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Kühne, R.; Baumgartner, S.E.

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Rinaldo Kühne | Susanne E. Baumgartner  
Thomas Koch | Matthias Hofer [eds.]

# Youth and Media

Current Perspectives on Media Use and Effects



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## Youth and Media – An Outline of Key Developments

*Rinaldo Kühne & Susanne E. Baumgartner*

The media environment is continuously and rapidly changing. Particularly young people are quick to integrate new devices and applications into their daily lives, which leads to substantial changes in the ways they use media and in the ways media affect them. This poses a critical challenge to communication research in general and to research on youth and media in particular: We aim at a moving target which requires us to continuously update and enhance our theories on media uses and effects. This chapter identifies current trends in adolescents' and emerging adults' media use and proposes an agenda for research on youth and media in a rapidly changing technological environment.

### *Introduction*

The media environment is in a constant state of flux, and the introduction and adoption of innovations is accelerating. Devices and applications that were regarded as new media only a few years ago, are now integral parts of our daily lives. This is particularly true for young people: As early adopters of technologies, they are quick to integrate new media – which in the last decade primarily meant social media – into their daily routines: WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat are all applications that are less than ten years old, but already heavily used by youth in Germany (mpfs, 2016). At the same time, the two big players Facebook and Youtube, which were introduced in the mid-2000s, continue to play an important role (mpfs, 2016). Add to this mix the occasional use of Skype, Twitter, Netflix, Tumblr, and Pinterest – all introduced within the last 15 years – and you realize that current youth's media diet consists to a large extent of media products that were not available one generation earlier.

This is not only true for specific media applications, but also for the devices young people use: Smartphones and tablets only became widespread in the last decade. Today, 95 percent of German adolescents (aged 12 to 19) own a smartphone and 30 percent have their own tablet. Interestingly,

smartphones and tablets have not replaced other devices, they have rather complemented them. About three quarters of German adolescents own a personal desktop computer or laptop. 99 percent of the households adolescents live in have a television set and 89 percent have a radio set. Still, shifts in the importance of specific devices for young people can be observed. An increasing number of activities, such as watching films and listening to music, are conducted online and thus on web-enabled devices. Notably, over 90 percent of German adolescents can now access the internet from their bedroom. More importantly, smartphones have recently become the most used media device among German adolescents and the main tool to access the internet: Three quarters of German adolescents mention the smartphone as the main device to go online, whereas desktop computers (10 percent), laptops (8 percent), and tablets (4 percent) are rarely mentioned (mpfs, 2016).

The broad availability of media devices to young people is reflected in the volume of their media use. Across all devices, German adolescents on average watch television for 105 minutes and listen to radio for 79 minutes each day. They spend on average about 200 minutes online per day (mpfs, 2016). By and large, this new generation of media users is thus characterized by a diverse as well as an extensive media use (see Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013).

The addition of new media into young people's daily lives not only affects the volume of their media use. It has also far reaching consequences for how they use media, how they are gratified by media, and how they are affected by media. Accordingly, "new media require new uses-and-effects theories" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p. 10). This is particularly true for the field of youth and media. There is a dynamic interplay between young people's development and their media use (Shaffer, 2009). Young people can actively employ media to reach developmental goals, but their development is also affected by their media use. Rapid changes in media technologies affect this reciprocal relationship between development and media use, which emphasizes the importance of continuous expansions and modifications of our theoretical frameworks.

Against this backdrop, this volume addresses the nexus of new media, young people's media use, and media effects in a collection of research articles and reviews. This first chapter provides an overview of current trends in youth and media and locates the single chapters within these developments. It is argued that being intensively targeted as a (media) consumers, being permanently online, employing mass self-communication,

and being more and more exposed to artificial agents are crucial developments in the field of youth and media.

