in regular physical activity, and fostering social interaction are all basic ways to promote cognitive health and overall wellbeing.

In addition, considering students' exposure to a digital environment, it is important to help them to recognize **key mechanisms** and **physiological reactions associated with the use of technology**, including dopamine release. As stated by Ted Gioia (2024), we live in the era of the **dopamine culture**, where, the entertainment industry in particular is exploiting these mechanisms (Fig. 1).

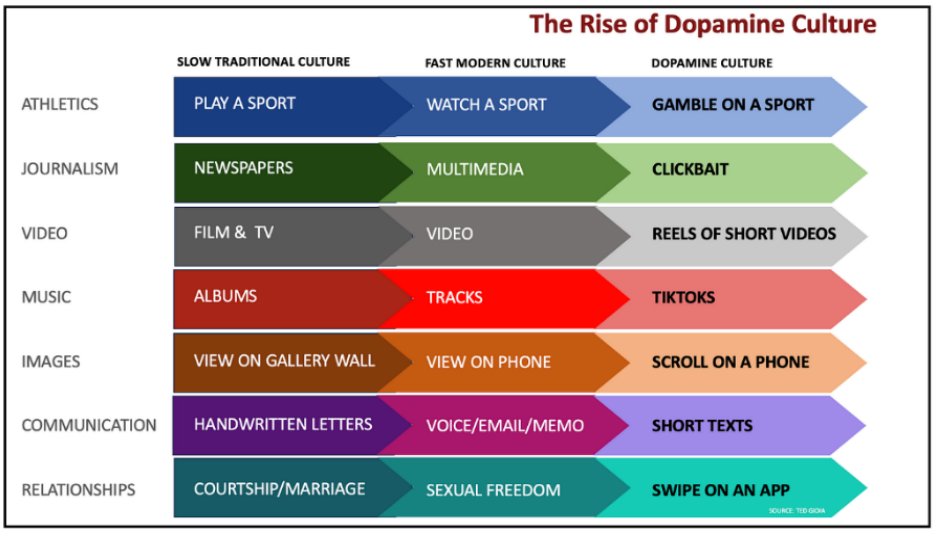

Fig. 1 - The Rise of Dopamine Culture (Gioia, 2024)

In the "attention economy", technologies such as social media platforms, video games, and other digital interfaces are engineered to **provide immediate gratification** and rewards in the form of likes, comments, shares, or other forms of engagement (Terranova, 2012). When individuals receive positive feedback or interactions through these platforms, their **brains release dopamine**, contributing to feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation. Moreover, the design of digital technologies often incorporates elements of **unpredictability** and **novelty**, which further stimulate dopamine release. Features such as notifications, scrolling feeds, and "likes" counters are intentionally designed to trigger intermittent rewards, akin to a slot machine, keeping users engaged and seeking more.
However, prolonged exposure to these digital stimuli can lead to **habituation** and **desensitization** of dopamine receptors, requiring individuals to seek increasingly novel or intense experiences, and contributing to **addictive patterns of technology use**.

Digital wellbeing

Digital wellbeing is defined as *"a state where subjective well-being is maintained in an environment characterized by digital communication overabundance. Within a condition of digital well-being, individuals are able to channel digital media usage towards a sense of comfort, safety, satisfaction and fulfilment"* (Gui *et al.*, 2017, p.166).

Technology & sleep

Based on a simple mathematical operation and considering that higher education students spend an average of 4.5 hours per day using smartphones, laptops, tablets, and desktop computers (Krystel et al., 2023), it is relevant to calculate where this **time** has been taken from. Probably, young adults find fewer opportunities for socializing with peers, reduce physical activity, and sacrifice academic study, but the dimension of wellbeing most impacted is sleep.

The CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings, recently declared *"our greatest competitor is sleep"*. The excessive use of digital devices can **disrupt sleep** in different ways. **Blue light** emitted by screens interferes with the body's natural circadian rhythm by suppressing melatonin production. **Stimulating content**, such as video games, can increase heart rate and make it harder to fall asleep (Walker, 2017). Managing device usage and minimizing exposure to blue light before bedtime are essential for better sleep quality.

Reflections from a pilot program

ESCP Business School, on its Italian campus, has developed a wellbeing program funded by the ESCP Foundation. The objective of this program is to cultivate **greater awareness** regarding mental health and brain functioning, and to prompt **reflection** on digital wellbeing and personal challenges.

Students were encouraged to **observe their personal behavior and collect data** on their consumption of digital tools. Over 50% of the 690 students involved in the pilot reported using their smartphones for more than 4.5 hours per day and spending over 2 hours per day on social media. They were asked to reflect on the primary **challenges** they faced and the **strategies** they employed to regulate their usage of digital devices.

Students clearly identified two areas for potential action: **quantity** and **quality**. Upon monitoring their usage, they realized it was much higher than they had expected. They also acknowledged a negative impact on the quality of their sleep and academic performance during exam sessions, for example. On the other side, students reflected on the **type of content** and usage patterns they tended to engage in and tried to **select sources** of information more carefully. They aimed to transition from an entertainment-centric approach to a more educational one.

An essential aspect of these programs is to effectively communicate the significance of the initiative and **engage students**. For example, participants were requested to complete a form committing to active participation. In return, they received a colorful alarm clock to replace their phones, and a nice journal to record their observations. Additionally, a "Wellbeing in the Workplace" contest was initiated in collaboration with an international consultancy firm.

Hopefully, **academic institutions** and researchers can play a critical role in **fostering a deeper understanding of the pervasive impact of social media on wellbeing**. This involves informing policies, best practices sharing, dedicated courses and implementing effective interventions.

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