
Media and Youth Development: An Overview of Issues, Theory, and Research

Guest Editor Commentary

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Introduction

The homes of today's youth are filled with a variety of media options, ranging from televisions (71%) and video game consoles (50%) in their bedrooms to portable handheld devices (e.g., iPods/mp3 players, 76%) and cell phones (71%) that can accompany youth wherever they go. Of course, youth also have access to centralized media found in homes, such as televisions (99% of homes) and computers with and without Internet access (93% and 84% of homes, respectively). Not surprisingly, youth consume media for about 7.5 hours per day, much of which involves using more than one media at the same time (i.e., multitasking), with adolescents consuming significantly more media than children (Lenhart, 2012; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Theoretical Perspectives

Although research on youth media use has been increasing over the years, much of the research conducted to date has lacked a strong theoretical foundation. Importantly, many of the articles in this special issue are grounded in theory. For instance, Steven Baretto, Sue Adams, and Jennifer Daly approach technology use from a general theoretical and developmental perspective (see "Windows of Opportunity: Family Systems Theory and Developmental Considerations for Supporting Youth, Parents and Clinicians in the Digital Age"). Based on family-systems theory, Baretto, et al. provide developmentally appropriate guidelines and objectives related to technology use for practitioners working with children/adolescents and their families. Barreto and colleagues integrate concepts related to child and adolescent development, parental functioning, and family system dynamics to inform this clinically-focused commentary. In addition, the authors discuss how university programs can enhance the training and education of human services professionals by providing instruction on the intersections of family systems theory, developmental theory, and technology use.

As part of their review of technology use among youth, Baretto, et al. briefly discuss the importance of Marina Bers's concept of a constructive digital experience, whereby developmental outcomes are fostered through the production of digital content (i.e., programming), not simply its consumption. Steven Worker explores these concepts in much greater detail in his review of Marina Bers' new book, *Designing Digital Experiences for Positive Youth Development* (2012). In the article, Worker systematically presents the tenets of Bers' model of positive technological development (PTD). In addition, Worker discusses Bers's concept of "technology mediated behaviors" (i.e., content creation, creativity, choices of conduct communication, collaboration, community-building) in the context of Lerner's (2004) model of positive youth development (i.e., competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, contribution). Moreover, Worker provides a theoretical basis for each of the aforementioned PTD constructs. Worker concludes by discussing the merits and limitations of PTD for both youth program development and research.

Developmental Issues

Considering its prevalence, youth media use is a primary contextual feature of interest (Calvert & Wilson, 2011; Roberts, Henriksen, & Foehr, 2009; Subrahmanyam, & Smahel, 2011). The contemporary media landscape is changing constantly and rapidly evolving, and the use of media and digital technologies is ever-increasing and varied. Thus, assessing how children's and adolescents' increasing use of various forms of media and technology affect their development is of theoretical and empirical importance.

A considerable amount of research on media and technology use has focused on potentially negative implications (e.g., violence and aggression, obesity and physical inactivity; Calvert, & Wilson, 2011; Roberts et al., 2009; Strasburger, 2009a, 2009b). To fully understand the influence of media and technology in the lives of young people, efforts should be made to understand the bases, development, and range of outcomes related to media and technology use. Furthermore, theory and research relating to media-related processes and effects across the life-span are enhanced by a developmental focus (e.g., Roberts, et al., 2009). The articles featured in this special issue contribute to our understanding of the links between media and technology use and human development by exploring a range of outcomes as well as using developmental theories to inform the work.

In "The Role of Adolescent Development in Social Networking Site Use: Theory and Evidence," Drew Cingel, Ellen Wartella, and Marina Krucmar explore the intersections of media use and human development. Specifically, the authors assess the links between social media use (e.g., Facebook) and imaginary audience ideation or the belief that others are constantly thinking about and judging you (Elkind, 1967). Based on Vygotskian developmental theory, the authors argue that social media use is a key developmental tool for socialization due to its prevalence in the lives of contemporary children, adolescents, and young adults. Using data from individuals 9 to 26 years of age, Cingel and colleagues found that there are associations and predictive qualities between imaginary audience ideation and Facebook use and customization (i.e., modifying one's profile page).

In her piece, "Toward a Theory-Predicated Definition of Digital Literacy for Early Childhood," Elizabeth Kazakoff provides a framework for defining and conceptualizing digital literacy specifically for young children (age two to eight). The author outlines conceptual and theoretical issues relevant to digital literacy for children – including cognitive, social-emotional, and social-cultural dimensions, as well as person-context relational processes. The article primarily focuses

on the Positive Technological Development framework (e.g., Bers, 2007) and the Conceptual Model of Digital Literacy (e.g., Eshet-Alkalai, & Chajut, 2009), both of which provide a foundation for the proposed framework with an explanation of how key developmental issues in early childhood (i.e., motor, literacy, and self-regulation skills) can be taken into consideration to further develop the framework.