### *Youth as (Media) Consumers*

Businesses have long recognized that young people are high-potential markets (Cummings, Morley, Horan, Steger, & Leavell, 2002; Mau, Schramm-Klein, & Reisch, 2014). Young people are consumers which now have a staggering spending power (Calvert, 2008; Piachaud, 2007). But even young children who cannot make purchase decisions themselves are an important target group because they influence the purchase decisions of their families and because they will turn into fully-fledged consumers in the future. Accordingly, advertisers and marketers have steadily increased their efforts to reach young people, who are now confronted with an unprecedented volume of commercial messages (Piachaud, 2007). It has been estimated that British children are each year exposed to over 10,000 commercials, American children even to over 40,000 commercials (Kunkel, Wilcox, Cantor, Palmer, Linn, & Dowrick, 2004). Similarly, a plethora of media products, such as movies, TV series, and social media applications, target young media consumers (see Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

The increase in the volume of media products and commercial messages directed to young people is accompanied by a proliferation of communication channels that are employed. Television has been the main way to entertain and advertise to young people for a long time, and it remains an important medium (Calvert, 2008). But the rise of digital media and their pervasiveness in young people's lives have opened new avenues to reach out to youngsters. Content producers and advertisers now regard social media as critical communication channels – in particular, the most widespread platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube (Stelzner, 2016) – because they enable high customer engagement through personalized messages, interactivity, and the co-creation of contents (Fromm & Garton, 2013). However, digitalization does not only provide new opportunities to businesses. It is also a driver of globalized markets and competitive pressures that can compromise existing business models (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014), and put increased demands on the quality of media products and commercial messages. Consequently, it is crucial for content producers and advertisers to refine their knowledge about how messages can

be tailored so that they reach young people and resonate with their specific preferences in a time in which media are pervasive and attention is scarce.

In contrast, a quite different set of concerns preoccupies parents and educators. While they often see media as a useful tool that can be selectively employed to benefit children (e.g., to achieve educational goals), they also regard the pervasiveness and high appeal of media as a problem. The concern is that young people might use certain media excessively (e.g., video games, social media) and that the exposure to certain contents (e.g., violence and pornography) and advertisements can promote undesirable behaviors and attitudes (e.g., aggression, narcissism, and materialism) (Strasburger, 2004). Thus, parents and educators are primarily interested in identifying potential negative effects that might arise from the constant availability of and exposure to media, and in developing strategies to prevent them.

The increasing focus on young people as (media) consumers and the potential positive and negative ramifications of this trend highlight a crucial task for communication science in the coming years: We should strive for a better understanding of how media contents can be created that appeal to and positively affect young people and how negative effects of media can be prevented. Extant research and current theoretical frameworks indicate that developmental characteristics are key to answering these questions. A model which integrates central insights from research on media uses and effects is the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The model suggests that social, dispositional, and developmental susceptibility variables influence how people use media and how people are affected by media. Notably, it postulates that during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood developmental characteristics are pivotal determinants of media uses and effects. That is, developmental characteristics should influence which media young people select and how susceptible they are to positive and negative media effects. A broad implication of the DSMM is that findings from research on adult populations can hardly be transferred to young people because of their idiosyncratic characteristics and preferences. From a theoretical perspective, further research on young people's media uses and effects and on the specific roles of developmental variables in these processes is thus necessary.

In this volume, two chapters focus on why and how adolescents use certain media products. Niemann-Lenz, Gölz, and Schenk investigate why adolescents watch scripted reality shows. They propose that scripted reali-

ties may cater to certain developmental needs of adolescents and that different user types can be differentiated. In their study, they show that four types of adolescent users exist that differ in the gratifications they seek in scripted realities. The chapter by Emde-Lachmund and Christoph Klimmt focuses on the question of why and how adolescents use news media in a high-choice media environment. On the basis of issue preferences and news use, they identify four types of adolescent news consumers.

The chapter by Naderer and Karsay as well as the chapter by Spangardt focus on the effects of advertising on children and adolescents. Naderer and Karsay investigate how brand placements in photographic love stories influence children's and adolescents' persuasion knowledge, brand recall, and brand evaluation. Their study shows that brand placements do indeed affect persuasion knowledge and brand recall, and that young people's age affects whether they recognize the persuasive attempt. Spangardt investigates how using music in commercial influences early adolescents' product recall, liking, and buying intention. He demonstrates that the use of music in television commercials can improve early adolescents' brand recall and purchase intention.

