**Taking Away the Phones Won’t Solve Our Teenagers’ Problems**

By Tracy A. Dennis-Tiwary

July 14, 2018

Apple has introduced new software designed to help users restrict the time they spend on their phones — just change your settings and your favorite app will lock you out after a certain number of hours. It’s been especially welcomed by parents who fret about the habits of their “screenagers” — young people who seem permanently attached to their mobile devices.

Even Silicon Valley insiders demanded that Apple make its devices “less addictive.” Some researchers have gone so far as to declare that smartphones have psychologically destroyed a generation of millennials and are fueling the epidemic of teenage anxiety and suicide in the United States. One study notes a spike in anxiety and depression among teenagers in 2011 — around the time of broad smartphone adoption.

But I’ve come to believe that conventional wisdom about the relationship between troubled kids and their favorite technology is wrong.

Although some research does show that excessive and compulsive smartphone use is correlated with anxiety and depression, there is a lack of direct evidence that devices actually cause mental health problems.

In other words, there simply does not yet exist a prospective longitudinal study showing that, all things being equal, teenagers who use smartphones more often or in certain ways are more likely than their fellows to subsequently develop mental illness.

Large studies that fail to follow individuals over time can reveal only correlation, not cause. Luckily, some recently begun studies will be poised to weigh in on causation — but we’ll have to wait years for the results.

In the meantime, we can’t just blame the machines. This is especially important because if smartphones aren’t a direct cause of teenagers’ mental health struggles, their use might instead be a crucial way in which these struggles are expressed. This calls for a different set of solutions.

Teenagers are struggling with anxiety more than any other problem, and perhaps more than ever before. There’s a good chance that it is anxiety that is driving teenagers (and the rest of us) to escape into screens as a way to flee fears. Across most types of anxiety runs a common thread — difficulty coping with feelings of uncertainty: something today’s teenagers have more than their fair share of.

They have uncertain economic lives: Unlike previous generations, they can anticipate a worse economic future than their parents.

They’ve also grown up with uncertain truths and unreliable sources of news and facts, yet they cannot easily escape the digital ecosystem that’s to blame.

Finally, teenagers have uncertain independence, many having been raised under the whirring of helicopter parents, overinvolved and trying to fix every problem for their children. This suffocates independence at a time when teenagers should be exploring autonomy, limits the development of self-reliance and grit and may even directly produce anxiety and depression.

When we’re anxious, we gravitate toward experiences that dull the present anxious moment. Enter mobile devices, the perfect escape into a two-dimensional half-life, one that teenagers can make sense of.

We already know that teenagers go online to avoid feelings of stress, depression and anxiety, and we also know this strategy has more negative emotional consequences than positive ones. With their slot-machine logic and addictive properties, smartphones keep us coming back for more: for distraction, a message from a friend, news, a funny cat meme.

Digital technology is designed to grab our attention, so it exhausts us, distracts us and detracts from our ability to nurture fulfilling relationships. With that in mind, teenagers should reduce their reliance on smartphones, and we must heed the call to make smartphones and social media less addictive while figuring out how they affect us and our children.

At the same time, if smartphone addiction is a reflection of adolescent anxiety, cutting screen time may not solve the broader problems that drive teenagers to their screens. Just blaming the machines is a cop-out, a way to avoid the much more difficult task of improving young people’s lives so they won’t need to escape.

Yes, we should devote resources to making smartphones less addictive, but we should devote even more resources to addressing the public health crisis of anxiety that is causing teenagers so much suffering and driving them to seek relief in the ultimate escape machines.

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**Are Today’s Teenagers Smarter and Better Than We Think?**

By Tara Parker-Pope

March 30, 2018

Today’s teenagers have been raised on cellphones and social media. Should we worry about them or just get out of their way?

A recent wave of student protests around the country has provided a close-up view of Generation Z in action, and many adults have been surprised. While there has been much hand-wringing about this cohort, also called iGen or the Post-Millennials, the stereotype of a disengaged, entitled and social-media-addicted generation doesn’t match the poised, media-savvy and inclusive young people leading the protests and gracing magazine covers.

There’s 18-year-old Emma González, whose shaved head, impassioned speeches and torn jeans have made her the iconic face of the #NeverAgain movement, which developed after the 17 shooting deaths in February at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. Naomi Wadler, just 11, became an overnight sensation after confidently telling a national television audience she represented “African-American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper.” David Hogg, a high school senior at Stoneman Douglas, has weathered numerous personal attacks with the disciplined calm of a seasoned politician.

Sure, these kids could be outliers. But plenty of adolescent researchers believe they are not.

“I think we must contemplate that technology is having the exact opposite effect than we perceived,” said Julie Lythcott-Haims, the former dean of freshmen at Stanford University and author of “How to Raise an Adult.” “We see the negatives of not going outside, can’t look people in the eye, don’t have to go through the effort of making a phone call. There are ways we see the deficiencies that social media has offered, but there are obviously tremendous upsides and positives as well.”

“I am fascinated by the phenomenon we are seeing in front of us, and I don’t think it’s unique to these six or seven kids who have been the face of the Parkland adolescent cohort,” says Lisa Damour, an adolescent psychologist and author of “Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood.”

“They are so direct in their messaging. They are so clear. They seem unflappable.”

Dr. Damour, who has spent her career talking and listening to teenagers, said she believes the Parkland teens are showing the world the potential of their peer group. “Those of us who live with teenagers and are around them can see something that is different about this generation,” she said.