Media Use and the Family

For many reasons, adolescence is an important developmental stage within which to explore the associations between young people's media use and their development and contexts in which they are embedded. For instance, the interpersonal relationships in a person's life shift during this period. That is, during adolescence, youth spend relatively less time with their parents and caregivers and more time with peers (e.g., Laursen, & Collins, 2009). This increasing independence and autonomy allows for more opportunities for teenagers to make decisions about their media use, often without parental influence (i.e., supervision and/or enforced rules; e.g., Rideout, et al., 2010). Furthermore, relationships with peers become more significant and impactful during adolescence (e.g., Laursen, & Collins, 2009). Although peer influences can compete with that of parents, caregivers still have a socializing role in the lives of their adolescent children and can continue to influence their attitudes and behaviors throughout this period (e.g., Laursen, & Collins, 2009). Therefore, in assessing youth's media use, it is important to consider the role of family dynamics, including relationships and interactions. Several authors featured in this special issue take the family system into consideration in their work.

In "Youth Online Media Use: Associations with Youth Demographics, Parental Monitoring, and Parent-Child Relationships," Jessie Rudi and Jodi Dworkin discuss the variation in youth's online media use. In their sample of 13 to 22 year-old youth, they analyzed the associations between online media use and youth demographics, parental monitoring, and parent-child relationship quality. The authors identified differences in usage by demographic variables and indicators of family dynamics and relationships. For instance, higher levels of parental monitoring and lower youth-mother relationship satisfaction significantly predicted higher use of online media for communication (e.g., using e-mail) and information-seeking (e.g., getting news) purposes. The authors describe the implications of the findings for youth development practice and programming.

In their contribution to this special issue, "Television and the Internet: The Role Digital Technologies Play in Adolescents' Audio-Visual Media Consumption: Young Television Audiences in Catalonia (Spain)," Meritxell Roca, Daniel Aranda, and Jordi Sánchez-Navarro use quantitative and qualitative data to explore the television consumption behaviors and perceptions of Spanish youth. Their qualitative data was derived from focus groups with youth ages 12 to 18 and supplemented by survey data from parents. The authors describe how youth in their sample favor online media (over television) and perceive the medium as more adaptable to their personal preferences and needs. In addition, the data suggest that television viewing is associated with family dynamics and interactions as it is often a social activity among family members, taking place in communal spaces within a home (e.g., the living room).

Linda Charmaraman and Jennifer Grossman present a qualitative analysis assessing the monitoring of youth's online media use in "Be Careful Who You Friend: Early Adolescents' Reports of Safety, Privacy, and Family Monitoring of Facebook Use." The article focuses on the use of social networking sites, specifically Facebook, among a sample of 7th grade students. The authors were concerned with self-disclosure and peer-monitoring behaviors by youth,

monitoring activities by parents and family members, and parental concerns and rules. A major activity for youth in this sample was to use Facebook to regularly communicate with their existing peer social network (versus, for instance, meeting new people). However, one key concern for parents (as reported by the adolescents) was that youth would befriend or associate with ill-intentioned or negatively influential people (including strangers) via Facebook. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for youth development, including practice and programming.

In "Without a Television" authors, Keri Schwab and Barbara Brock examine the influence of television on youth development and life-long habits. Results from their 10 year study suggest youth who grow up without television may have improved health outcomes, engage in creative hobbies and have a strong sense of agency.

Media Use and Youth Adjustment

Many studies have shown that media use is related to health and adjustment problems during adolescence. For example, research has shown that time spent watching television and playing video games is associated with physical inactivity and weight during adolescence (Koezuka, Koo, Allison, Adlaf, Dwyer, Faulkner, & Goodman, 2006). Playing video games, computer games, watching television, and talking on the phone have been linked to poor academic performance as well (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). Media use also has been shown to be related to aggressive behavior (Bushman & Huesmann, 2014; Krahe, Busching, & Möller, 2012). However, the relationship between media use and adjustment is not straightforward. The articles in this special issue underscore the importance of examining this relationship through a magnified lens in order to capture important nuances that have been overlooked in prior research.

As noted, a number of studies have found media use to be linked to aggressive behavior in youth. However, this research has failed to consider the perspective of the target – the adolescent. Rosemary Barnett, Joshua Hirsch, Gerald Culen, Joy Jordan, and Heather Gibson extend the research on media use and aggressive behavior by asking adolescents themselves about their views on the effects of media. In their study of 245 13-17 year-old adolescents (see "Adolescent Perceptions of Animation Violence as an Indication of Aggressive Attitudes and Behaviors"), adolescents' exposure to violent content in a popular TV show (The Simpsons) did not influence adolescents' perceptions of their abilities to learn aggressive behaviors and attitudes. Importantly, youth in the study did not perceive that the violence on TV was realistic. This article suggests that the negative effects of media on youth in some instances may be exaggerated.