### *Permanently Online*

Due to the rapid rise of smartphones and other mobile devices, youth today have the possibility to be online whenever they want and wherever they are. This trend of being permanently online allows young people to be constantly connected to others, and to easily communicate with their social networks. It has been pointed out that this connectivity fulfills basic social needs (e.g., Vorderer & Kohring, 2013). Fulfilling these social needs may be particularly gratifying for adolescents as their orientation towards peers highly increases during adolescence and the formation of friendships becomes increasingly important. Communicating with peers through social media thereby may help to gratify important developmental needs, such as forming new relationships, intensifying existing relationships, and receiving valuable social information (see for example, Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

However, next to these apparent benefits, being permanently online and connected to others may also have potential downsides. More specifically, the constant availability of gratifying media may lead to an excessive media usage which has been previously related to negative outcomes for ado-



lescents and young adults. For example, social media and mobile phone use in general, and media use during academic activities specifically, has been linked to lower academic performance (see for example, Rosen, Carrier, and Cheever, 2013; van der Schuur, Baumgartner, Sumter, & Valkenburg, 2015), increased sleep problems (e.g., Cain & Gradisar, 2010), and lower well-being (e.g., Pea et al., 2012) among adolescents and young adults. It is thus important to know which factors determine young people's excessive and potentially dysfunctional usage of social media.

For some adolescents and young adults, the extensive usage of social media and smartphones might be driven by fears and anxieties. For example, high involvement with social media has been previously linked to the *fear of missing out* (FoMO; Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). This fear is characterized by the constant concern that others are having more rewarding experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013). In their chapter, Hefner, Knop, and Vorderer show how this fear of missing out is related to an over usage of the social functions of the mobile phone, to problematic involvement with the mobile phone, to risky forms of communication, and also to mobile phone bullying among early adolescents. It thus seems that some adolescents use their mobile phones in dysfunctional ways driven by an intense fear that they miss out on what their friends are doing.

In a similar vein, Meier, Meltzer, and Reinecke show that general stressors in young adults' lives can increase an escapist use of social media. Their findings suggest that young adults who experience lower levels of life satisfaction are more likely to use Facebook for escapist reasons, and that these motives, in turn, are linked to experienced strains resulting from their social media usage. Thus, if young people experience stressors in their lives they may turn to gratifying social media diversions to distract themselves from these stressors. However, engaging in social media may be perceived as a dysfunctional coping strategy that rather decreases than increases well-being.

The constant availability of media may pose challenges to the self-regulatory resources of individuals. Being surrounded by gratifying media, young people may find it difficult to control their impulses to use these media and to focus on other tasks at hand, such as doing their homework or studying. It is thus not surprising that self-regulation is a consistent predictor of excessive media use (see chapter by Jöckel and Wilhelm, and chapter by Meier, Meltzer, and Reinecke). Adolescents and young adults with deficient self-regulatory skills seem to be more likely to use social

media to procrastinate from other important tasks (see chapter by Meier, Meltzer, and Reinecke), and to use social media excessively (see chapter by Jöckel and Wilhem).

The key role of self-regulation in explaining excessive (social) media use may be particularly pronounced among adolescents because their self-regulatory skills still have to fully develop. It has been shown that in the course of adolescence, the abilities to control impulses and to regulate behavior efficiently are still developing (Huizinga, Dolan, & van der Molen, 2006; Steinberg, 2008). Thus, one way to help adolescents to cope with the constantly available media distractions may be to improve their self-regulatory skills. Moreover, as pointed out in the study by Jöckel and Wilhelm, media literacy may prevent adolescents from an over usage of social media. In this respect, parental guidance and monitoring may help young people to become competent media users in a world in which media are omnipresent. Future research should thus not only further investigate the effects of being permanently online but also examine which factors and skills may assist children and adolescents to deal efficiently with media distractions.

### *Mass Self-Communication*

The last decades have witnessed a profound change in the mass communication process. Whereas originally the distribution of media messages was limited to a few organizations who reached a mass audience, nowadays everyone can create and disperse messages to large audiences. Castells (2007) has referred to this process as “mass self-communication” because this type of communication “[...] is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many” (p. 248). Particularly young media users have embraced mass self-communication through their extensive usage of social media, including social networking sites, blogs, and vlogs.