There is still much to learn about the postmillennial cohort — social scientists haven’t even agreed on when this generation begins, although there seems to be a consensus forming that the year 2000, give or take a few years, is a good place to start. But data collected from various health surveys already show that today’s teens are different from previous generations in many ways.

Many risky behaviors have dropped sharply among today’s teens. Cigarette smoking among teens is at a historic low since peaking in the mid 1990s. Alcohol use has also declined significantly — the number of teens who have used alcohol in the past 30 days is down by half since the 1990s. Teen pregnancy rates have hit historic lows, and teens over all are waiting longer to have sex than their parent’s generation. Teen driving fatalities are down about 64 percent since 1975. Some of that is attributed to safer cars, but teen crashes have declined between 10 and 30 percent in states with tiered licensing systems, and teen drunken driving has dropped while teen seatbelt use has increased.

While most health researchers celebrate these changes in teen health, some scientists think the trends suggest a lower level of maturity among today’s teens. Perhaps teens are safer simply because their reliance on social media and smartphone use means they are getting out less. In September, the journal Child Development published a study by Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, noting that there is a decline in a number of “adult” activities among today’s teens. In seven large, nationally representative surveys of eight million American adolescents from 1976 to 2016, fewer adolescents in recent years are having sex, dating, drinking alcohol, driving, working for pay and going out without their parents.

“The big picture is that they are taking longer to grow up,” said Dr. Twenge, whose latest book is “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood.”

In an article in The Atlantic last fall titled “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?,” Dr. Twenge argued that teens are more comfortable in their bedrooms or on smartphones or social media than at a party. While they are physically safer than past generations as a result, rates of teen depression and suicide are on the rise. “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades,” she wrote. “Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”

But a number of social scientists and adolescent health researchers disagree with that conclusion. While teen depression and suicide rates are worrisome, there is no causal link to show those trends are the result of smartphones and social media. In fact, a literature review by Unicef researchers in December found that moderate use of digital technology tends to be beneficial for children’s mental well-being, while no use or too much use is associated with a “small negative impact.” The larger issues that affect a child’s well-being are family functioning, social dynamics at school and socio-economic conditions, the report concluded.

Don Tapscott, author of “Grown Up Digital,” said he believes today’s teenagers are better communicators than any previous generation. “They didn’t grow up being the passive recipients of somebody else’s broadcast,” he said. “They grew up being interactors and communicators. In the 1960s we had a generation gap. What we have today is a generation lap — they are lapping their parents on the digital track.”

The clinical psychologist Wendy Mogel interviewed groups of middle school and high school students around the country in 2015 and 2016 for her new book, “Voice Lessons for Parents: What to Say, How to Say It and When to Listen.” Dr. Mogel spoke with diverse kids from various regions and walks of life, but found herself consistently impressed by their thoughtfulness, how much they liked their parents, and how much they cared about the world around them.

“The press and general public like to see them as spoiled and not having to work hard for anything except grades and being very entitled,” Dr. Mogel said. “But they’re courageous, energetic, optimistic and really smart.”

Neil Howe, a historian whose books include “Millennials Rising,” said that unlike earlier generations, today’s teens have accepted the structures of society and have learned to work within those boundaries. “They’re very good at using rules to make their point, and they’re absolutely excellent at negotiating with their parents, and negotiating in a reasonable way about how to bend these rules in a way that will make them more effective and give them more space,” he said. “This is not a ‘throw the brick through the window and burn stuff down’ group of kids at all. They’re working very constructively, arm-in-arm with older people they trust, to make big institutions work better and make them stronger and more effective.”

Ms. Lythcott-Haims notes that the current crop of teenagers is the first generation to grow up with active shooter drills since kindergarten. “I think what we might have here is a generation that really defines itself by the markers of their childhoods,” she said. “In addition to being marked by these gun violence tragedies, they came to consciousness with a black man in the White House and smartphones in their hands.”

What does all this mean for the future of today’s teens? All of the researchers agreed there is still much more to learn about this cohort, but what we know so far is promising.

“We are in the process of distilling the data and discerning who they are, but I am excited,” said Ms. Lythcott-Haims. “We don’t know who they will be in their 20s, but already they have agency, the sense of your own existence, your own right to make decisions and your own responsibility for outcomes and consequences. That’s what we need to have to be mentally well. I think these folks could turn out not to be just leaders, but to be a generation that we look back on and end up calling one of the greatest.”

**Perception**

**Reflective/Argumentative Writing**

**Task**

Reflect and write about one of the following topics. Prewrite/Draft in your Writer’s Notebook. Complete you final draft on the paper provide or by typing. Use evidence from both texts to support your ideas.

• Which adult descriptions of your generation, if any, seem particularly apt or true, and which seem unfair, incomplete or wrong? Why? In your opinion, do the two articles contradict each other in describing your generation?

• What’s missing? What are some things you know or have observed about people your age that you think adults often ignore or misunderstand?

• In general, how much does when you’re born shape who you are? How do you think people your age have been affected by the events, technology and culture of the years in which you’ve grown up? How do you think other generations are different from yours? Why?

• How do you think it is easier to be a teenager today than it was, say, 50 years ago? Harder? In what ways do you think it’s the same?

• What do you think about articles like these in general? To what extent do you think it is fair, meaningful, useful or even possible to characterize an entire generation?

• What are the implications of being characterized this way? Why do media portrayals of your generation matter? For example, do you think they affect what products are marketed to you? How your teachers and parents relate to you? How employers now or in the future might think of you? Why or why not?