



Editorial: Digital Media and Social Connection in the Lives of Children, Adolescents and Families

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Digital Media and Social Connection in the Lives of Children, Adolescents and Families

Digital and mobile media—including visual social media—are impacting children's and young people's sense of connection, belonging, and wellbeing. While the call for this Research Topic was first published in early 2020, the questions we raised took on greater significance with the spread of COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic led to increased reliance on digital media given shelter in place and social distancing that greatly limited face-to-face interactions. Accordingly, it is even more critical to understand whether and how these media support or detract from social connection.

As researchers studying youth and media, we were particularly concerned with how the constantly evolving changes in technology (Subrahmanyam and Michikyan, in press) may lead to changes in digital media effects both positive and negative, during youth development (Uhls et al., 2017). For the purposes of this Research Topic, the term digital media was conceptualized to include the internet (e.g., websites, online forums and communities, and video and image sharing platforms), communication applications/platforms (e.g., social media and messaging apps), and electronic games. More broadly digital media are also referred to as interactive media following England and Finney (2002) definition of interactive media as the integration of digital media including combinations of electronic text, graphics, moving images, and sound, into a structured digital computerized environment that allows people to interact with the data for appropriate purposes" (see p. 2).

This Research Topic, "Digital Media and Social Connection in the lives of children, adolescents and families" brings together 14 papers including 11 original research studies, two brief research reports and one perspective article. Taken together, this body of work addresses the implications of a range of digital media technologies and constructs among an array of youth from diverse parts of the world. The majority of the papers focus on early to late adolescents as well as young/emerging adults, while two papers also focus on parents. Reflecting the broad ways that digital and mobile media are integrated into our daily lives, examined contexts included social media, educational settings, Internet cafes, messaging apps, audio visual content (e.g., streaming and YouTube), and mobile applications. The papers also showcase a variety of methods including Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA), large scale surveys, in depth interviews, content analysis of comments and more. Overall, the papers uncover nuanced effects which differed in myriad ways depending on mechanisms such as what kind of digital media (social media vs. messaging apps), frequency and motivation of communication (e.g., high texters vs. low texters) and individual characteristics.

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Although there is a proliferating literature on the ways children and young people use digital technology, the global North tends to lead these discussions. A strength of this collection is that it canvasses insights from diverse parts of the world (e.g., Italy, Argentina, Indonesia, UK, Taiwan, India) helping to redress the imbalance in perspectives from different cultural contexts. Keep in mind one third of all internet users around the world is a child—a number that is expanding rapidly. And nine tenths of the world's children live in the global South—so it's critical that, as those children come online, we are documenting and responding to their lived experiences—particularly given that they come online primarily via mobile phone, and without the necessary structures of

adult support around them that children in the global North often have.

Taken together the papers highlight the need to go beyond categorizing media as monolithic with simple effects (Haidt and Twenge, 2021) and to instead attempt to tease apart individual differences, definitions of wellbeing and connection, different affordances and developmental stages (Moreno and Uhls, 2019).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YU, KS, and AT equally contributed to the editorial process. YU organized the group and all contributed to requesting submissions, reviewing, and editing manuscript.

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