Although mass self-communication can reach large audiences, its content is oftentimes personal and self-related (Valkenburg, 2017). The personal nature of mass self-communication may, however, pose risks to users who have to struggle between the right amount of self-disclosure and privacy concerns. By self-disclosing too much personal information, users may reduce their privacy and lose control of their personal information. There have been concerns that particularly young people disclose too

much information online. It is therefore important to identify factors that determine the privacy behavior of young users. Niemann-Lenz in this volume contributes to this discussion by employing the theory of reasoned action to further understand why adolescents and emerging adults pose personal information on social network sites. Overall, the findings presented in this chapter are in line with the privacy paradox (Utz & Krämer, 2009) suggesting that although adolescents and emerging adults are well aware of privacy issues, they still post substantial amounts of personal information online. This decision, however, may nevertheless partly be rational because the perceived benefits outweigh potential risks of online self-disclosure. Particularly among adolescents, self-disclosure is mainly driven by social norms whereas for emerging adults habits play an important role in determining how much they self-disclose. These findings clearly point towards the important role of peers in guiding adolescents' online behavior.

One specific type of self-disclosure that has received considerable public as well as research attention is sexy self-presentation on social network sites. It has been argued that young media users, particularly girls, present themselves in sexually suggestive ways on social media. As the development of a sexual identity is an important goal during adolescence, young people may use social media to explore their sexuality and to learn from their peers' online sexual self-disclosure. However, the role of social media in adolescents' sexualization is not yet fully understood. Providing an overview of recent studies, Van Oosten explores in this volume the role of social media in the sexualization of adolescents. Although initial studies suggest that (self-) sexualization occurs on social media, many important questions remain yet unanswered. Most importantly, future research should focus on self-effects in this process. Self-effects (also called expression effects, see Pingree, 2007) are effects of media messages on the sender him-/herself (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Pingree, 2007; Valkenburg, 2017). These self-effects may frequently occur when young people compose and post messages online. Presenting themselves in a specific way (e.g., sexy, attractive, extraverted), may make this aspect of their selves more salient, which may lead to a further integration of this aspect into their self-concept. With youth engaging frequently in mass self-communication, these types of self-effects may occur frequently and thus deserve further research attention.

### *Communicating with Machines*

Communication research originally focused on mass communication processes and on the question of how political, economic, or journalistic organizations use media to communicate to audiences (Schenk, 2007). Mass media functioned as tools that connect senders and receivers. In the age of mass self-communication, new patterns of communication have emerged, in which media are used for “the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many” (Castells, 2007, p. 246). But the main function of media remains the same: They still act as communication channels through which information is exchanged.

Recent technological developments indicate that this is about to change. Because of advances in computing power, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, we are now standing at the threshold of a “second machine age” (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014) in which technology is increasingly becoming smart and sociable. In this new age, technology will not merely function as a conduit for communication processes anymore, but it will often play the role of a communication partner. Communication with machines will be possible because they are gradually acquiring the ability to understand and use speech, recognize and express emotions, exhibit a personality, and form memories about interactions (Fong, Nourbakhsh, & Dautenhahn, 2003; Krämer, Eimler, von der Pütten, & Payr, 2011).

Already, embodied agents – such as humanoid and non-humanoid robots – as well as non-embodied agents – such as virtual assistants and chatbots – are available, whose main purpose is to entertain and communicate with people. Industry estimates suggest that the number of robots in our households will substantially increase in the coming years (Business Insider, 2015; International Federation of Robotics, 2016). Interactions with artificial agents are thus likely to become a prevalent aspect of our daily lives (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Ford, 2015). As with other disruptive technologies before, this raises the question of how the use of and interaction with artificial agents psychologically affects individuals and what the broader implications for society are. Especially the implications for the development and well-being of our children are of central importance because they are likely to grow up in a world in which artificial agents are as pervasive as television and social media are today.

In the final chapter of this volume, Jochen Peter suggests that research on youth and media has not tapped the full potential that lies in the study of emerging communication technologies. He identifies social robots as

one of the key technologies that will shape the lives of future generations and posits that communication researchers should investigate communication processes in which technology functions as a communicative agent with which humans can interact. He concludes the chapter and this volume by delineating a research agenda on young people's interactions with social robots.

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