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# Introduction to the Issue “Adolescents in the Digital Age: Effects on Health and Development”

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# Introduction to the Issue “Adolescents in the Digital Age: Effects on Health and Development”

**Abstract**

This thematic issue brings together papers by researchers who are studying the ways that today’s adolescents interact with their peers, families, and the larger media environment in the digital age. The contributors highlight both the challenges and the opportunities that this new age presents for the healthy development of young people.

**Keywords**

adolescents; digital communication; healthy development; social networking

**Disciplines**

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Editorial

## Introduction to the Issue “Adolescents in the Digital Age: Effects on Health and Development”

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### Abstract

This thematic issue brings together papers by researchers who are studying the ways that today’s adolescents interact with their peers, families, and the larger media environment in the digital age. The contributors highlight both the challenges and the opportunities that this new age presents for the healthy development of young people.

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### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Adolescents in the Digital Age: Effects on Health and Development”, edited by Dan Romer (University of Pennsylvania, USA).

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This thematic issue on the Health and Wellbeing of Adolescents in the Digital Age covers considerable ground regarding the ways that young people use and are influenced by the many forms of digital communication. The dominant theme in news media attention to this topic focuses on the dangers that confront adolescents as they navigate this new terrain. The irony however is that adolescents are using digital media in ways that often exceed the capabilities of adults. They are the first adopters of many of the innovations that appear in this landscape, and they likely feel more comfortable using digital media than adults. Indeed, the new media offer novel ways to communicate that were not even conceivable to parents during their transition to adulthood. At the same time, these new means of communicating have also introduced problems that have often confronted adolescents of the past either in face-to-face interaction or when using more traditional media.

The contributors to this issue address both the opportunities and the problems of the digital age. Katherine Mills (2016) reviews what research has told us about the effects of the new media on adolescent cognitive and social development. With so much information at one’s fingertips, there is the fear that adolescents will fail to learn about the world as prior

generations have done. However, based on the literature to date, there are no clear indications of adverse effects. Adolescents may now need to learn more about where to find information rather than memorizing the information itself. In addition, evidence appears to be accumulating that communicating through screen media is no less detrimental to social bonding than face-to-face interaction. Indeed, adolescents who frequent social media appear to be less lonely and better adjusted than those who use it less. However, adolescents who use social media to overcome deficits in social competence may benefit less from its use.

The article by Ellen Wartella, Vicky Rideout, Heather Montague, Leanne Beaudoin-Ryan and Alexis Lauricella (2016) presents the results of a recent national survey they conducted to uncover the ways that adolescents use the new media to gather information about their health. With access to this vast resource, it is no surprise that many search for such information. What is perhaps more surprising is that they use this resource less for sensitive topics, such as sexual health, than other topics. They instead seem to prefer adults they know, such as parents and doctors, for such advice. The authors also present findings indicating continuing evidence of a digital divide in the US afflicting low-income youth.

One concern that has arisen in the digital age is the overuse of the internet, especially by young people. Amy Bleakley, Morgan Elliathorpe and Dan Romer (2016) examine the results of a recent national survey in the US regarding the phenomenon of internet addiction. Youth who spend inordinate amounts of time on the internet often report symptoms that appear to reflect an addiction to this behavior. The most recent addition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association identifies this condition as a form of behavioral addiction that requires further study. Bleakley et al. (2016) find that the youth who report these symptoms tend to have less parental supervision and poorer relationships with parents. They also appear to be more impulsive than other youth, which suggests that the behavior is reflective of an impulse control problem that may well precede the appearance of internet addictive behavior.

Given the ubiquitous presence of adolescents online, the new media may well offer new opportunities for marketers to promote unhealthy products to adolescents. Sally Dunlop, Becky Freeman and Sandra C. Jones (2016) review what is known about the marketing of such products, including sugar-sweetened beverages, tobacco, and alcohol, to adolescents, especially on video sites, such as YouTube. They find that such marketing is widespread and largely unregulated. Opportunities to promote healthier lifestyles online have not yet been realized to the degree needed to counteract these influences.

Megan Moreno, Jon D'Angelo and Jennifer Whitehill (2016) examine the potential for adverse peer influence to proliferate on the internet, primarily through social media. They review what is known about the sharing of profiles and other messages in social media as influences on such unhealthy behaviors as binge drinking. In addition, they show how marketing of products such as alcohol can intersect with the transmission of unhealthy messages through peer networks. Finally, they suggest some ways that future interventions might be developed and tested to counteract these influences.

Another aspect of the digital lives of young people is the extension of offline peer networks into the digital space. Robin Stevens, Jamie Dunaev, Ellen Malven, Amy Bleakley and Shawnika Hull (2016) examine the characteristics of such "digital neighborhoods" with special attention to sexual behavior in Latino and African American youth. The authors highlight what is known about the transmission of sexual norms in online communities and how this opens opportunities for novel interventions to encourage healthy development of sexual behavior.

Lynne Edwards, April Kontostathis and Christina Fisher (2016) examine the highly publicized issue of cyberbullying. They highlight the important characteristics and consequences of this behavior and note the

relative lack of attention to youth of color as either perpetrators or victims. Although youth of color appear to be as digitally connected via smartphones as other youth, they do display unique patterns of communication using these devices and appear to experience less cyberbullying victimization. However, what victimization they do experience appears to be associated with comparable levels of adverse mental health outcomes.

One of the consequences of nearly continuous connectivity on digital networks is the potential for distraction while engaged in such attention-dependent activities as driving. M. Kit Delgado, Kathryn J. Wanner and Catherine McDonald (2016) review what is known about this phenomenon, especially in regard to texting while driving, and the hazard it poses to young drivers who are inexperienced and potentially challenged by incomplete development of cognitive control capacities. They suggest some ways that use of smart phones could be integrated into driving that might minimize the risks that they pose.

In an afterword, Dan Romer is joined by Michael Rich (2016), the "Mediatrician" at the Harvard Medical School, in discussing the cross-cutting implications of the papers in this issue. In terms of large-scale national health and well-being indicators, the digital age has not yet had an observable aggregate impact. However, for some subpopulations, there may well be challenges and adverse outcomes. Needless to say, our understanding of the digital age is only in its early stages and much remains to be learned about how nearly continuous access to the vast stores of information on the internet and digital communication without limits affects the development of children and adolescents. It is an exciting, if not concerning, time in history.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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### About the Author



#### **Dr. Daniel Romer**

Daniel Romer, PhD, is the Director of Research at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on policy relevant effects of the media and other social influences on the behavioral and mental health of adolescents.