Consistent with research linking media use to negative youth outcomes, some of the papers in this special issue also suggest that media use may be associated with problem behaviors during adolescence. In their article, "The Changing Landscape of Peer Aggression: A Literature Review on Cyberbullying and Interventions," Katie Davis, Justin Reich, and Carrie James discuss a media-related problem for youth today - cyberbullying. The authors note that while traditional bullying has been on the decline, cyberbullying via the Internet, mobile devices, and social media, has been increasing. In the article, Davis and colleagues define cyberbullying, discuss risk factors and negative outcomes, and distinguish cyberbullying from traditional bullying. The authors also highlight the need for the development of research-based interventions and discuss characteristics of effective intervention programs. The piece concludes with a section detailing areas for future research, which ultimately may inform the development of successful anti-cyberbullying programs.

Much of the research on youth media use has focused on negative outcomes. However, some research has indicated that media use may be beneficial for youth. For example, Durkin and Barber (2002) found that youth who played computer games were better adjusted than those who did not play. Those who played games had higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of substance use, were more involved with school, and had closer family relationships than those who did not play games. In a study conducted on Dutch youth (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007), online communication was positively associated with reported closeness of friendships. Similarly, Ohannessian (2009) found that media use (playing video games and watching television) served as a protective factor for at-risk youth, decreasing levels of anxiety. Articles in this special issue are consistent with research suggesting that potential positive effects of youth media use should not be overlooked.

In contrast to many studies examining the relationship between media use and youth outcomes, Ohannessian examined media use in relation to a positive outcome – adolescent self-competence (see “A Longitudinal Examination of the Relationship between Media Use and Self-Competence during Adolescence”). This study extended the literature further by examining the direction of effect between media use and youth adjustment in a sample of 1,031 10th and 11th grade students. Results revealed that media use had a minimal effect on adolescent self-competence. More specifically media use did not influence how adolescents felt about themselves academically, socially, or in regard to their appearance. However, adolescent self-competence did predict media use, suggesting that socially well-adjusted youth may be more likely to use media. In addition to examining media in relationship to positive factors, results from this study emphasize the need to examine both directions of influence between media use and adjustment during adolescence.

Media use also has been found to have benefits at the community level. In their study detailed in the article, “At-Risk Youth in After-School Programs: How Does Their Use of Media for Learning About Community Issues Relate to Their Perceptions of Community Connectedness, Community Involvement, and Community Support?,” Rosemary Barnett, Jeffrey Neely, Caroline Payne-Purvis, and Gerald Cullen examined the influence of various forms of media that may provide information to youth to increase their community connectedness, community involvement, and community support. In their longitudinal sample of 133 at-risk adolescents, media used increased youth’s knowledge of community issues. Moreover, the association between media use and knowledge of community issues strengthened over time. Importantly, results from Barnett and colleagues’ study demonstrate that media may be used to positively connect at-risk youth to their communities. As noted by the authors, “Connecting them (at-risk youth) to community builds pride and attachment, which can help protect them from risk factors and increase their resiliency (Loughlin, et al., 2013).”

As illustrated in Steven Worker’s review of Mariana Bers’ new book, *Designing Digital Experiences for Positive Youth Development* (2012), some contemporary scholars are embracing ways in which technology may promote positive youth development. Worker describes how Bers applies the Six C model of Positive Youth Development (PYD; Lerner, 2004; Lerner, et al., 2012) to the digital arena with her theoretical model, Positive Technological Development (PTD). The PTD model provides guidance on the types of digital and media activities, programs, and experiences that may lead to positive technological development by linking the 6 C’s (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, and contribution) to specific technology-mediated behaviors. This model is especially useful for practitioners who are seeking to design digital experiences for youth.

Elizabeth Kazakoff also emphasizes the utility of the PTD framework and discusses how it may be used as a foundation for defining digital literacy in early childhood given that it considers multiple developmental dimensions, including the personal, social, and emotional. In her article, "Toward a Theory-Predicated Definition of Digital Literacy for Early Childhood," Kazakoff notes that PTD provides a useful developmental framework; however, it does not directly address the age-specific issues of digital literacy in early childhood. Therefore, her paper focuses on merging PTD with digital literacy definitions relevant to early childhood.

Taken together, all of the articles in this special issue focusing on youth media use highlight the need to consider media and the digital world as a primary context in the life of contemporary youth. Moreover, the articles in this issue clearly underscore the importance of conducting theoretically grounded research that incorporates both the developmental stage of the young person and other contexts salient to childhood and adolescence, including the family.

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